

Ever since Arwin was summoned as a child, all he has known is war. And now, to claim the demon queen's life, he plans to trade his own.

But, as he deals the final blow to his mortal enemy, the Hero of Mankind is betrayed by his own guild.

Caught in a magical explosion thought to end him, Arwin awakens a month later to find that everyone has already moved on. His [Hero] class has changed to a unique blacksmith class called [The Living Forge] that is empowered by consuming magical items, but some of his old passive [Titles] remain, giving him the power to forge his new future exactly the way he wants to.

Arwin isn't going to settle for anything less than bringing down the guild that betrayed him and completely surpassing the powers he wielded as the Hero.

After all, you are what you eat – and Arwin's diet just became legendary.

Chapter 1

Ever since Arwin had been summoned as a child, all he had known was war. He had killed enemies. He had killed friends. And now, to kill the demon queen, he was going to kill himself.

Corpses covered the ruined battlefield around Arwin, strewn about like the discarded toys of an unruly child. Thousands had stood strong that morning, and across from him was the only one that still remained.

The demon queen. A faded scar ran down her right eye, left there from a battle they'd had years ago. Her armor smoldered with embers that had once been roaring flames, and the dark, leathery wings sprouting from her back were shredded to bloody ribbons.

“Hero of Lian,” the demon queen said, coming to a stop ten paces away from Arwin. Her voice lacked the thunderous presence that it normally carried. There was no need for it. Nobody was left from their armies to hear them, and so she spoke in a normal, weary tone that matched exactly how he felt. She raised her sword and pointed it at Arwin's throat. “Today—”

“Is there a point?” Arwin asked, cutting her off. “I have energy for one last blow, not a conversation.”

A small, wry smile tugged at the corner of the demon queen’s lips. “As do I. Good riddance.”

Arwin readied his sword. His armor creaked around him, the enchantments covering it sputtering with effort to keep themselves active. The only thing that even kept his body standing were the considerable number of Titles and Achievements that he had built on the graves of friends and enemies alike. But today, as Arwin’s exhausted arms raised his sword one last time, he knew that it would end. The fifteen-year nightmare would finally be over.

They charged. In truth, it was more of a sad stumble. They both reached each other at the same time, driving their blades for each other’s hearts. Neither tried to block or dodge, lacking the energy to do any more than what they’d already mustered.

Arwin’s blade pierced through the demon’s armor, driving straight through her heart. In the same instant, her sword shattered the cracked surface of his breastplate and ran through his.

Blood poured down Arwin’s chest, dripping to the ground at his feet. Dizziness gripped his mind as the world spun around him. If he had the energy, he would have laughed.

In the end, they’d both died.

At least the war was over. His job was done.

Darkness started to swallow his vision, taking life with it. It was peace. It was the release that he had sought, a way to finally rest –

Rude light flashed before his eyes.

The conditions for [Sunset] to activate have been met. [Sunset] has been consumed.

Arwin's breastplate shimmered. His weary eyes just barely managed to pick up a small black gemstone glittering at its center, burning with magical power. If he'd had the energy, he would have been surprised. The demon queen didn't seem to recognize it either.

Huh. This wasn't supposed to be there. What is it?

And then, with a tiny pop akin to a cork from a bottle of wine, the gemstone cracked.

The world collapsed.

A massive wall of force slammed into Arwin, driving the breath from his lungs and scorching his body. His armor and magical equipment vaporized as it tried and failed to resist the massive outpouring of energy, and then the true force of the explosion hit him with nothing left to obstruct it. He didn't even get a chance to scream.

His consciousness sputtered and blinked out like a candle in a hurricane, and then there was only blissful nothingness.

But, like all things, the peace ended.

Arwin's eyes fluttered. Then they snapped open. He drew in a desperate, ragged breath as his heart slammed desperately in his chest, suddenly remembering that it had to beat. His throat was impossibly dry and his lips cracked.

He was alive. Far above, the warm sun shone down on him from a cloudless sky.

Warm, wet dirt pressed against his back. The smell of moss and mildew surrounded Arwin, but the fact that he could breathe anything was a miracle. Coughing and gritting his teeth, he pushed himself into a seated position.

The ground released its grip on Arwin's back with a wet squelch, but something was wrong. His body felt... strange.

Empty.

He groaned, blinking as he tried to figure out what had happened. He looked down – and, just like that, he found a problem. Arwin had changed. The enormous, magic-empowered muscles that had once covered him were nowhere to be seen. In their place were the normal, lean muscles of a workman. He'd shrunk significantly in height, going from seven feet tall to just over six.

It was a vaguely familiar body – one that he'd had before he'd advanced his Paladin class to Master Tier. All the magic he'd once possessed was muted and distant, but he couldn't quite bring himself to care. He didn't need it anymore. The demon queen was vanquished. His power was a small price to sacrifice for peace.

There was a thick, ropey scar right beside his heart, where he had been run through. Arwin instinctively reached for his sword, but his hand found nothing. The only thing he could find were the tattered scraps of his pants. Not even his shirt remained. A dull, gnawing pain clenched his stomach, but it was surprisingly bearable and not at all like a stab wound.

“What happened?” Arwin choked on his own words. He doubled over in a coughing fit for several seconds before managing to regain control of himself.

What was that black gemstone? I oversaw the forging of my armor with my own eyes, but the gemstone was clearly embedded within it. It was clearly some sort of magical bomb. Perhaps it was a failsafe to destroy the Demon Queen even if I died? That gem didn't feel like any form of magic we possess, but I've never seen the monster army use its like either.

Is it possible I was betrayed and someone in the guild was working with the Demons? That wouldn't make sense, though. The explosion should have killed both me and the Demon Queen. I still don't know how I survived. And what is Sunset? That was not a title I had.

There were far too many questions and far too few answers. One thing Arwin knew for certain was that he would find no solutions whilst laying on the ground. Slowly, he pushed himself to his feet. He was somewhere in a large, marshy field. Crops surrounded him, so there was probably civilization fairly close. There were no answers in the wilderness, but the nearest city could tell him what happened.

Scanning the horizon, Arwin spotted a small gray plume in the far distance. It might have been a cloud, but he was fairly certain it was smoke from a chimney. At least, that's what he hoped it was.

Arwin almost called on the Mesh, just to see if any of his former magic remained. But, before he could, he stopped himself. With magic came responsibility. He would be the Hero once more if anything remained. Sending one last glance down at his body, Arwin shook his head and trudged in the direction of the plume.

Hours later, a city came into view. It wasn't one he recognized, but the stone walls stood proud, manned by several guards at the gate. They wore plain but effective chainmail armor.

Even without his magic, Arwin could sense faint power emanating off them. A sigh of relief slipped from Arwin's lips. If a city still stood, the Horde had fallen.

I won.

The guards watched Arwin with wary expressions as he approached. The dry mud caked to his body and the exhaustion on his face likely didn't do him any favors.

"We don't welcome beggars in Milten," the lead guard said, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Milten? Doesn't bring up any memories. It must be toward the edges of the Kingdom.

Arwin almost laughed. "My name is Arwin. I know I look different, but I'm no beggar."

"A beggar with a name is still a beggar," the guard said, his eyes narrow.

I suppose I can't blame them for not recognizing me. I don't look like what I once did.

There's no point bothering to convince them. It may actually be better that people don't recognize me. Maybe I can finally rest and take advantage of the peace.

"I just want to bathe and hear the news," Arwin said wearily. "I can assure you I can pay for any services I need. I will not trouble any of your citizens."

The guards exchanged a glance. With a shake of his head, the lead guard stepped to the side. "I shouldn't do this, but fine. You seem honest enough but get to an inn and wash off immediately. If I catch you begging on our streets, you'll get a boot up your ass."

"Understood." Arwin strode past the guards, not wanting to try his luck. He didn't actually have any coin on him, but as long as someone was willing to offer him a bath, he'd happily wash dishes in a kitchen for as long as it took.

Despite the sun hanging straight above, the city of Milten was surprisingly quiet. There were only a few other people on the roads, and none of them gave Arwin so much as a second glance.

Stone buildings with just enough variety to avoid being an eyesore lined the streets in neat rows. After several minutes of walking, Arwin finally spotted the subject of his search. An inn, identified mostly by the cauldron burnt into a wooden sign hanging above its door, sat near the center of town.

Smoke curled from the three-story building's chimney, and warm firelight flickered within its window from a fireplace. A newspaper had been wedged into the window, and Arwin paused for a moment to read it.

The Horde grows in power. The Kingdom of Lian calls for all capable adventurers to take to arms in its defense. Great rewards will be given to those who bring proof of their victories in battle back to the Adventurer's Guild. We must strike before the Horde can mount an offense. It is time the Kingdom goes on the offense.

For any adventurers over Journeyman Tier, the Hero of Lian is in need of a party. Auditions are being held in the capital for the privilege of adventuring alongside him.

To lay down one's life for the kingdom is the greatest service one can do, and you will be remembered for all eternity.

Please note: The fallen Hero's body was recovered, but the funeral has been canceled due to weather conditions. Tickets will not be refunded.

At the bottom of the words was an image of a heavily muscled man holding a glowing sword aloft, a courageous expression on his handsome features. It was signed by the Hero of Lian – but the man on the paper wasn't Arwin, and the signature wasn't his either.

He stared in disbelief.

How could they have recovered a body when I'm right here? Why would they lie about that? It would have been easy to say a failsafe destroyed both of us, if that was what it was. But, if they aren't mentioning it... was I betrayed? Could that gem have been a way to make sure I didn't survive the war? But why? I don't understand. I need answers.

Arwin grabbed the paper and pulled it away from the window, ripping the edges in the process. He shoved the door open and entered the inn, making a beeline for the thin innkeeper behind the bar.

“Gods, man. What happened to you?” the innkeeper asked with a grimace. “You reek.”

Arwin slammed the paper down. “What is this?”

Something about his voice must have given the innkeeper pause, because he swallowed and looked down at the paper.

“It came in the news a week ago. What about it?”

“Everything! The demon queen is dead! How is the Horde back?”

The innkeeper blinked, then let out a laugh. “Ah. You went on a solo adventuring trip after the war ended, didn't you?”

So it did end?

“I – yes,” Arwin said, deciding it would be easier to go with the man’s assumptions than correct them. “I left right after the demon queen was struck down.”

A smile crossed the innkeeper’s face and he nodded. “I understand that. What a party it was. I swear the entire kingdom celebrated for a week straight.”

“So what happened? Why is there a missive about another war?”

The smile fell away and the innkeeper shook his head. “Sorry you’ve got to find it out like this, lad. After the celebrations, a new demon queen was discovered about a month later, gathering the remnants of the Horde. It’s been about two weeks since then. Luckily for all of us, the Kingdom actually had another Hero in training. We’ll all be safe, don’t you worry.”

Arwin’s ears rang and he tasted metal in his mouth. He leaned against the counter, staining it with mud, but he barely even noticed.

“So the war ended, but then it started again?”

“It’s more like it paused.” The innkeeper rubbed the back of his head, then let out a heavy sigh. “Just when it looked like everything would let up. I suppose it’s not like we aren’t used to it, though. You’ve got the build of a warrior, so you should be happy too. There’s a lot of opportunities for adventurers—”

Arwin grabbed the paper from the counter and spun, striding out of the inn as his mind roiled. A throbbing pain built in his stomach, eating at his insides like a lump of molten coal.

He’d won the war – or, at least, his war. Sure, the peace had lasted all of a month. He had no idea where a new demon queen or Hero had come from, but the relief he felt was so intense that he couldn’t bring himself to care.

His duty was finished. There was a new Hero for a new war, and he was no longer required. He, along with the men and women that had fought alongside him, could rest. But still, the gemstone lingered in Arwin's mind.

Someone tried to kill me with magic that I've never seen. The options are the guild, someone within the guild working for the demons, or the demons themselves. I don't think someone planted anything on me, but I just don't have any way to tell.

Every single aspect of my armor should have been checked over by dozens of people, which means all of them had to have been involved somehow. Hell, the head of the guild literally handed me the armor and confirmed it was prepared and ready on the day I set out for what should have been my final battle. He was the last one to check it.

Sure, something could have gotten changed while I was headed to battle, but I don't think anyone got that close to me. I can't believe I'm thinking this, but I think the guild – or someone with a lot of influence in it – must have been heavily involved.

But, if it really was them, then, my very existence proves their lies, and they'll definitely kill again to keep me silent. Even if it's just a few people at the top – I can't handle them yet. When I was at the peak of my power, perhaps I could have. But now... I'll need to lay low until I can regain my strength.

There was no more delaying it. He had to see how much had changed. Arwin finally reached out to the Mesh. The sentient magic that permeated the entire world, rewarding those who sought to advance their strength and sought challenge, had been one of the only constants in his life.

And, as it always had, the Mesh responded. Glowing golden letters, visible to only him, traced through the air before him.

Name: Arwin Tyrr

Class: Living Forge (Unique) (Tier: Apprentice 1)

Skills:

[Awaken] (Passive) – *All items forged by your hand have the potential to Awaken. In addition, they have the potential to take on a trait, determined by [Unknown]. The potential for the trait to be detrimental scales inversely with your Tier. It is currently [80%]*

Titles:

[Scourge] – *You have faced an entire army in combat and emerged victorious. Your physical strength can be significantly intensified at the cost of magical energy.*

[Indomitable Bulwark] – *You have withstood a blow that would have leveled a city. Damage from all attacks is reduced significantly.*

[The Hungering Maw] – *An enormous burst of energy has permanently infused you with magic, but not without cost. You must consume magical objects or items to survive. Consuming an item temporarily grants you some of its properties.*

Achievements:

[Broken Bearer of Last Light] – *Awarded for meeting the conditions of [Sunset]. You survived an explosion that could have leveled a city. Effects: Class Changed to Living Forge. All other Achievements and competing Titles have been consumed. This Achievement will be consumed upon advancing your tier.*

Arwin's hand dropped. His class and skills were gone, replaced by what seemed to be some form of craftsman class. His Tier was back to Apprentice. The vast majority of his Titles – gone as well. He didn't have any Achievements left, but at least that wasn't a surprise, as they were consumable and weren't meant to stick around. But, on top of everything else, he'd gained a new Title that forced him to consume magical items in order to survive.

And yet... the Class was almost exactly what he had once hoped for. A chance to create rather than to destroy. Even though he hadn't actually chosen Living Forge, it was as if the Mesh had known what he desired.

Actually, that's likely exactly what happened. The Mesh gives rewards that let you upgrade your class or skills whenever you get Achievements or Titles. This was my reward for completing the purpose I've been pursuing ever since coming here. The actual class must have come from that achievement, Sunset... but why this particular one? I've never had interest in Blacksmithing before, though I've always loved the idea of being a creator.

Perhaps it had to do with all the armor and weaponry that I had on me. I did have an extensive presence in helping make my weapons and armor, so perhaps that strongly influenced it. I certainly can't complain.

I'm finally free. And, so long as the guild doesn't find out I survived, I can figure out what happened. And, if they really did betray me, I can tear them down from the inside out... after I rebuild my own life. They'll pay, but I'm not dying for a cause again. Besides, I need a damn break.

As for the Hungering Maw passive... it's problematic right now, but it's clearly tied deeply to the class itself. That means, if I get stronger, I'll be able to upgrade the passive and get more out of it than just temporary boons. The potential is ridiculous.

For the first time in his twenty-five years of life, he felt unburdened. For everyone else, the war was still going. It bore the promise of power and riches, and the draw was too great to resist for many adventurers.

But, for him, the war was over. He'd done his part, and they'd turned on him. As to why, he didn't know. At the moment, he didn't particularly care. Arwin started to laugh. It was on that day, covered in mud and crouched in a dark alley cackling like a madman, that the true Hero of Lian died. The man that rose in his place was simply Arwin. There was only the man who would forge his new life one hammer blow at a time.

Arwin didn't get to enjoy his newfound freedom for long, though. Even as his laughter echoed out, the burning pain in his stomach intensified. His face creased in pain and he doubled over, drawing in a ragged breath.

Through squinted eyes, he could just barely make out the glowing words of the Mesh taking form before his eyes.

[The Maw within you hungers for power. If you do not consume a magical item within 1 hour, your body will collapse.]

Arwin stared at the glowing words with dread. He shoved his hands into his pockets, but he already knew what he would find. They were empty. Arwin didn't have a single thing of worth to his name.

In fact, the only thing he did have of worth *was* his name – and if he used it anywhere, the guild would come for him. He grit his teeth, waving the words away and turning away from the inn to stumble into a dark alleyway nearby.

I might be in trouble.

Chapter 2

The pain in Arwin's stomach intensified with every passing second. He wasn't even sure what he was searching for. It wasn't like he could just break into a shop and steal a magical item, nor was he going to find one lying around on the ground.

I suppose I could break in somewhere, but then I'd be a wanted man. No. I need a smithy. This class should let me forge something. If I can just find a smithy somewhere, I'll be fine.

That was easier said than done. The agony was so intense that Arwin could have sworn that his stomach was actually eating itself. He'd been stabbed, cut, and ripped up by magic more times than he could count – none of it came close to this.

His body begged him to lie down and curl into a ball. To give into the pain in hopes that it would end sooner. Arwin's mind rebelled. He ground his teeth and pressed on, leaning on a wall for support as he staggered through the dark alleyways.

As Arwin turned an alleyway, muted voices reached his ears. He forced his eyes up, squinting. Standing just feet away from him in a corner of the alley well within the shadows was a bald man in dark clothes.

He had his dagger to the neck of a short, hooded woman with dull red hair and a scarred face. They were arguing about something, but Arwin's ears barely even registered the words. He mustered his energy and took a step toward them.

"You," Arwin growled, his pained words coming out coarse. "Smithy. The nearest one. Where is it?"

"We're doing something here," the bald man said. "Don't get any ideas. Get lost before you get run through as well."

I don't have time for these damn games.

"Answer the question," Arwin spat. His stomach spasmed and his hand bit into the wall in attempt to support himself. "Now."

"You trying to be a hero?" the bald man shoved the woman back, pointing his dagger at Arwin and taking a step forward, a cocky smirk on his face. Inwardly, Arwin twitched. The man's stance was all wrong.

His feet were unbalanced, and he gripped the dagger between two fingers like it was a fork rather than a weapon. If he was meant to be intimidating, it wasn't working.

"That dagger magic?" Arwin asked.

"Think you're funny, do ya?" the bald man bared his teeth. "I'll gut you like a fish, big man. I don't see a sword on you. Muscles won't stop you from bleeding out."

Arwin stopped listening to his words after he realized that the man wasn't answering his question. If he wouldn't say if the dagger was magical or not, then Arwin would have to find out himself.

He shoved the pain down, just like he'd done in countless battles before, and *moved*. The bald man's eyes widened and he thrust the dagger for Arwin's stomach. It was such a pathetic blow that Arwin almost laughed.

He drew on the Mesh. He might have lost his original class, but some of his titles had remained. With just a small injection of magic into [Scourge], Arwin felt power flood him.

His hand came down on the other man's wrist, and bones shattered like dry sticks. Arwin's fingers wrapped around the man's crushed wrist and his other fist slammed into the man's stomach.

The man crumpled with a pained scream, dangling by one arm from Arwin's grip. Disgust washed through Arwin and he released [Scourge], driving an open palm into his would-be murderer's skull.

Just like that, the screaming stopped. The man fell limp, unconscious but not dead. Shaking his head, Arwin grabbed the dagger from the man's limp fingers. All that his fingers found was plain metal. It didn't have the telltale tingle of magic within it.

"Worthless," Arwin growled. He knelt beside the man and rifled through his pockets. They were, just like his, empty. Arwin's eye twitched.

Just my luck to get robbed by the cheapest thief to ever live.

His eyes flicked over to the girl at the back of the alley, who was staring at him in a mixture of horror and awe.

“You,” Arwin growled, straightening back up. The gnawing in his stomach was back and stronger than ever, but he couldn’t afford to give it heed. He didn’t remember how long he had left and it didn’t look like the Mesh planned to enlighten him.

Forty-five minutes? Thirty? More than that, I think. I hope.

“Yes?” the girl squeaked.

“Smithy. Where is it?”

“I – I’ll show you,” she stammered. “Please don’t kill me.”

Arwin didn’t bother replying. He just jerked his head in acknowledgement. The girl swallowed heavily, then edged along the walls toward a connecting alleyway.

“It’s this way,” she said hesitantly.

“Lead. Quickly, now.”

She hurried to comply, and the two of them headed deeper into the city. Arwin was relieved to find that the girl took his words to heart. She was practically scampering away from him, but it was all he could do to maintain his fast walk.

Anything more felt like it would rip him apart from the inside out. The girl kept throwing glances over her shoulder at him as if she expected Arwin to suddenly decide to change his mind and rip her head off.

They walked for roughly ten minutes. At least, Arwin was pretty sure it had been that long. Time felt like it was blurring together. What mattered was that he was still alive when the girl came to a stop in front of a dark, run-down street.

Grey cobblestone was stained black and dull moss grew in the cracks between it. The buildings were crooked and crumbling, with some of them having completely given way to ruin. The faint scent of rubbish and mildew permeated the air, but with such intensity that Arwin knew for a fact it was never going to leave his clothes.

“T-this building. The whole street is abandoned so I don’t know if there’s anything useful here, but it used to be a smithy,” the girl said, pointing at a crumbling stone storefront. What had once been a window was now just a hole, the grey brick around it badly cracked. Weeds had tried to take root around the building, but they’d all withered and died.

The chimney poking out of the top of the building had largely fallen apart and was just a pile of bricks that vaguely resembled a rectangle.

Arwin didn’t even bother saying anything. If it had a forge, he didn’t care what it was. He staggered across the street and nearly tripped on the jagged, ill-kept steps leading inside. There were the remains of a rotting wooden door barring his way, but Arwin quite literally walked straight through it.

Fragments of dust and rancid wood flew up around him as the door crunched. Arwin’s eyes scanned the dust-covered interior of the building, instantly landing on the back, just beyond a counter.

An open door led into another room where the tip of an anvil stuck out into view. Arwin increased his speed, pushing through the remains of the building. He stepped into the room at the back.

What greeted him was far from inspiring. Piles of scrap metal were piled in the corners, and not a single part of it looked like it had been touched in years. And yet, tools still hung from

the forge's walls. An anvil sat in its center, beside a pair of rotted buckets that had fallen in on themselves.

Beyond them was the forge, cobbled brick leading up to the crumbled chimney that he'd seen from above. There was still dry wood within it, blackened from being partially burnt. Mixed in with the wood was some charcoal, as if the smith who had last used had tried to save money by combining the two. It wasn't much to work with, but it was all Arwin had, and he'd be damned if he went out without giving his all.

Arwin had never forged something himself, but he'd closely overseen the manufacturing of his armor. A memory of the black gemstone flitted through his mind and a bitter smile pulled at Arwin's lips.

I suppose I oversaw the forging of most of my armor, not all of it.

Either way, the first step he could recall was fire. And, to get fire, Arwin needed –

There.

Sitting near the hearth was a black brick. A piece of flint. It was mostly used up, but all he needed was a spark. Arwin heaved himself over to it, grabbing the piece of flint, and struck it with the dagger that he'd taken from the thief.

It scraped against the flint, sending up a tiny cloud of dust and doing nothing more. Undeterred, Arwin struck it again.

And again.

The fourth time, his efforts were rewarded. A tiny spark leapt as he struck the flint, landing on one of the dry, burnt pieces of wood nestled amongst the charcoal. Perhaps fortune

smiled on Arwin, or perhaps the gods were smiling on him. Regardless of the reason, the spark took. He struck the flint a few more times until a tiny fire started to spread across the dry wood.

Arwin fanned the flames as they grew, flitting across the dry wood and quickly filling the hearth. He grabbed the handles of the bellows, squeezing them desperately and pumping air into the flame.

In minutes, a fire started to roar. Arwin's stomach reminded him that he didn't have minutes to work with. At any point, his time would run out and he would die.

I'm not even guaranteed to make a magical item. I hardly know what I'm doing, but I have no choice but to try.

Arwin staggered over to the pile of metal and grabbed a piece, barely pausing for long enough to check how good it looked. They were all garbage, and he didn't need to make a work of art.

He practically threw it into the fire, then immediately remembered that he had to take it back out. Cursing under his breath and pumping the bellows to keep the flame going, Arwin scanned the room once more. There was a poker already resting in the hearth, but it wasn't exactly what he needed.

His eyes landed on a pair of crusty tongs lying on the ground in a pile of rotted wood. Beside it, leaning against the anvil, was an old hammer. The wood making up its handle didn't look particularly reliable, but it was better than nothing.

Arwin turned his attention back to the piece of metal. It was only barely starting to heat, but he didn't have any way to make it hot faster. All he could do was continue pumping the bellows, gritting his teeth as the pain continued to scale.

It was another five precious minutes later when the metal finally seemed hot enough to work with. Arwin released the bellows, lurching forward and grabbing the tongs with fumbling fingers.

He stuffed them into the hearth, sending out a shower of sparks as he grabbed the slightly reddened piece of metal and slammed it onto the anvil. Snagging the hammer with his other hand, Arwin brought it down on the piece of metal.

It struck with a resounding clang, and Arwin immediately found a problem. The hearth hadn't been anywhere near hot enough, and the metal had only slightly bent at his strike. The amount of time it would take to let the hearth heat properly was too great, though.

Arwin raised his arm and called on [Scourge]. His hand fell, power infused into his muscles, and he struck the metal again. This time, it gave beneath the blow and bent. Arwin suppressed a pained grin and raised the hammer once more.

If he didn't have time, he'd just have to cut a few corners. Over and over, Arwin's hammer fell on the strip of metal.

He flattened it out, using the tongs to hold it in place as he pounded away. Arwin stuck it back into the hearth as it cooled, then pulled it back out as soon as it felt ready to work with. He had absolutely no idea how to forge just about anything, but a bracelet seemed easy enough. It was just a circle, after all.

He hammered at the metal again, starting to put a curve into the metal. With every blow, he felt the molten coal inside his stomach start to burn hotter. Time was nearly up.

But nearly wasn't the same thing as completely, and so he kept at it. The strip of metal started to curve, and the two pieces finally came around to touch each other. It was, without a doubt, the ugliest bracelet that Arwin had ever seen.

And yet, a bracelet it still was.

Even though it still glowed with faint heat, Arwin felt the Mesh rise up within him.

[Metal Bracelet: Garbage Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [The First Step] has been earned.

[The First Step] – *Awarded for forging your first item.* Effects: Your first item has been granted magic. May it serve you well. *This achievement has been consumed upon creation of your first item.*

The Mesh traced words through the air as Arwin inspected his newly made bracelet.

Metal Bracelet: Garbage Quality

[Running Hot]: This item was forged hastily, imbuing it with the panic of a dying candle. While wearing it, you may use a small amount of your magical energy to imbue your attacks with the Fire element.

Arwin could have cried in relief. He grabbed the Bracelet, the heat still singing his skin, and brought the bracelet to his mouth. It was a monumentally stupid idea to try to bite down on a piece of hot metal, but he had no idea how else he was meant to eat something.

As his mouth opened and his teeth touched the bracelet, a surge of energy raced down his body and into his stomach. The metal groaned within his mouth. And then, with a loud crack, it shattered.

Relief flooded through Arwin as the pain started to abate. He chewed, unaware and uncaring of how he was eating straight metal as if it were bread, and then swallowed. The pain continued to recede, but Arwin wasn't taking any chances.

He took another bite from the bracelet, grinding the metal between his teeth. As Arwin went to take another bite, he heard a foot fall behind him. He turned, still chewing on metal, as five cloaked men stepped into the shop, their weapons drawn.

"What do you want?" Arwin asked, taking another bite from his bracelet. The taste was starting to grow on him. It almost felt a little bit spicy, but that might have been his tongue burning. "I'm busy."

"This is the guy that roughed Blin up?" one of the men asked.

"It's him," another said, tapping his nose. "Followed him here."

The first man glanced at the largest with an uncomfortable frown. "Boss, I—"

"Shut up," the large man snapped. "You don't fiddle with the Brothers Six and just waltz off. He only got a dagger, idiots."

"Brothers Six? What are you, a circus troupe?" Arwin asked. He finished off the last of his bracelet, then let out a slow sigh. The last traces of pain had finally vanished.

**[Metal Bracelet: Garbage Quality] has been consumed. Trait temporarily added:
Running Hot.**

Heat coiled in Arwin's fists, and a cold smile split his lips. He could think properly again.

"Get out, you corny shits. I value my solitude."

"I'm the one who calls the shots here," the large man said, pointing his sword at Arwin. Magic crackled around his hand and entered the blade, igniting it with hissing yellow lightning.

"And you're paying in blood for what you did."

Of course he's got magic. This is going to be a little more annoying than I was hoping for.

"Idiots." Arwin grabbed the poker from the hearth and pulled it free, its tip glowing red-hot. "Come on, then. I can't say I enjoy moving much after a meal, but I'll make an exception if it shuts you up."

Chapter 3

The first man charged. Arwin took care to avoid getting a good look at his face. In his later years of fighting against the monster horde, he'd taken to avoiding staring into someone's eyes as they died.

At first, he'd always seen monsters as nothing more than mindless killers that sought blood because it was their nature.

That wasn't true. It was said that the eyes were the windows to the soul, and Arwin had seen everything in the eyes of those he had cut down. He had seen desperation – he had seen fruitless hope – and, inevitably, he had seen death.

It was much easier to kill without looking at the eyes. Arwin leaned back, letting the thief's dagger flash past his face, and brought his fist up. He fed a small amount of magical power into his hand, and heat surged around it as his knuckles connected with the man's chin.

There was a loud crack as the thief's head snapped back. Fire flared around Arwin, scorching the man badly. He let out a terrified scream, but Arwin didn't leave him to suffer long. His fist crashed back down, taking the man in the head and putting him to eternal sleep.

"I already gave one of you a second chance," Arwin said as the man crumpled at his feet. He turned to the others, who were staring in disbelief at the speed that their ally had been killed. "If you take one step closer, you will meet the same fate."

Arwin didn't expect his words to work. Nobody had ever taken him up on them before. But, to his surprise, one of the four remaining men turned on his heel and fled. The largest of them called out a curse, but the man didn't heed it.

"He is wiser than you," Arwin said, pointing his hot poker at them like a sword. "Last chance."

"Murderer!" the boss screamed, charging at Arwin. Lightning crackled around his body and gathered at the tip of his sword.

Could you telegraph that any harder?

Arwin lunged to the side, narrowly avoiding the magic. It slammed into the ground where he'd been standing with a loud crack, shattering the stone and sending up a wisp of smoke. The other two men sprinted toward Arwin as well, aiming to surround him.

He didn't plan to give them a chance. Arwin lunged, driving his hot poker for the large man's back. To Arwin's surprise, the thief was decent with his blade. He knocked Arwin's attack to the side, then swung for his head.

Arwin ducked the blow, then twisted out of the way as one of the other men tried to stab at him. He went to dodge an attack from the third man, but for some reason, it never came. Arwin didn't question his luck and lunged again, this time drawing on [Scourge].

The large thief made to block Arwin's attack again, but this time, his sword rang off the hot poker like he was a child batting at a bear. His eyes only had an instant to widen before Arwin's makeshift weapon ran him through between the eyes.

Arwin ripped the poker free and spun, raising it defensively just in time to block a desperate blow. For an instant, he locked eyes with a terrified thief. Then Arwin's poker struck again, and another corpse fell to the floor.

Damn it. One more memory to add to the pile.

He turned in search of the final man, then blinked. The man was right in front of him – his throat slit. Behind him stood the girl with red hair, a dagger clutched in her hands.

She quickly dropped the blade and raised her hands into the air. "I – I was just trying to help. Please don't kill me."

Arwin glanced back down at the dead men, then let his poker lower. "I didn't need help."

"I could tell," the girl said. She swallowed. "But even a master swordsman can slip on a rock."

A small grin tugged at the corner of Arwin's lips. "You aren't wrong, and I'm no master swordsman. I'm only twenty-five. Why did you help?"

"Because you helped me. That's how it works."

Arwin nearly laughed, but he caught himself at the last second. If that was actually how the world worked, then it would have been a far better place. If that was how the world worked, he wouldn't have been betrayed.

A flicker of anger passed through Arwin's eyes, but he wrestled himself under control. The guild's time would come.

Well, the guild or whoever it was within it that took me down. For now, the entire guild will have to be suspect until I learn more.

"An old sentiment that I do not believe many mirror. What is your name?"

"Reya."

"I am Arwin." He wasn't worried about sharing his real name – almost nobody in this world actually knew him as anything other than the Hero. His name was one of the few things that he hadn't lost when he was summoned from earth.

Reya gave him a small nod, her shoulders relaxing. Arwin wasn't surprised – generally, people didn't kill people that they gave their names to. Then again, there were some that always asked for the name of a worthy opponent. He wasn't going to remind her of those, though.

Kneeling beside the large thief, Arwin took the sword from his hands. To his disappointment, the sword was as plain as plain could be. There was nothing magical about it.

He set it to the side and went through the rest of the men's pockets, gathering their weapons and belongings.

His efforts were not well rewarded. Aside from a small pile of daggers and two swords, all he managed to get his hands on was a meagre nine gold. When Arwin looked back up, he found Reya still standing in place.

“Why are you still here?” Arwin asked. “We're even.”

Reya shifted uncomfortably as Arwin's gaze bore into her eyes. She looked away from him, suddenly finding a pile of rotting wood fascinating. “You just killed the rest of my guild.”

“Those idiots were your guild? You weren't even in the name.”

“Yes, I'm aware. There aren't a lot of options. They seemed fine enough when I joined, but...” Reya trailed off, then shrugged. “I was wrong. I tried to leave, and you saw how that turned out in the alleyway. I'm not great at frontal confrontations. The Mesh hasn't graced me with a Class yet, so I'm not too strong either. I didn't have a good way to fight back when they were watching me.”

“Sounds like you should learn how to use a sword.”

That clearly wasn't the answer Reya had been expecting. She winced, then gave him a small shrug. “I guess. I'm not very strong, and I don't really love fighting. I'm much better at nicking things.”

“And you are telling me this because...?”

“Well, you're moving in, right?” Reya glanced around the crumbling smithy, then cleared her throat. “I was... uh, hoping you might be recruiting.”

Arwin blinked in confusion. “Recruiting? For what?”

“I don’t know. Something. A gang?”

A snort slipped out of Arwin’s nose. He grabbed the dead men’s bodies and dragged them over to the corner, stacking them until he could figure out what to do with the bodies. “I’m not starting a gang.”

“Oh.” Reya twiddled her thumbs, but she still made no signs of leaving. Arwin glanced down at his hands. They were wet with blood. Letting out a sigh, he turned to face her. “You shouldn’t ally with people you fear.”

And I don’t want to deal with anyone right now. I just want to be left alone.

“It’s better than getting stabbed in the back while I’m sleeping.”

“There are a bunch of empty houses on this street. Go take one of those.”

“I might run into one of the other gangs,” Reya said, wincing at the glare in Arwin’s eyes. “If you want me to leave, I’ll leave. I just thought it could be mutually beneficial.”

“Mutually beneficial? How so?”

She turned, latching onto the small branch that Arwin had unwittingly extended. “What do you need? I can do it for you. I’m not the best at fighting, but I’m great at stealing things. People tell me things too. I can get information, or I could find other gangs for you to take over. You really wiped those guys out, so I bet—”

“Stop,” Arwin said, raising a hand to stave off the flood of words. He didn’t relish the idea of stealing from anyone or going around murdering all the criminals hiding in the slums of

the city, but information – that was something he needed more than anything else. “You said you could get information?”

“If it’s about anything or anyone in Milten, I’ll get it. I swear. Give me a test to let me join your gang. I’ll pass it.”

“I’m not starting a gang,” Arwin snapped.

I’m not a criminal. I do not kill needlessly – and I definitely don’t want to play politics with a bunch of idiots.

“But I thought–”

“I am willing to trade,” Arwin said, cutting Reya off. “And if you can bring me useful information, then I will not object to your presence so long as you remain silent when you do not need to speak. Is that acceptable?”

Reya opened her mouth, then closed it again. She very pointedly crept over to her dagger and, after a quick glance at Arwin to make sure he didn’t object, picked it up and returned it to a sheathe at her side.

She then, moving with the speed of a crippled sloth, inched her way over to the wall and sat down against it. The whole process took nearly a minute, and Arwin couldn’t bring himself to do anything other than watch.

Is she screwing with me?

“You don’t have to be that quiet,” Arwin said. “I’m not going to kill you if you sneeze. Just... don’t bother me.”

Reya let out an explosive breath. “Oh, thank the Mesh. I was going to suffocate from trying to breath quietly.”

Arwin shook his head and turned back to the pile of scrap on the ground. He’d figure out what to do with Reya – and the bodies – later. Right now, the most pressing matter was still his magical affliction.

He could still feel the energy from the bracelet burning within him, but there was no way to tell how long it would last. At any moment, the Mesh could warn him that his energy was going to consume him again, and he wouldn’t have another guaranteed magical item to fall back on.

Up until now, I’ve been running off luck. I need to take things into my own hands.

And, if he wanted to do that, it meant he was going to need to get to work. All Arwin had to work with was a run-down smithy, some shitty weapons, a pittance of gold, and metal that was little better than garbage. His lips pulled back in what might have been one of the first genuine smiles he’d had in years.

It was time to forge.

Chapter 4

Fire roared in Arwin’s hearth. He’d heated it for the last twenty minutes, burning the wood within to a crisp and bringing the piece of metal within it to a burnt orange. There wasn’t much charcoal left to burn in the first place – he was pretty sure his hearth would be out of fuel within the hour, but Arwin was determined to get everything he could out of it before his time ran out.

The brick of metal that he'd selected from the pile was far from perfect. Even he could see the imperfections running through it, but it wasn't like there was a manual he could reference.

Practice makes perfect.

Arwin grabbed the brick with his tongs, moving it over to the anvil and grabbing the hammer. He was a little drained from the fight, but there was still more than enough energy left in his body to power [Scourge] for a short while.

The sound of ringing metal filled the old smithy as Arwin beat away at the brick, doing his best to shape it to his desires. Unfortunately, his best wasn't quite, well, the best. It was definitely taking on some semblance of a dagger, but that was about where it ended.

What should have been a straight blade was jagged and chipped, and the handle was more of a blobby tube. He hadn't even bothered trying to make a hilt – that was beyond him at the moment.

He'd been at it for about an hour. The hearth was dying down to embers, and his reserves of magical energy had almost completely been drained. For the last half of the hour, he'd just been beating away at the dagger with his normal strength.

With no more fire to reheat the weapon, Arwin was forced to lower the hammer and study his creation. He was pretty sure he was meant to quench it to ensure the steel cooled properly or something along those lines, but he doubted the dagger could actually get worse.

It's hideous.

And, worse, when Arwin studied it, the Mesh gave him nothing. The weapon wasn't magical. It was just a dagger. But, in spite of all that, he couldn't keep a grin from his face. He'd *made* something.

Instead of taking life, he'd created something, purely because he wanted to. And, as far as daggers went, he was pretty sure this one wouldn't be killing anyone anytime soon. A satisfied chuckle slipped from his lips as he walked in a circle around the anvil.

Reya watched him with a mildly confused expression on her face, but she didn't say anything. A few minutes passed before Arwin touched the dagger with the back of his hand, making sure it was cool enough to hold before picking it up.

"It's... nice," Reya said hesitantly.

"It is a good start," Arwin agreed. "And, speaking of starts, I think you should get one as well."

She scrambled to her feet, straightening out her shirt and giving him a sharp salute. "Yes, sir."

Arwin stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"Saluting."

"Don't."

Reya let her hand drop. "Okay. I thought we might be mercenaries since we weren't a gang."

"That's not how – ah, never mind. I want you to get information of everyone that lives on this street. Do you think you could do that safely?"

Reya gave Arwin a sharp nod. “Yeah, sure. I already know some of it, so I don’t think it should be too hard. I can figure it out by tomorrow.”

That fast?

Arwin didn’t bother questioning her. He just shrugged. “I’ll be here. Probably.”

With one final nod, Reya turned and jogged out the door. Once she left, Arwin turned back to the bodies that were starting to stink up his shop and scrunched his nose in distaste.

I’m not used to having to dispose of the kills I leave behind. I wonder if there’s a ditch somewhere I can toss them into. I definitely don’t want to go around dragging a corpse behind me in broad daylight, though. Good way to piss off a guard. But first... they’ve got some clothes. Waste not, want not.

There was indeed a ditch. It was down the street and behind a crumbling stone building one firm breeze away from collapse. While it wasn’t as deep as Arwin had hoped, it was still more than enough to toss a few naked bodies into. Their clothes now rested in a corner of his smithy, with one set having replaced the rags that Arwin had been wearing.

He shoved some dirt over the top of the corpses, moving just enough to cover them before heading back to the forge. Arwin couldn’t be bothered giving them a proper burial – it would have taken too long, and there were other things he wanted to do.

Criminals, the guild’s adventurers, monsters; is there really any difference? Nobody gave my friends proper burials when they died. It’s just life – and I don’t want anything more with the

guild, the monsters, or any of that. Not yet, at least. Not until I'm ready to make them pay for what they did.

Arwin paused by a wooden building on his way back to the smithy. He glanced around, but the street was completely empty. He poked his head inside, but it was just as desolate as the street.

“Well, it’s not like anyone is living here,” Arwin mused. He didn’t even want to risk going too far inside, so he gathered as much fallen wood as he could carry, then piled it into his arms and lugged everything back to his smithy.

The pathetic excuse for a dagger that he had forged wasn’t enough. It was a start, but Arwin had never been a fan of mediocrity. As soon as he got back, he added some of the wood into the hearth and brushed the splinters out of his shirt and arms.

I still need oil to quench the stuff I forge, but that can come later. Right now, I just need to work on my technique.

Arwin struck the flint with his shoddy dagger and a spark leapt onto the dry wood. It caught quickly, and he turned his attention to the bellows, pumping air into the flame. He couldn’t help but notice the cracks running along the leather that made up the back of his bellows.

It probably wouldn’t be too long before they broke, but that was another problem for later. Right now, the only thing that mattered was practice. Sweat beaded at Arwin’s brow as he worked the forge.

Minutes stretched on. The ringing of his hammer filled the forge, bearing with it a strange but welcome sense of peace. All but smithing faded, leaving Arwin in a trance as he worked.

As his hammer rose and fell, he could start to see another dagger take shape before him. Every blow he made felt more intentional – and more effective. He alternated between using [Scourge] and just striking the metal purely on instinct, immersing himself completely in the process.

In and out of the flames the block of metal went, taking more and more shape with every pass. At some point, Arwin finished. He barely even registered it. The new dagger was better than the first, but it still wasn't what he wanted.

Not even stopping for a rest, Arwin grabbed another piece of scrap metal and threw it into the hearth.

The cycle continued. Hours ground by, and daggers piled at Arwin's feet. He replaced the wood in the forge as it burned away, chewing through his pile of liberated fuel without even realizing it. The bellows groaned and creaked with every movement, but still Arwin ground on.

His entire upper body was soaked with sweat, but there was something primal about the whole process. A grin pulled across his face, growing wider with every strike until he was nearly laughing with joy.

Forging felt incredible. He was exerting his will on a mere block of metal, and that block was transforming into the item that he envisioned within his mind. And, with every ringing strike, Arwin could tell he understood the material he was working with just a little better.

It was brittle and of poor quality, but just as Arwin desired to form it into something more than trash, the metal had similar longing. He wouldn't claim that the metal lived, but he would have sworn on his life that it *desired*.

Just like everything else, the metal sought a purpose. It was more than trash, but it had been left to rot for who knew how long. To a random smith, the voice of the metal likely would have been indiscernible – but Arwin was not just an amateur smith. He was potential. And, once he started to understand the longing of the metal, the world shifted.

Parts of the metal glowed. At first, Arwin thought it to be residual heat from the forge, but he quickly realized that it was a different light. This one was a faint, warm yellow as opposed to the cherry red of the hearth.

Every time Arwin's hammer struck, the changes to the dagger became even more noticeable. The metal was telling him what it wanted to be. It was guiding his hand.

And, as Arwin raised his hammer to deliver another blow, he paused. The glow had vanished. He had no idea how long he'd been working on the blade, but the fire in the forge had dwindled to dull embers.

A dagger sat on the anvil before him, and it actually looked like a dagger. It was plain and didn't even have a hilt, but it was a dagger – just one without an edge. Arwin's eyes scanned the room in search of something to sharpen the blade with, and they landed on a circular stone in the corner of the room that he'd overlooked before.

Walking over to it, Arwin was mildly relieved to find that it was indeed a whetstone. He was less relieved to find it was barely in workable condition, but anything was better than

nothing. He worked the blade of the dagger against the stone, alternating sides and slowly bringing a sharp edge to the blade.

His efforts were slow, and they smarted of inexperience, but the dagger sharpened, nonetheless. And, after some time, he found himself holding a piece of metal that could actually be considered a completed product.

Before Arwin could so much as smile, he felt something stir within him as the Mesh burst forth.

[Dagger: Poor Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Your Tier has raised by 1 rank.

[Broken Bearer of Last Light] has been consumed.

Arwin's laughter echoed through the forge. The Mesh had recognized his efforts. He'd created another magical item, and this time entirely without the Mesh just handing it to him. Arwin picked the dagger up and inspected it.

Dagger: Poor Quality

[Awoken]: This item has taken on life of its own. With every death it causes, it will grow slightly more powerful. Upon reaching [Unknown] threshold, it will be able to bond with its wielder.

"Fascinating," Arwin breathed, holding the dagger out before him and watching the ember light reflect off its blade. He'd seen many weapons in his years of work. He'd wielded

artifacts that could topple cities and tossed them aside when even more powerful ones came along – but not once had he ever seen one that lived, much less had the potential to change. It wasn't much now, but with enough time, it could become quite an interesting weapon.

Not bad at all. Maybe I can sell this for a bit of gold and get a few improvements to the smithy. I'll have to find out how fast it grows. If it's fast, it might be incredibly expensive. I have no need for a dagger, but this has immense potential.

Arwin set the dagger back down, then turned his eyes back to the forge. His eyes flicked over to the remainder of his dwindling wood pile. There was still more scrap, there was still more wood, and the night was still young.

But first, I have more power to work with. When was the last time I was excited about growing stronger? I can't remember, but I can't wait to see what skills I can unlock.

The Mesh bloomed before Arwin, golden letters scrawling through the air before his eyes.

Name: Arwin Tyrr

Class: Living Forge (Unique) (Tier: Apprentice 2)

New Skill Choice Available.

Arwin reached out to see what new skills he could earn. As soon as his finger touched the golden lettering, it dissipated into dozens of little motes of light that formed into new words.

You may select one of the following skills.

[Hammering Blows] (Passive) – *Your efforts in the smithy have granted you increased strength and efficiency. All hammer strikes will be stronger and faster, scaling based off your Tier.*

[Soul Flame] – *Passion burns within you with such intensity that it can heat metal. You may draw out your Soul Flame, empowering the fire of your forge, but be wary – any magical damage done to the Soul Flame will transfer onto your soul.*

[Avenging Strike] – *War is no stranger to you, and your hammer crushes bones and metal alike. Spend a portion of magical energy to empower your next hammer strike. It will strike living beings harder than non-living ones, scaling based off your Tier.*

Chapter 5

Arwin dismissed [Avenging Strike] immediately. He was already good enough at killing things, and while he suspected [Avenging Strike] and [Scourge] would likely stack on top of each other, he really had no desire to take another combat skill.

Both of the other two Skills were interesting, though. [Hammering Blows] would make smithing considerably faster. It didn't sound very impressive, but over time, it was likely to save him thousands of hours.

[Soul Flame] was a little less clear with exactly what it did. Having an endless source of fire was definitely useful, but the skill had used the word *empowering*, implying it did more than just replace normal flame.

If that was the case, Arwin was willing to sacrifice efficiency for potential. He could always get stronger and faster with time. And, if [Soul Flame] gave him a higher chance to imbue his weapons with magic, then it was a shoe-in.

Arwin selected the middle skill, and the other two shimmered and faded away. Energy trickled through his body, and he felt a faint heat form within his chest. As soon as he turned his attention to it, the heat intensified.

Holding a hand out, Arwin drew the warmth through his arm and into his palm. A dull yellow spark formed in the air between Arwin's fingers, swirling into an orb of flame. It crackled patiently, waiting for him to do something.

Even though the fire was warm, it didn't feel *hot*. Arwin reached out, holding the back of his other hand against the flame. It wasn't uncomfortable. If anything, it just felt like he was holding a loaf of freshly baked bread.

He touched the fire. To his delight, it didn't burn him. Arwin walked over to the pile of wood and picked up a small piece, holding it to the fire. The wood crackled, starting to smoke. He pulled it away before it could properly catch fire – there wasn't enough of it to waste.

“So it can't burn me, but it's definitely real fire,” Arwin said. He closed his fist around the flame and it vanished, darting back into the center of his body. “That's useful already. I suppose it'll remain to be seen exactly what it can do, but there's only one way to find out.”

Fire coiled from Arwin's palm, catching onto the wood in the hearth and igniting with a *whoomph*. Golden-yellow light washed over him, bringing with it a comforting warmth. The wood crackled merrily, though it didn't smell quite as great as he'd hoped.

“I suppose that’s what I get for working with rotten wood,” Arwin grumbled. He held a hand out toward the fire, testing its heat. To his delight, it wasn’t too hot. In fact, it felt identical to the normal ball of [Soul Flame].

In what was probably the nightmare of any parent with an overly curious child, he stuck his hand right into the flame. And, to his delight, it didn’t burn in the slightest. The flame was nothing more than a comforting caress.

Arwin grabbed a piece of scrap metal and stuck it into the flame, turning his attention to the bellows to heat the hearth to even greater degrees. He continued until the flames roared furiously and the metal within them had turned a deep golden orange.

Once he was confident the heat was high enough, Arwin held his hand out, leaning back to make sure his clothes didn’t catch. While his body might have been safe, he only had a few pairs of clothes and he wasn’t eager to accidentally set any of them on fire.

The heat was just as comfortable as it had been before. Arwin brought his hand closer to the piece of metal, but he couldn’t feel any real discomfort from being near it. Using a single pinky, he tapped it.

Nothing.

Arwin grinned. He wrapped his hand around the bar. It was hot, but not unbearably so. A chuckle slipped from his lips.

“That’s a fun little trick. Now… let’s see. What would this bar like to be?”

Arwin was still working the forge when Reya returned. He barely even noticed her enter, and didn't spot her until he reached for the small sword in the furnace with his bare hands.

"Careful!" Reya yelled.

Arwin froze, spinning to look back at her. She flinched at his gaze.

"What?" Arwin asked.

"You – you were going to reach into the fire with your bare hand," Reya said. "I was worried you'd burn yourself."

Arwin blinked, then chuckled. He held a hand out, pulling the burning fire from the hearth and into his palm. The hearth went dark instantly. He'd been working with his Soul Flame for the past few hours, but he loved his choice already. Any flame that he made was completely safe to work with.

He looked down at the crooked sword on the anvil before him and grimaced. Despite his best efforts, he'd been unable to re-create his experience with the dagger. He'd certainly gotten close – at times, he could have sworn that the metal was speaking to him.

But, at some point, he'd lost its voice. Something had gone wrong, and he was left with a sharp piece of scrap. It was still leaps and bounds better than some of the work he'd done earlier, though.

Oh well. Practice is practice. Can't get good at something without failing in the process.

Arwin blinked, realizing that he'd been ignoring Reya. He turned back to her. Her eyes were transfixed on the dagger that he'd made some time ago. "Did you need something?"

“Oh, sorry. I got distracted,” Reya said, yanking her eyes away from the dagger. “You... uh... have an interesting dagger. It might be a good idea not to leave that lying around, sir.”

Shit. Even though it's pretty useless right now, this is probably a pretty decent weapon even in its current, untested state.

“It’s just a test,” Arwin said, picking the dagger up and holding it out so it caught the dim light of the moon shining down through the cracks in the smithy. “Turned out decently enough, I’d say.”

“You made that?” Reya stared at Arwin, then swallowed and shook her head. “I – never mind. Sir, I’ve got the information you asked me to get.”

Arwin had completely forgotten that he’d asked Reya to get anything for him. He lowered the dagger, then cleared his throat and gestured for her to continue. “Ah. Right. Out with it, then. What did you find?”

“There aren’t too many people that really live in this area that make themselves known. There are a fair number of small-time thieves, murderers, and the lot,” Reya said, confidence starting to seep into her tone as she spoke. “The main people that controlled this area were the Brothers Six. I guess they’re the Brothers One-and-a-half now, though.”

“One and a half?”

“One fled and you crushed the other one’s wrist back in the alley before smacking his brains in.”

“I didn’t hit him that hard.”

Reya stared at Arwin. “Right. Brothers Two, then.”

Arwin sighed. “Those jokers were the ones controlling this area?”

“Not all of it, but a good part of it,” Reya confirmed. She tilted her head to the side, digging through her thoughts before speaking again. “Aside from them, there was another gang called Snake Bite. It’s just two people, but they mostly keep to themselves. They live at the south of the road, in the remains of the two-story inn.”

Arwin nodded. “Okay. Anyone else?”

“Aside from the random people passing through and squatting in the houses? Not really. It’s hard to tell which of the ones passing through are ones that are actually going to stick around. I asked everyone, but most people just ignored me.”

Arwin started to nod again, then paused. “Wait. You just... asked them?”

“Yeah. I just wandered through all the houses and asked what they were doing and how long they’d be there. Almost everyone ignored me. I knew Snake Bite because they had a small feud with the Brothers, but that’s obviously no longer a problem.”

Well, nobody can say that she isn’t efficient. She’s certainly bold as well. If she’s worried about fighting, shouldn’t she be at least a little more apprehensive about strolling up and starting chats with known criminals?

“Were any of the passersby interesting?”

“Hard to say. One of them was so drunk that he couldn’t understand a single word that came out of my mouth. I’m pretty sure the one that got him drunk was a lady that claimed she was starting a tavern, but I’m also pretty sure she was drunk too.”

Arwin snorted. “I’d agree with your assessment there. Nobody is starting a tavern where there’s literally no one around to sell to that isn’t going to just try to rob you. Who else?”

“Just a few thieves and cutthroats. I let them know to stay away from the smithy if they knew what was good for them.”

Arwin tilted his head to the side. Threats didn’t usually go well if you didn’t have the strength to back them up, and Reya had yet to give him any reason to believe that she did. “I see. And how did that go?”

“Not great, until I told them to go look in the ditch where you tossed the Brothers.”

“You found that? I thought I buried them well enough.”

Reya stared at Arwin, a grin starting to cross her face but fading quickly when she realized he wasn’t joking. She cleared her throat, then nodded. “Uh... yeah. Really well buried. The, uh, wind kind of just... unveiled them. It isn’t your fault, though. It happens all the time.”

“You don’t have to butter me up,” Arwin said, rolling his eyes. “They clearly weren’t buried quite enough. No matter. It sounds like that turned out to be useful. Is there anything else I should know?”

Reya’s stomach grumbled. Loudly. Her cheeks reddened and she hurriedly shook her head. “No. Nothing at all. That’s it.”

Arwin let a small smile cross his features. Even though he’d only known her for a short while, the girl was starting to grow on him. She reminded him of Blake. An image of his former friend’s glassy, dead eyes staring up at Arwin flashed through his mind.

The smile that had been forming cracked like a dropped pane of glass. He couldn't remember what the man – little more than a boy when he'd died – even looked like anymore. Blake had been one of the earliest people he'd made friends with in this world, and he'd been one of the earliest to die.

Arwin shook his head and took the dagger, tossing it to Reya. Her eyes widened and she snagged it by the handle before it could hit the ground.

“What's this?”

“If you're going to go around threatening people, you should have something that lets you back it up,” Arwin said. The dagger had an interesting effect, but he wasn't about to go around stabbing people to see how well it worked. Besides, its make was still a little shoddy. It was a far cry from the beautiful weaponry and armor that he envisioned himself making in the future. “I'd suggest finding a way to conceal it, though. I'd be embarrassed if people thought I was going around selling sub-par equipment.”

Reya stared at the dagger in disbelief. “And... I can have it?”

“Just make sure to put it to use on people that actually deserve it,” Arwin said with a wave of his hand. “And tell me how fast it grows, if you would.”

Reya's hand snapped up to her head in a salute. “Yes, sir!”

“Stop calling me sir,” Arwin grumbled. “I'm twenty-five.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Commander?”

“Just call me Arwin,” Arwin said, massaging his forehead. “And let’s go back to Rule 1.”

“Rule 1?”

“Don’t bother me,” Arwin said, turning back to his forge. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small bag of coins he’d collected, tossing it to Reya. “Go see if you can get dinner. Eat, then bring me back whatever is left. I’ll be here.”

Reya swallowed, nearly giving him another salute before she stopped herself and settled for a nod. She darted out of the crumbling smithy and Arwin turned back to his forge, his fingers twitching in excitement.

There was still much to do, and he wasn’t even slightly tired.

Chapter 6

Reya’s heart raced in her chest. She could feel the dagger in its sheath at her side like a hot coal. Even though nobody could tell what it was while it was hidden, she couldn’t help but feel like every single eye in the darkness was watching her every move.

This is the most incredible weapon I’ve ever seen in my life, and he just... gave it to me? For free? Who in the Nine Underlands did I find?

A shiver ran down Reya’s back. Arwin terrified her, but for all the wrong reasons. She would have taken him to be an adventurer if she’d run into him on the street, but his eyes burned with an intensity that Reya had never seen before.

Whenever he locked eyes with her, it felt like she was trying to stare down a volcano that was just waiting to erupt. The casual ease he'd handled the Brothers Six made it absolutely clear that Arwin didn't belong in Milten.

Reya didn't know where he'd come from or what his goals were – and she didn't care. She'd lived on the streets for long enough to know that attaching herself to someone strong was the best way to stay alive.

Unfortunately, she'd had pretty poor luck with that in the past. Her lips pressed thin and she shook her head. Arwin cared so little about her that she didn't suspect she even properly registered in his eyes, and that was just fine with her.

So long as he keeps his space and I keep mine, I might be able to actually sit around and gather a little wealth for myself. I'm fed up with getting robbed every single time I gather up enough coin to get out of this shithole.

The thought of coin sent a tiny sliver of guilt through Reya. Distributed across her body in a dozen small pouches was well over a hundred gold – all the savings she'd managed to keep over the years.

It was a pittance in comparison to all the gold that had been stolen from her, but it was still everything she had. Arwin had been under the impression that she was broke, which was exactly what she expected. The less interesting she was to his eyes, the better.

What she *hadn't* expected was for Arwin to offer to pay for her meal. Nine gold was far too much for two portions, but he'd tossed it to her like it was nothing. Reya squished the guilt down.

The way he treats money and magical items means he's got to be pretty damn rich. I'm not going to steal from him, but there's obviously no need for me to waste my coin when he's offering to feed me.

That didn't make the guilt sting any less. Reya's stomach rumbled again, the dull, gnawing pain in it reminding her that it had been far too long since she'd last eaten. Her eyes flitted around the street.

There really wasn't much in the way of food in the area. Nothing that wasn't dead rats, anyway. Reya grimaced. She would have loved nothing more than to head into the city proper and get a real meal, but that was a fantastic way to get herself killed.

She'd made a few too many enemies among the guards and criminal underground alike. The Brothers Six had been assholes, but everyone had hated them and they'd been strong enough to maintain control over their territory.

Oh well. No use crying over spilled milk. I'll just head to one of the taverns at the edge of the slums. They're dangerous, but no more dangerous than pissing Arwin off. If I'm in and out fast enough, I doubt anyone will recognize me.

Reya set off, but she barely managed to make it more than ten feet before a woman called out to her.

“Hey! You there!”

Reya turned toward the voice. A tall woman with dark, bordering on purple skin waved to her. A ropey scar ran down one of the woman's eyes and her dark hair stuck out against the splattered apron she wore. She might have been attractive if she wasn't covered with dirt and

grime. Her hands dripped with a dark red substance, and the stains on her apron were a matching color.

It was the woman who had insisted she was starting a tavern.

“Yes?” Reya asked, putting a hand on the hilt of her dagger and turning her back to a wall. She wasn’t about to get ambushed by some madwoman trying to stuff her into a stew.

“You look hungry,” the woman said, coming to a stop on the other side of the street.

“How does someone look hungry?” Reya asked. “I’m just wandering around.”

“Right,” the woman said, her voice so dry that it could have grated wood. “Sure you are. I smell the hunger on your breath.”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re selling, but I’m not interested,” Reya said with a shake of her head. “And I’m not—”

Reya’s stomach rumbled, and the woman sent her a pointed glance.

“Just one gold. Come on,” the woman offered. “It’ll be good.”

Who in the Nine Underlands charges an entire gold for a plate of food? That better be something fit for nobles at that price, and I’m pretty sure there aren’t any nobles around here.

“I’m not buying it,” Reya said. “Literally and figuratively. One gold? Are you insane?”

If anything, the woman just looked confused. Her brow furrowed and she pursed her lips. “Oh. Is that too much?”

“Yes, it’s too much!”

“What about a silver?”

“You aren’t supposed to be guessing about this kind of thing. Why are you asking me?”
Reya asked. She scanned the road, but it didn’t look like anyone else was there. It was just the two of them.

If this is a robbery, it’s the strangest robbery I’ve ever seen.

“I don’t know. I’m new to this,” the woman said with a shrug. “I’m Lillia. You are?”

Reya heaved a sigh and, against her better judgement, she answered. “Reya. Look, you really shouldn’t be doing this. You could get hurt.”

For some reason, Lillia seemed to find that amusing. The corner of her mouth quirked up in amusement and she let out a small snort. “Sure. Whatever. You want some food or not?”

“Depends,” Reya said suspiciously. “Are you going to try to convince me to follow you into a dark alleyway and strip first? Because I’m getting that kind of feeling from you.”

“What? No,” Lillia said, drawing the last word out and clearing her throat. She glanced over her shoulder, nodding to a small stone building that looked like it had once been a restaurant or storefront. It was directly in the shadow of a larger building, and Reya couldn’t see more than a foot into the darkness. “Just in there.”

“That is no better than a dark alleyway. If you think I’m following you in there, you’re delusional.”

“What if I bring the food out?” Lillia asked, almost desperately. “It’s going to go bad if nobody eats it, and everyone keeps ignoring me when I approach them on the street. Please?”

Against Reya's better judgement, she let out a heavy sigh and inclined her head. The pleading expression on Lillia's face finally managed to chip away at her. "Fine. One silver, and you're bringing it out here. Deal?"

Lillia nodded, then quickly started backing away, not taking her eyes from Reya. She reached the edge of the door. "Stay right there! I'll be right back!"

Reya gave Lillia a fake smile and nodded. The other woman disappeared into the darkness, and the urge to turn and sprint in the other direction gripped Reya. She wasn't sure what stopped her.

Perhaps it was the remnants of manners that she really had no place in keeping, or perhaps it was sheer curiosity. Today – though it was nearly tomorrow, if she was going by the position of the moon in the sky – had been interesting.

A few minutes passed before Lillia came out carrying a large plate covered with a silver bowl. Reya's eyes widened at the sight. It wasn't the fanciest bowl she'd ever seen, but it definitely resembled the plates that she'd occasionally seen served in fancy restaurants.

Only when Lillia got closer and properly stepped into the moonlight did Reya realize what the bowl was. Rather than a smooth, glossy sheen, it was rough and bumpy. It looked like someone had hammered several sheets of trashy metal together. Nails jutted out of it at odd angles, and the whole thing was so roughly formed that she had to suspect it had been formed by hand rather than with tools.

"Here!" Lillia exclaimed, thrusting the bowl in Reya's direction. "All yours."

“Uh... thanks,” Reya said hesitantly. She eyed the handle, which was a random stone that had been stabbed into the top of the bowl. “Should I open it?”

“I’ll charge you extra if you try to eat the metal as well.” Lillia didn’t sound like she was joking.

She’s definitely off her rocker. Or really, really drunk. I don’t smell any alcohol on her breath, though.

“Right. Logically,” Reya said with a small laugh. She grabbed the bowl by its makeshift handle and lifted it back.

Her eyes widened. Sitting on the plate were several drumsticks. From what bird, Reya wasn’t sure. They were pretty large, and while they barely looked seasoned, they had salt and pepper on them.

She licked her lips. As far as food here went, she was practically staring down a feast. Reya pulled out the coins that Arwin had given her and handed Lillia a gold coin, taking the tray from her. “You have change for that?”

Lillia took the coin, eyeing it hungrily. She glanced back to her, then reddened. “Uh... no. You’re my first customer.”

Figures.

Reya scrunched her nose and took one of the drumsticks, taking a bite out of it. Juice dripped down her chin as she chewed and swallowed, her eyes widening. It wasn’t the greatest meal she’d ever had in her life, but it wasn’t bad at all.

“Whoa. This isn’t bad.”

“Thanks.” Lillia beamed. “It’s my fourth serving today. The others didn’t go nearly as well.”

“Why not?” Reya asked through a mouthful of meat.

“Well, the feathers were really scratchy on the first one,” Lillia said, ticking a finger off on her hand. “I removed them on the second bird, but its beak was kind of sharp. Also, I burnt that one black. Burnt the third one too. This one turned out great, though!”

“So it did. What was the secret?”

“I killed it before putting it in the oven.”

Reya nearly choked, but she managed to keep the food in her mouth. She’d gone hungry too many times to waste it over anything like that. It was impossible to tell if Lillia was joking, but the woman looked dead serious.

“Oh. Well... uh, congratulations,” Reya said. She took the other drumsticks from the plate and handed it back to Lillia. “How about this? You give me five more meals like this, and you can keep the gold.”

Lillia’s mouth split into a wide, hungry smile. A chill ran down Reya’s spine as an ill feeling gripped her. It felt like a shadow had fallen over her shoulders. She spun, but there was nobody behind her.

When Reya turned back, the feeling was gone.

“It sounds like we’ve got a deal,” Lillia said with a nod. “Could you tell anyone else you meet about my tavern as well? I’m trying to build up some business.”

Reya did her best not to send a pointed glance around the abandoned street. She just nodded. “Okay. I will.”

“Great,” Lillia said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

With that, she turned and strode back into the darkness of her *tavern*. Reya squinted at it, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t see into the darkness covering the windows.

Tavern my ass. More like a dungeon.

Shaking her head, Reya turned and headed back toward Arwin’s smithy. At least she’d managed to get them food for a fairly decent price, assuming Lillia hadn’t scammed her. Another shiver ran down her spine and she glanced over her shoulder.

I just got a pretty good deal. Why does it feel like I just made a huge mistake?

Chapter 7

“Huh,” Arwin said, chewing and swallowing before speaking again. “This is okay. I wasn’t expecting there to be much of substance in the area.”

“Me neither,” Reya admitted. “Turns out, the lady that wanted to start a tavern was serious about it. She promised to give us five more meals, free of charge.”

The two of them had polished off the remaining drumsticks and had piled the bones between them. There weren’t any chairs or a table in the smithy, so they just sat cross-legged on the floor. Arwin wasn’t particularly bothered by the chill, but Reya had progressively scooted closer and closer to the warmth of the hearth until she sat right beside it.

“Did you get a chance to test my dagger?” Arwin asked, covering a yawn. The day was finally starting to catch up with him.

“No, s – uh, Arwin. I don’t gut random people I walk by.”

“Ah, right. Good point.” Arwin rubbed his eyes, then pushed himself to his feet and wiped his hands off on his shirt. Napkins were another item on his growing list of necessities, but those could come after he patched the rest of the place up.

He’d managed to forge a single sword while Reya had been out. It wasn’t anything special, but it looked like a sword and handled well enough. It would probably sell for a bit, so long as he could find a buyer.

“I’m going to try to start making some money,” Arwin said, stretching his arms over his head. “Keep an eye out for anyone who might need the services of a smith, would you?”

Reya squinted at Arwin, as if she were trying to determine if he was joking.

“What?” Arwin asked.

“Do you mean like... horseshoes and the like? Or swords?”

“Dunno. I haven’t made a horseshoe yet, but I’ll do whatever people want. I’m just trying to earn some gold right now. If anyone’s in the market for something better, then great. I’ll do that. In the meantime, I’ll just keep forging things until I’ve got enough to set up a little stand somewhere.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Reya said, sounding like she did not think it was a good idea in the slightest. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

Arwin just nodded. He didn't much care if Reya approved of what he was doing or not. The most important thing he could do right now was learn more about his Class and keep his head low.

Actually, scratch that. The most important thing I can do right now is find a goddamn bed. I'm exhausted.

There were, unfortunately, no beds in the smithy. There wasn't anything soft either – or, at least, nothing soft that Arwin was eager to put his head on. He scrunched his nose in distaste and leaned against the wall, raising a hand to suck the flame from the hearth.

"I'm going to bed," Arwin said. "Don't rob me."

Reya paled and she nodded hurriedly, raising her hands. "I wouldn't do something like that. I value my life."

"Good," Arwin said. Then he closed his eyes and, minutes later, drifted off to sleep.

Arwin dreamed of home. Not the home that the Adventurer's Guild had built for him, but the small, one-story house that he'd lived in as a child – the home that had been his before he'd been summoned to this world by the Guild.

His memories of it were fuzzy at best, but he still remembered more than he suspected he should have. He couldn't remember the faces of his parents, but he remembered their love.

Arwin had a brother as well. Aiden. He couldn't remember his face either. Arwin wasn't even sure if any of them were still alive. Traveling between dimensions or universes – he still wasn't sure where it was that this world existed – had to take time.

Maybe they were all already dead, or perhaps they still wondered what happened to him. Arwin had been ten on the day he'd been ripped from his comfortable bed and found himself here. There had been a time when he'd longed to return, but that feeling was gone.

Earth was his first home, but it was his home no longer. He was part of this world, now. And yet, he didn't even know if this world had a name. Amusingly enough, he knew more about Earth than he knew about the world around him now.

Every waking moment he'd spent here, going from when he was summoned until when he struck down the Demon Queen, had been spent in training. Training tactics, fighting monsters to gain strength and raise in Tiers, and training against the other adventurers.

That was all he'd known. It had been for the best. Even if he hadn't had a childhood, he was fighting to protect the childhoods of everyone who lived within the Kingdom of Lian.

At least, that was what he thought he'd been doing. Now, he wasn't so sure. The Guild had betrayed him without even blinking an eye, and the kingdom was at war once more.

Why? What was the purpose? I did everything I was meant to. We should have been at peace.

The answers didn't come. No matter what should have happened, the new war *had* started. Mercifully, there was someone else to deal with it now. Arwin couldn't help but wonder if the new Hero was the same as he had been – another child stolen from their family on Earth, forced to give their life in trade for peace.

Arwin wasn't sure how he felt about that. He didn't get a chance to find out. Sleep ripped itself away from him and his eyes snapped open. Bolting upright with a start, Arwin leapt to his feet and grabbed for a sword that wasn't there.

The smithy was empty. His heart slammed in his chest as he spun, searching for an enemy. His hand slowly lowered and he swallowed, shaking his head and letting out a slow breath.

Sunlight filtered through the cracks in the smithy roof above him. He stretched his arms out, then popped his neck. The subjects of his dreams had already started to drift away from him, but that was fine.

The past doesn't matter. I'm free now, and I'm going to abuse that to its fullest extent. This smithy is a perfect place to get started. It's got a lot that I need to get around to fixing, but I can already picture it in its full glory.

A smile drifted across Arwin's face at the thought. He rubbed his hands together, warming them back up, and turned to the hearth. A new morning meant more time for work, and he had some swords to work on.

He grabbed the last of his wood pile and tossed it into the hearth. Then, summoning his [Soul Flame], Arwin sent a small orb of fire into the dry wood. It quickly started to crackle as the flame took, and he got to work with the bellows to bring the heat up faster.

Once the flame was properly roaring, Arwin picked out another few pieces of metal and tossed them into the forge. He vaguely remembered one of the artificers making his weapons hammering layers of metal together, claiming they were stronger that way.

No clue if he was right, but I've got nothing but time. Experimenting will be fun.

Arwin waited until the metal was properly heated before setting the first one out on the anvil and laying into it with his hammer. As he had previously, Arwin quickly fell into a rhythm. His hammer rose and fell, striking the glowing portions of the metal.

This piece seemed particularly determined to guide him in the right direction, and he made good time. Once it was flattened out, Arwin claimed another one of the pieces and hammered it out as well.

He started to layer them, folding them in on themselves as he worked. It was getting harder to read the metal's intent, but there was just enough to follow by. It helped that every [Scourge] empowered blow struck the metal like a hundred individual strikes, drastically increasing the speed he worked at.

Before long, the shape of a sword took form before Arwin. A grin stretched across his lips as he worked, feeling his desires mixing with those of the metal and starting to take form on the anvil before him.

Arwin accelerated. This was going to be a magical weapon. He could feel it in his very bones. Every minute he made the world wait felt like a disservice.

He worked for a little under an hour before the glow finally faded and Arwin let his hammer lower, breathing heavily as he took in his creation. There was no real hilt, and the handle was more of a spike than a comfortable grip.

Arwin brought the blade over to his old whetstone and got to work, sharpening the blade. He was starting to get better at it, though his efforts still weren't exactly those of a master. But, even after he raised the blade from the stone, nothing changed.

Magic simmered within the metal – and yet, it wasn't finished. Arwin's brow furrowed as he looked down on the sword.

“Do I need to get you a proper handle?” Arwin murmured. “I suppose that would make sense. Can't call it a proper sword if you're holding it by that little nub.”

He scanned his shop, but he didn't exactly know any woodworking. Still, he wasn't about to be dissuaded. Arwin set the sword down on his anvil and departed the smithy, returning to the wooden house he'd looted the day prior.

After a quick search, he spotted a piece of wood that looked to be in pretty good condition. He snagged it and headed back to his smithy without a second glance. As soon as he returned, Arwin used one of the swords he'd taken from the Brothers to shave away strips of wood until he had something that vaguely resembled a hilt.

Arwin then took the sword and held it to the anvil, pounding the wooden hilt in at its bottom with his hammer. Each strike impaled the wood a little farther on the tang until it was all the way up to the blade.

He took a step back, studying his creation. It didn't have a proper hilt, and he knew for a fact that he'd made it completely wrong. But, despite that, he felt the Mesh tingle against his skin.

[Short Sword: Garbage Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Arwin wasn't exactly surprised. The sword looked like it had been dropped down a flight of stairs while it was being forged, and the impurities in the metal had done a serious number on its potential.

That said, he'd still made a magical weapon. Arwin inspected the weapon closer to see what properties he'd imbued it with.

Short Sword: Garbage Quality

[Brittle]: This item has a chance of shattering on every blow. Upon shattering, the magical power stored within the weapon will be released in an instant, causing a minor magical explosion.

A burst of laughter slipped out of Arwin's mouth. He carefully carried the sword over to the corner of his forge and set it down, taking care not to move it too aggressively. It wasn't a sword he was inclined to use himself, nor did he want to find out what would happen if he ate its power, but it wasn't bad as a throwing weapon.

"I suppose this is one of the detrimental qualities my skill talked about."

I wonder if the gemstone that was meant to kill me worked in a similar manner. Maybe forging a few more weapons with Brittle would actually be a good way to research what happened – but I'd rather make something actually useful.

Arwin studied the blade, pondering on what he'd done wrong. The first and easiest problem was obviously his materials. He needed better metal to work with, but that would be fixed when he started earning more money.

The bigger issue was with his actual technique. He was pretty certain that he'd made the handle entirely wrong, and now that he thought about it, when he'd seen his smith making a sword for him, the man had twisted two metal rods together rather than just hammering some scraps.

Maybe I need to get some metal rods first. They would certainly lend themselves to the shape of a sword better. I think that should be my next step.

Arwin was still nodding to himself when he heard gravel shift near the entrance of the smithy. He glanced over as Reya walked inside, chewing on a chunk of meat on a bone. She froze as she saw Arwin.

“You're awake!”

“Of course I'm awake,” Arwin said dryly. “What else would I be? It's the middle of the day.”

“Uh, right. Yeah.” Reya cleared her throat. “It's just that you slept for like... two days straight. I was wondering if you would wake up.”

“Two days?” Arwin's eyes widened, but Reya's word did make a certain amount of sense. “I suppose I was rather tired.”

“Are you hungry? I didn’t get food for you, but…”

Arwin shook his head, surprised to find he meant it. His stomach didn’t exactly feel full, but he didn’t feel like he’d slept for two days at all. As a matter of fact, he actually felt rather good.

Interesting. Do magical items sustain me for longer than normal food does? Does that mean I don’t need to eat food at all? Eh. Even if I didn’t, I still would. There aren’t enough joys in life to skip out on one.

“Forget food for a moment. Did anything interesting happen?” Arwin asked.

Reya crossed her arms behind her back and suddenly found one of the broken-down walls fascinating. “Uh… nothing too interesting, no.”

Arwin’s eyes narrowed. “Out with it.”

“I, uh, may have killed someone.”

Chapter 8

“Is that all?” Arwin asked. “Did they deserve it?”

“Uh… yeah.”

“Then that doesn’t seem particularly interesting. Who were they?”

“A member of the thieves’ guild.”

That got Arwin's attention. His eyes narrowed and he turned his full attention to Reya.

"A large one?"

"No, nothing like that," Reya said hurriedly. She held her hands up defensively. "A tiny one, and they aren't even from this area. They control the territory a few streets down, and they were poking around to see what had happened after the Brothers Six got gutted."

Arwin pursed his lips. "I'm not seeing the part where this ended with you stabbing someone."

"Well, one of them tried to sneak into the smithy. I knew you were sleeping in it, and I didn't think you'd want to be bothered. I told him to turn around, but he ignored me, so I stabbed him."

"Huh. Pragmatic," Arwin said. He shrugged. "Sounds like he had it coming. I appreciate it. Where'd you put the corpse?"

"In the pile with the others."

"We should probably avoid making that a habit," Arwin mused. He stretched his arms over his head and yawned. "Did he have anything on him?"

"About ten gold." Reya pulled a pouch out and tossed it to Arwin. He caught it with a surprised blink.

"Why are you giving it to me? You're the one that killed him."

Reya give Arwin a sheepish grin and shuffled her feet. “Ten gold is what was left after I took my cut. You’re the boss, so you get a split.”

Arwin tilted his head to the side, studying Reya for a few seconds. Then he gave her a slow nod, sliding the pouch into a pocket. He needed gold if he was going to get better materials to work with.

“In that case, I’ll take it. I suppose it’s about time I went shopping for some supplies,” Arwin said. He headed out of the smithy and Reya followed him. Arwin glanced at her over his shoulder. “Say, how did that dagger work out? Did it change from the kill?”

“No,” Reya said. “I think I have to use it more.”

Arwin grunted.

That’s a disappointment. Oh well. I gave it to her for free, so it’s not a big deal. No matter what happens, I’m making a sword that I can use myself today. A good one. It doesn’t have to be great, but it’s going to be good.

Reya came to a stop as they reached the edge of the street. Arwin took several steps before he realized she wasn’t following behind him. “Are you not coming?”

“I’ve got some more to take care of back home,” Reya said with a shake of her head. “I’m still trying to establish relationships with the other people on the street.”

Arwin shrugged. “Suit yourself. Try to make sure nobody gets their hands on the sword I left in the smithy. It’s liable to blow up the moment someone starts swinging it, and I have no

idea how big the explosion will be. It would be unfortunate if my smithy got damaged any further.”

Reya’s face paled. She looked back at the crumbling building, then gave Arwin a hurried nod. “I’ll make sure nobody touches it.”

“Good,” Arwin said. He set back off, leaving Reya behind him.

Arwin walked in as straight of a line as he could so it would be easy to retrace his steps. The alleyways weren’t the easiest to traverse, but by the time he returned to the city proper, he was pretty sure he’d memorized the way back.

It took a little under half an hour of aimlessly wandering around Milten until Arwin’s nose led him to a market. The scent of freshly baked bread, greasy meat, and about a dozen other flavors he couldn’t place hung low in the air.

A small crowd bustled around the street. There weren’t too many people, especially compared to the capitol, but there were still more than enough to make the city feel alive. Arwin couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in a city without an escort from the Adventurer’s Guild.

For that matter, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been anywhere in the Kingdom of Lian without a guard of some sort.

The smells were tempting, but Arwin only had a single thing on his mind at the moment. His eyes scanned the roofline of the shops near the market, and it wasn't long before he found what he was looking for.

Smoke rose up from a small stone chimney near the end of the market. Arwin made his way over to it, and the crowd gave him a wide berth on his way over. He sniffed at his arms, but he didn't smell *that* bad.

Weird.

Arwin arrived at the smithy and stepped inside. A large man with a bushy black beard and muscles large from years of work sat at the counter, staring off at the wall in complete boredom.

The smith nearly leapt out of his chair when he spotted Arwin. The man's eyes narrowed and he rose to his feet, brushing himself off.

"What do you want?" the smith asked in a brusque tone. "I don't give handouts."

"Handouts?" Arwin squinted at the man. "Why would I need handouts? I'm here to buy some materials."

The blacksmith blinked. "You are? You should have said so. My name is Taylor. Please feel free to take a look around. You just didn't look much like the 'buyin sort.'"

“What’s that meant to mean?” Arwin looked down at his clothes. They were dirty, sure, but it didn’t look like they were that out of place. He looked back to the blacksmith. “Do I have dirt on my face?”

“Well, it looks like you slept in a pile of soot.”

Arwin reached up and touched his cheek. His fingers came away gritty and he grimaced. “Ah. Yes, that would do it. No matter. Do you have metal rods?”

“Rods? You don’t want a weapon?”

“Just rods,” Arwin said firmly. “Or any sort of metal scrap that isn’t complete trash, now that we’re at it. I’m trying to learn forging.”

The smith’s eyes narrowed, and Arwin realized he might have made a mistake. Telling someone that you were going to start up a business in competition with them wasn’t really the greatest idea.

“You want me to sell to competition?” Taylor asked.

Arwin scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah. Your work should speak for itself, right? No shame in competition if they’re worse than you.”

“You’re a shameless one, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I’ve also got ten gold here, and I’m willing to spend as much of it as I need to for some rods. Save us both the trouble of dancing around and tell me if you’re willing to sell or not. If you aren’t, I’ll just find someone else to give them to me.”

Taylor's frown split into a mildly amused grin and turned, heading into the back of his store. A few minutes later, he came back out with four metal rods and a small tarp bag bulging at the seams. He thumped everything down on the counter.

"If you're going to get your hands on it regardless, I might as well make some profit in the meantime," Taylor said with a shake of his head. "I'm not giving you the best price, though. You want a better one, go find someone else."

"I respect the honesty." Arwin tossed Taylor the bag of coins, and the smith counted everything before giving Arwin a curt nod.

"And I respect the balls. Next time, find someone else to buy from. I'm not outfitting my competition."

"Noted," Arwin said, gathering up everything he'd bought. "Thanks."

Taylor just shook his head. As Arwin headed out the door, the other smith called out to him.

"Say, where are you opening up shop? It better not be too close to me."

"I'm not exactly sure," Arwin replied. "It's somewhere in an alley. I'll let you know once I rebuild it."

He headed back out onto the street, leaving Taylor gawking at his back. He had what he needed, and now all he had to do was head back and get back to work. A grin crossed Arwin's lips and he increased his pace, striding back into the dark alleys and toward his smithy.

Fortunately for his dwindling patience, Arwin didn't have to walk long. He'd memorized the way back pretty accurately, and he soon found himself back on the alleyway that wasn't quite home yet.

But, as he approached his smithy, a frown crossed over Arwin's face. There were noises coming from inside it that definitely weren't meant to be there – in particular, voices that he didn't recognize.

I suppose I should have expected this.

Arwin ducked through the crumbling doorway and stepped into his building. Reya stood with her back to the wall and her dagger in her hands, facing off against two men wearing loose green clothes.

As soon as Arwin entered, one of them spun toward him.

“We're not open for business yet,” Arwin said, setting the materials he'd purchased from Taylor down on the ground. “Get out.”

“Who're you?” one of the men asked.

“When asking a name, it is polite to introduce yourself first.”

“Jin,” the man said, putting a hand on the hilt of a short sword at his waist. “Your turn.”

“Arwin. Pleasure to meet you, Jin. Now get the hell out of my smithy.”

“This is your smithy?” Jin’s head tilted to the side. Arwin was more focused on Reya, who looked like she was about half a step away from stabbing Jin or his compatriot. Normally, he wouldn’t have particularly minded, but that would mean he’d get even more blood on his floors.

“Yes,” Arwin said. “Is there a problem with that?”

“Not at all. We’d be pleased to leave,” Jin said, inclining his head and giving Arwin a slight bow. “Rex and I don’t have any interest in bothering you. We’re just after the little rat.”

Arwin’s eyes flicked to Reya, who swallowed. Her grip tightened on the dagger.

“There seems to be a misunderstanding here,” Arwin said.

“Oh? What is it?” Jin tilted his head to the side, shifting his stance. It was a subtle move, but Arwin had been in enough fights to recognize it. Jin knew how to fight – at least, he knew more than the Brothers Six had.

“Anything that happens to be inside my smithy is part of my smithy,” Arwin said. He jerked his chin in Reya’s direction. “And she is inside my smithy.”

Just leave so I don’t have to get blood on my floor, would you?

“Are you sure about that?” Jin asked, his eyes narrowing. He drummed his fingers on his sword. “You’re a big guy, and you clearly know how to carry yourself. But you’re sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. This is guild business.”

“Not my guild,” Arwin said. “And not my problem. You want to start shit, then do it outside. I’m going to be pissed if I get more blood on my floors.”

Jin’s gaze flicked down to the dry splotches near the forge. His lips pressed thin and he snapped his fingers. Rex took a step back, sheathing his blade. Arwin was actually somewhat impressed – he’d fully expected the men to attack.

“Very well,” Jin said. He didn’t say another word as he swept past Arwin. Rex trailed after him, giving Arwin a glare before stepping out the front door. Arwin waited until he heard their footsteps fade down the street before he turned to Reya.

“Huh. I’m surprised they had the brains not to attack,” Arwin said. “Lucky me. The floors are spared.”

“That wasn’t brains,” Reya said, biting her lower lip and staring out the door. “Jin’s one of the thieves’ guild enforcers. He has a bit of a grudge against me, but he’s not stupid. He knows you killed the Brothers Six, so he doesn’t want to get into a fight with you.”

Arwin grunted. “Clever thieves. Lovely. At least he left.”

“He didn’t leave,” Reya said, swallowing heavily. “But we probably should. Jin is going to show back up with more people. He hates losing. The only reason he backed off is because he felt like he was outnumbered.”

“More people? I thought you said this was a small guild.”

“I may have over-exaggerated their small-ness,” Reya said, clearing her throat. “They have thirty members.”

“Thirty members?” Arwin exclaimed. “What the hell did you get me wrapped up in? And what is it with you and getting into trouble? Every time I leave, you manage to get into something new.”

“It’s not new!” Reya protested. “I just have a bunch of old things that kind of keep stacking up on each other. I haven’t done anything that bad recently!”

“You stabbed someone.”

“They had it coming.”

“Okay, fair. You aren’t avoiding this, though. Answer the question. Why is a thieves’ guild pissed at you?” Arwin asked. “And don’t tell me it’s because of the smithy. I’m getting the feeling it isn’t the shitty old building they care about. They followed *you* here.”

Reya’s shoulders slumped and her eyes fell to her feet. “I’m sorry. They did.”

“I gathered as much. I want to know why.”

“Well, long story short, I may have stolen something from them.”

“What did you steal, Reya?” Arwin demanded. “Stop hedging around it and tell me!”

Reya bit her lower lip, then walked up to Arwin and leaned in close to whisper into his ear. “The only key to a Journeyman Tier Dungeon.”

Chapter 9

It had been a long time since Arwin had last thought about dungeons, but he was surprised to find that the word brought up warm memories. He'd spent the majority of his earlier years in this world within the dungeons together with the men and women that had once been his friends.

As far as Arwin had learned, dungeons were areas where the Mesh got caught up and layered over itself, growing unstable. Monsters were lured to the location and the Mesh fed them, letting them grow in strength and turning their flesh and bodies valuable.

Most times, dungeons vanished forever once someone went through and killed everything within them. The Mesh would unravel, returning to its proper form, and whoever had cleared the dungeon would be the only one to benefit from it.

But, in some situations, the bundled Mesh was so tight that it could become permanent. Anything that spent extended periods of time within these areas grew warped with power, and there was enough magic present that the dungeons would reform themselves and the monsters within them over periods of time.

Dungeons such as those were incredibly valuable and highly monopolized by both the Mesh and people alike. Many of them had limited entrances to keep the dungeons from being over-cleared and risking the dungeon unraveling. Some of those entrances were man-made, and some of them seemed to be placed there by the Mesh itself.

Arwin had never properly understood the Mesh's purpose. At times, it seemed to be to force people to grow and pursue their goals. At other times, it seemed as if it rejoiced in causing chaos and preventing peace from ever cementing itself. Nobody had ever given him a straight answer for what the Mesh truly was, but he knew one thing for certain – it granted power.

A Journeyman dungeon wouldn't have been of any interest to me when I was still the Hero. It's only one Tier up from Apprentice. Things are different now, though. This is an incredible find. And, if there's actually only a single entrance, it's an incredible training ground and way to generate both money and materials. Granted, I'd actually have to be able to survive it. As things stand, I can wipe the floor with some nameless goons, but I'd get slaughtered if I tried to solo a dungeon twice my Tier.

Arwin realized that he'd drifted off in thought, and Reya was staring at him, growing progressively more and more worried by his lack of reaction.

"I know I should have told you earlier, but I was worried—" Reya started.

"This is a huge opportunity," Arwin said, cutting her off. "I don't blame you for not sharing your secrets. I've hardly shared mine, but if you're willing to share that dungeon, there could be a lot we could get from it. Have you checked the dungeon out yourself?"

Reya blinked at Arwin's excitement, but it wasn't long until her frown returned. "I – no, I haven't. The thieves' guild is watching the entrance, so I haven't had a chance. But... do you mind if I ask a question?"

"You can ask, but I may not answer."

“I know you’re pretty strong, but are you able to do a dungeon at Journeyman Tier? I don’t doubt you or anything, but aren’t you some sort of smith?”

“I am a smith, yes. What of it?”

“Well... a smith doesn’t have any battle skills. No matter how strong you are, a Journeyman dungeon might be too much. I don’t even have a class, so there’s no way I’d be able to do anything. I suppose we could try to earn enough money to hire someone, but then they might just take all the good stuff themselves.”

I don’t have any mere crafting class, though. I’ve got a Unique one. I guess that may or may not be a good thing. The Unique modifier doesn’t necessarily imply something is better or worse – just that it’s different from the standard. Only time will tell, but I’m pretty sure Living Forge has more benefits than drawbacks.

Either way, I still have some of my titles. With a little preparation, I think we could handle the dungeon. When I was still the Hero, training would have handled that. But now... no. Training wouldn’t hurt, but it’s not what I need. If I want to become strong again, I need to build myself a set of equipment so strong that it can let me keep up with the combat classes.

“We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it,” Arwin said. “I’m confident we’ll be able to handle the dungeon at some point, but you were right to keep this secret. I trust you’ve got the key stashed somewhere safe, where nobody can find it?”

Reya cleared her throat loudly. Arwin's eyes narrowed. "I'm not asking you to tell me where it is. I'm not going to rob you. Just make sure someone doesn't nick it while we're getting ready."

Reaching up to her chest, Reya pulled the top of her shirt back and pulled out a key dangling on a thin necklace. "I, uh, kind of just have it here. I didn't think about stashing it anywhere."

"Put that away," Arwin said hurriedly. He glanced at the entrance of the smithy to make sure nobody was there, not relaxing until the key was hidden once more. "Holding onto it is fine. Just don't lose it. We can get a lot out of it."

"So it's definitely a *we* thing now?" Reya asked, giving him a cheeky smile.

"Don't get too big for your britches. You're the one that dragged me into this," Arwin pointed out, but he couldn't keep a small smile from passing over his own features. "And I've dealt with worse than you. I'm not opposed to a partnership so long as you don't go stabbing me in the back or doing anything overly stupid."

"You aren't going to make me share more about myself?"

Arwin let out a burst of laughter. "No, Reya. Why would I do that? If I asked you to spill your secrets, then I would have to do the same. I don't care about your secrets, so long as they don't affect us."

Shifting uncomfortably, Reya glanced to the side. Arwin's eyes narrowed. "What else have you done?"

“You might have to be more specific.”

“How many enemies do you have that are actively looking for you?”

Reya raised a hand, ticking fingers off on it. She quickly ran out of fingers and swapped to the other hand. Finding that one also lacking, she started pulling a shoe off. The other shoe soon followed after it, and Reya finally raised her gaze back to Arwin’s, biting her lip.

“Arwin?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t get mad, but I lost count.”

Arwin heaved a sigh. “Figures. Maybe we’re more alike than I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” Arwin said. He waved at her shoes. “Put those back on before you step on something sharp by accident, would you? Do any of your enemies other than the thieves guild know where you are?”

“No, they shouldn’t. I’m sorry. I should have told—”

“Good. Keep it that way. I’ve already spent enough time on this. I’m going back to work. Could you get dinner?”

Reya froze midway through pulling her socks back on, looking up at Arwin in shock.

“You’re not kicking me out?”

“Of everyone I’ve run into in the past few days, you’ve been the most reliable. So long as things stay that way, I don’t care who your enemies are. Just... try to give me a little forewarning the next time, would you?”

“Yes sir!” Reya saluted him, then scrambled to her feet and gave him another salute.

“Arwin.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Reya slipped out the door and Arwin shook his head, a small smile on his face. Blake would have loved her. He’d been excited about just about everything, and he could barely remember a time when Blake hadn’t been smiling. Even his last breath had passed with a grin sprawling across his lips.

“Could have used your help right about now,” Arwin muttered into the air. “But maybe this is your way of sending it, eh?”

There was no response, but Arwin wasn’t so sure he hadn’t already gotten one. Still wearing a small smile, he turned back to his forge and cracked his neck. There was a lot of work he had to get done, and the thieves’ guild wasn’t going to sit around forever.

Days flitted by, and the thieves’ guild still had yet to return. That was perfectly fine with Arwin. He barely left his forge, and Reya proved to be capable in more ways than one. She

didn't just bring him food – she also woke him up in the mornings and made sure he went to sleep early enough to avoid passing out for another few days at once.

Beyond that, she also continued to procure a steady supply of metal scrap. It wasn't the highest quality material, but it was a lot better than the other trash that Arwin had to work with – and it was free.

Arwin didn't ask where Reya had gotten the materials, and she didn't offer an answer. He was going through supplies far too quickly to be picky, but his efforts were to great effect. Two piles of swords, daggers, nails, and other assorted objects started to form beside Arwin.

The first – and largest – of them was full of garbage that was completely worthless and had no magical properties. The second was considerably smaller, but it had several swords mixed in with the daggers that Arwin wasn't completely disgusted with. None of them had been magic, but they looked like real weapons. The rate he was improving at was, at least to his eyes, incredible.

He'd been successful in making only a single magical item in his three days' work, and that had been a Garbage Quality magic dagger that he'd promptly eaten upon feeling the pangs in his stomach.

It looks like I need to eat an item about once every four or five days. That should be sustainable, but I need to build up a bigger backlog of things to eat in case something goes wrong.

Arwin's hammer rung against steel as he thought, putting the final touches on the blade he'd been working on that morning. This particular piece had been singing him a song that was reaching its final notes, and Arwin was particularly optimistic about its chances.

But, if he was going to make a sword that he could actually be proud of, he needed to do the full process, not just the first half. Arwin held the glowing hot blade before him and glanced around in search of liquid.

There wasn't anything in the smithy that he could use – which was probably a problem he should have rectified before starting his work. Arwin headed outside, walking around the back of the smithy and down the road.

Luck must have been smiling upon him. After just a minute or two of walking, he spotted a deep puddle near the ditch at the side of the road. It was only a little longer than his body and barely as wide as his arm, but there was a quarter foot of water in it.

Better than nothing.

Arwin plunged the blade into it. Steam erupted forth and the water bubbled furiously as it cooled the blade. He held it beneath the water, enjoying the faint massage of roiling water against this hand. Only once the bubbles resided did Arwin lift the blade free. It was covered with black flakes of metal that he brushed away with his thumb, using a tiny amount of power from [Scourge] to push them off the metal.

It looked like a blade. He wasn't sure what else to say. If he'd known more about smithing he probably would have shuddered at the weapon before him, but in this particular

instance, ignorance would be a blessing. Arwin headed back to the smithy, partially finished sword in hand.

After a few minutes of scraping at the rough surface to get it as polished as possible, Arwin was mostly satisfied with the weapon's blade. He took a slightly curved metal tube that he'd formed the previous night and slid it over the tang of the blade before taking the whole thing over to the hearth and sticking it into the flames.

After letting them heat, Arwin brought the sword back to his anvil. He grabbed some nails and drew on [Scourge] to hammer them straight through the metal, holding the hilt in place beneath the crossguard. He then lumbered over to a small roll of leather that Reya had *procured* and wrapped the hilt with the leather.

As soon as Arwin's hands lifted off the sword, he felt the tingle of the Mesh race across his skin. A grin split his lips as magic swirled before his eyes.

[Short Sword: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [More than Average] has been earned.

[More than Average] – *Awarded for forging your first Average Quality item. Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

A faint feeling of strength seeped into Arwin's body and his grin grew wider. There were a very high number of adventurers who believed that the most important way to get stronger was purely reaching higher Tiers and upgrading their class.

While that was certainly *one* way to get stronger, Arwin's years of combat had shown him that it was far from the most important one. The actual key to power was getting as many Achievements and Titles as possible, which would give the highest chance to get the best skills. There was no limit to how many of them someone could get per Tier, but there were only ten levels per tier. Unfortunately, Arwin had only learned that late into his career as the Hero.

I always did wonder why the Adventurer's Guild never told me about how important getting good skills in each Tier was. Now that I suspect they tried to kill me, it makes me wonder what purpose they really summoned me for. It clearly wasn't to be the strongest warrior humanity had, or they wouldn't have withheld information.

One day, I'll find out. For now, I've got another chance. I'm all the way back at Apprentice Tier, which means I have all the opportunities in the world to improve my skills. I can be stronger than I ever could have been as the Hero.

But that would come later. He picked the sword up and held it out before him, letting the Mesh tingle against his skin. For now, it was time to see what magic his first well-made sword possessed.

Chapter 10

Short Sword: Average Quality

[Ringing Blows]: This item remembers the ringing of the man who forged it. While wielding it, you may use a small amount of your magical energy to imbue your attacks to leave a faint resonance behind upon impact. Repeated strikes against the same area will cause increased damage.

[Hungry]: This item hungers for power, and will consume more magical energy than necessary in order to function.

“Would you look at that,” Arwin mused, holding the sword up to the light. “That’s actually rather useful. Not bad. Not bad at all. It still managed to pick up a detrimental property, but considering the chance of that is eighty percent right now, I don’t think I can complain. It’s good to know I can get two different properties on a single weapon.”

“Whoa.” Reya’s voice came from behind him.

Arwin turned, finding Reya standing in the doorway of the smithy, her eyes wide. He lowered the sword, then picked up the sheath from one of the swords he’d taken from the Brothers Six, swapping the blade out for his own.

“Staring is impolite,” Arwin said.

“Sorry.” Reya shook her head, blushing. “I just saw the swords you were making before. No offense, but they sucked. You’re getting better at a crazy rate. Were you just screwing around before?”

Arwin looked over to the pile of garbage, then chuckled. “No. I’m just a fast learner.”

“Right,” Reya said, clearly not believing him. Arwin’s stomach rumbled before either of them could say anything else, and it was Reya’s turn to laugh. “Time for lunch?”

“I’d say so,” Arwin agreed. “I hoped you’d gone out to get it.”

“I did, but Lillia actually said I wasn’t allowed to take food out anymore. She’s trying a new strategy of getting people to stay in her tavern longer.”

Arwin squinted at Reya. “You say people, as in plural. Does she actually have other customers?”

“Er... she’s got one. I’ve seen a drunk guy passed out in her shop every once and a while. That’s it, though. She’s just really adamant that she can’t have the right atmosphere if people are always coming in and leaving right after.”

“I’d say the first problem is that she’s trying to build an inn on the least populated street in the city,” Arwin said dryly. He brushed his hands off on his shirt, then shrugged. “Her cooking seems to be improving, though. Perhaps it’s worth a trip out of the old building.”

Arwin glanced around his smithy, but there wasn’t much he really had to put away or move. He took a moment to take his potentially explosive magical sword and bury it beneath the pile of garbage before following Reya out of the open doorway, stepping carefully to avoid slipping on the rubble.

I really need to start looking into improving this building. It’s depressing.

“Do you think we can make this place look a bit better soon?” Reya asked as they walked down the street, reading Arwin’s thoughts perfectly. “Or at least add some beds? I’m not unused to sleeping on the floor, but I don’t normally stay in one spot this long. I mean, I’m not really bringing in any money so I can’t tell you what to do, but—”

“I’d say you’ve brought in more than enough supplies to give you some say over what we do,” Arwin said, raising a hand to stall her. “And I agree. Some comfort would be nice, and improving the smithy will be important if I want more people to come. I think the first step will be finding a way to sell some of my work, though. I need a wooden cart or something of its like that I can bring to a more populated area of the city.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out.”

Arwin suppressed a laugh. “I need to get one the *proper* way, Reya. I don’t want to have someone chasing me down the streets because they recognize the cart I’m selling out of.”

“Oh,” Reya said, her face falling. “Right.”

They came to a stop at the end of the street, before a building that was somehow in worse shape than Arwin’s smithy. He squinted through the empty window frames, but it was so dark inside that he couldn’t make a single thing out.

“This is the tavern?” Arwin asked doubtfully. “It looks like a morgue.”

“It’s a bit weird looking,” Reya admitted. “I try not to stay inside too long. If I’m being honest, it kind of gives me the creeps. It’s still a tavern, though! Or... well, Lillia is good at cooking. That makes it a tavern. Right?”

Reya sounded like she was hoping that Arwin would convince her. He let out a long-suffering sigh and shook his head.

“Well, the food certainly wasn’t bad. Might as well take a look.” Arwin stepped through the doorway, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head. He squinted into the darkness, just barely able to make out the room beyond.

Broken tables and chairs littered the floor. A counter sat at the back, mostly rotted through and collapsed. There was a single stool in front of the counter, and it didn’t look like it could hold much weight. Piles of glass shards and other debris had been swept into the corners, just barely visible in the faint light that came from a doorway at the back. Faint scuffles came from through the doorway, as well as the muted noise of what Arwin suspected to be humming.

Reya cleared her throat. “Lillia? Are you here? I came back to get lunch!”

Her words echoed through the darkness, making Arwin wince. He superstitiously glanced over his shoulder, putting a hand on the hilt of his sword. The back of his spine prickled, and his hair stood on end. Something about the tavern set him on edge. The shadows were too long, and it was far too silent – and dark. Much, much too dark.

It wasn’t the same as his smithy. That building had been equally as run down, but it didn’t feel nearly as ominous. Reya didn’t seem particularly concerned, so she was either completely oblivious to the sensation or had just gotten used to it.

“Who’s asking?” a female voice called. It was followed by several choked coughs and a curse. Smoke curled out of the doorway and trickled out through the cracks in the precarious ceiling.

“That’s Lillia,” Reya whispered before raising her voice to call back. “It’s me, Reya! I came back for lunch. You told me to, remember?”

“Oh, right.” There was a short pause. The smoke pouring out of the kitchen intensified, and Reya exchanged a glance with Arwin. There were some hurried thuds, followed by a loud crunch. The smoke stopped. “Do you mind waiting a bit? I may have set lunch on fire.”

“That’s fine,” Reya said before Arwin could say anything. She walked up to the counter, ignoring the small pieces of debris that crunched beneath her feet with every step, and carefully sat down on the stool. It creaked precariously.

“Sorry,” Reya said. “Only one chair right now.”

“So I see,” Arwin said dryly. “And I suspect there are no chairs that hold my weight.”

“Hold on,” Lillia called from within the kitchen, her tone gaining a panicked note to it. The shuffling from behind the wall grew more aggressive. “Did you bring someone else with you? Is that a new customer?”

“It’s just Arwin. You’ve been cooking for him a while already,” Reya explained. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Oh no. This is a horrible precedent,” Lillia said. There was another crash, followed by a series of curses. “I’ll have food out as soon as possible, I promise! Just wait a little longer?”

“I thought she *wanted* more customers?” Arwin asked, whispering to avoid stressing the poor woman any further.

“She does,” Reya whispered back. “But I think she’s also worried about disappointing them, you know? I don’t really know her that well, but she clearly cares a lot about what people think of her cooking. She plied me with questions about how we liked the food every time I got something from her.”

Arwin grunted. He walked up to the counter beside Reya, glancing around for somewhere to sit before promptly giving the idea up. There really was only a single stool, and it definitely wasn’t holding his weight.

He put a hand on the bar, leaning gently against it to make sure it wouldn’t collapse beneath him. When the wood didn’t make too many creaks of protest, he allowed himself to put the rest of his weight against it.

The uneasy feeling still gripped him, but at this point, his desire to eat something was greater than his concern. He highly doubted that there would be anything truly dangerous in this backwater city, and even though he didn’t seem to *need* real food anymore, he still relished the taste.

Minutes ticked by. Arwin listened to Lillia's hurried cooking through the wall. He could hear her muttering to herself, but the exact words were lost. Reya didn't seem to mind the wait, and was busying herself by organizing tiny pieces of broken wood on the counter before her.

"Have you ever been in here before?" Arwin asked.

"Only to wait while the food was getting made," Reya replied, glancing up from her artwork. "Why?"

"Just wondering. It feels a bit... concerning," Arwin said.

Reya scrunched her nose. "Oh, yeah. I felt like that at first too. I haven't gotten stabbed yet, though. That makes it better than most of the places I've been in."

"Your standards are far too low," Arwin informed Reya, shaking his head. She did have a point, though. Nobody had tried to stab them. Yet.

Arwin was about a second from drumming his fingers on the countertop in impatience when Lillia finally called out to them again.

"Okay! I'm so sorry about the wait, but I've got your food ready!"

Lillia hurried out of the kitchen, her dark purple skin nearly invisible in the dim light. It looked vaguely familiar, but Arwin didn't have much time to process it. He was much more interested in the food she was carrying. She moved so quickly that Arwin's eyes could barely track her, but she came to a stop on the other side of the bar when she went to put two steaming plates of fried rice down before them.

“Enjoy!” she said cheerfully.

Arwin’s gaze lifted to Lillia’s – and he froze. He recognized the scar that ran along her right eye. He recognized her features, even as covered in grime as they were. And, as her expression shifted from excitement to shock, Arwin knew without a doubt that she recognized *him*.

Standing before him, two plates of fried rice in her hands and an award-winning smile on her face, was the Demon Queen.

Chapter 11

Arwin’s ears rung, his mind refusing to believe the information that his eyes were conveying to it. The Demon Queen was dead. He’d killed her – run her through the heart with his sword.

And yet, as if mocking his thoughts, the scar on Arwin’s own heart tingled. The Demon Queen had run him through in the very same spot, and yet here he stood. Arwin swallowed, tasting metal.

Every part of him wished that he was somehow hallucinating. He blinked furiously, trying to snap himself out of it, but nothing worked. There was absolutely no denying that the woman before him was the Demon Queen. He’d put the scar on her eye there with his own sword, and she’d returned the one along his cheek.

It wasn't that much of a reach for her to have survived the explosion – she and Arwin had been evenly matched for as long as he could remember, so if he'd somehow made it out alive, he should have expected that she would have done the same. Truly, he should have recognized the ominous aura covering the tavern the instant he'd stepped into it.

But, somehow, the thought had never registered. Admitting that she was still alive would have been the same as admitting that he'd failed, and his duties as the Hero still remained. Duty would have compelled him to return to his former role, no matter how little he wanted to. The concept made him feel physically ill.

The surprise in the Demon Queen's eyes told Arwin that she was just as surprised to see him as he was to see her. Everything around Arwin felt like it had slowed to a crawl, but his heart raced in his chest as if to make up for lost time.

If the Demon Queen was still alive, she would have been plotting and preparing to destroy the Kingdom of Lian once more. Two Demon Queens would have been impossible for a single Hero to handle, and the life Arwin had just started to get used to would come crashing down.

But... she wasn't plotting. Arwin wasn't anywhere near stupid enough to believe that starting a tavern in the back of the least populated street in the empire and serving fried rice to strangers was in any way, shape, or form even remotely close to a plot.

His mouth opened, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to ask. He wasn't sure what he *could* ask. His hand shifted, moving toward the hilt of his sword. But, before he could touch it,

he paused. The moment his hand touched the hilt of his blade, everything would return to how it had been.

If the blade came free of its sheath, their battle would begin anew.

For a second, he didn't dare let himself move again. Then he made a decision.

Arwin let his hand lower, scarcely able to believe the actions of his own body. Instead of doing what any sane man would have done and striking the first blow before the Demon Queen could react, he chose another option.

“Thank you,” Arwin said, taking the plate from Lillia's stunned hands. “It looks delicious.”

She stared at him in disbelief. The shadows had gathered behind her, and Arwin could tell that they were just inches from forming into wings at her back. For several seconds, neither of them spoke again.

He'd made his move. The sword hung at his side like a brick of lead, but Arwin made no moves to draw it. For years, he'd fought. For years, he'd tried to kill the woman before him. And now, the proverbial blade was in her hands. If she wanted to keep their fight going, then she'd have to make the next blow.

A terse second ground by. Arwin could hear the blood slamming in his ears like a roaring ocean, but he refused to let it show on his face. He just held Lillia's gaze, not letting his hands budge from the table.

The shadows gathering behind Lillia slipped away. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then let it close again. For several seconds longer, none of them spoke.

The silence was then promptly broken by Reya grabbing handfuls of rice with her hands and shoveling it into her mouth, chewing loudly. She was completely oblivious to the nonverbal exchange that Arwin and Lillia were locked within, her eyes completely focused on the plate in front of her. “This is great, Lillia! Thanks!”

Like a hammer through glass, the moment was shattered. Lilia gestured to Arwin’s plate. “Are you going to eat? Or are you just going to look?”

Could it be poisoned? Is this a – no. It can’t be a trick. She didn’t know I was coming, and I’ve been eating her cooking this whole time.

There weren’t any utensils, so Arwin copied Reya and scooped some rice into his mouth. He didn’t break eye-contact once with her as he chewed, then swallowed. A small grin passed over his lips.

“This is fantastic,” Arwin said, genuinely meaning it. “It must have taken a lot of work to make. Thank you.”

Even more confusion passed over Lillia’s face, but she gave him a small nod. “It did. I’m glad to hear you enjoy it. I’m sorry I don’t have another chair. I haven’t had a chance to start properly renovating yet.”

“You just moved in, then?” Arwin asked, keeping his tone conversational. He wasn’t sure where his life had taken a turn to the point where he’d be enjoying a meal served to him by his mortal enemy, but he wasn’t about to stop eating now.

The proper thing to do here is dig for information. This is just research to determine what her goals are.

“Yeah, I did. Reya told me it’s the same for you?” Lillia asked, her tone matching Arwin’s.

She’s aiming for the same goal that I am. I shouldn’t reveal too much... but do I even have anything to hide?

“It is.” Arwin ate another mouthful of the fried rice. “The building was conveniently unoccupied. It needs just a dash of repairs, though.”

Lillia let out a small snort. “Yeah, I’d say. I saw that ratty old thing when I first got here. I’m surprised you chose it.”

“I could say the same about the tavern,” Arwin countered. “You’re not going to get many customers if it’s impossible to see inside it.”

Lillia’s face fell. “I know, but it was the only building that even resembled a tavern, and it’s in a great location. Once I get it fixed up, I’m sure more people will come around.”

Arwin was suddenly struck with a small pang of regret. She genuinely looked unhappy about his words – but when had the Demon Queen even cared about his opinions in the slightest? They'd exchanged so many insults that he could barely remember the list.

“I'm sure you'll manage it,” Arwin said. “With food like this, you could be selling it out of a pigsty.”

The corner of Lillia's lips quirked up, though it quickly returned to normal when she seemed to remember who she was speaking with. “I'm always pleased to hear a client enjoys my work. Is there anything else I could get the two of you?”

“Do you have anything else?” Reya asked through a mouthful of rice.

Lillia cleared her throat. “No. I'm just trying to get into the habit. Hospitality is a bit new to me, but I've always wanted to run a tavern. I'm not being too oppressive, am I? Should I wait in the kitchen?”

“It's fine,” Arwin said, his words ringing in his ears as if someone else were speaking them. “I'm sure there are some people that would prefer to eat on their own, but if you're going to have a unique atmosphere, you might as well lean into it.”

Lillia's brow furrowed as she tried to find a hidden meaning in Arwin's words. When it became apparent that there wasn't one, her confusion only grew more apparent. “I suppose I'll keep that in mind.”

Arwin and Reya finished off the rest of their meals quickly, not speaking again until they'd both polished their plates clean. Arwin was pretty sure he was in minor shock – his brain still couldn't fully comprehend what was going on.

This is it? She really isn't going to do anything? I thought the Demon Queen hated humans. Why would she want to start a tavern for them? There's no way this is just some long plot to poison the city or something, is there?

He couldn't exactly ask her. That would be the same as admitting he knew who she was, and then the farce would be over. As long as he didn't reveal he knew who Lillia was and she did the same, things could remain as they were.

And, just like that, the meal was over. Arwin quietly stacked his plate on Reya's. "Thank you for the meal. What do we owe you?"

"Reya already paid," Lillia said. "You're good, but if you run into anyone that looks hungry, I'd appreciate if you send them my way."

"Can do, so long as you send anyone looking for some smithing in my direction. I've got some swords I'll be about to put up for sale, but I'm sure I could figure out more specific requests," Arwin said.

Lillia nodded, and the two of them stood in uncomfortable silence for a second. Then, slowly, Arwin lifted his hand. Not to his sword, but palm out in offering. Lillia stared at it, then looked back to him.

She took it, and the Hero of Lian shook hands with the Demon Queen. It was a strange feeling to hold hands with the woman that he had spent the entirety of his life trying to kill, but when he looked into her eyes, he saw himself within them.

Arwin had fought her for long enough to understand her body language perfectly. When she was going to summon her magic – the kind of strike she was about to make. He could tell all of it just from a single look, and he suspected she could do the same for him.

But, for the first time that he could remember, Arwin couldn't tell what she was thinking. He abruptly realized that they'd been holding hands for several moments longer than he'd planned and let go, taking a step back.

“See you tomorrow!” Reya said with a cheerful grin, waving farewell as she and Arwin headed out of the dark tavern. Arwin resisted the temptation to pause at the doorway and glance back at Lillia.

His mind still spun, confusion ruling his emotions with an iron fist. For the first time, he spent more than a few moments wondering what in the world had happened at the end of their fight. He brushed a hand over the wound covering his heart.

I don't understand this at all. When I first arrived at this world, I thought everything was simple. All I had to do was kill the Demon Queen and everyone could be happy. What would I have thought if I'd learned I'd be eating her cooking?

A chilling realization set in on Arwin's shoulders as they drew back up to his smithy. If he wanted to figure out any answers to what had happened and how he'd survived the explosion, the best person to speak with was probably the only other one that had been present for it.

That seems like a problem for later. I need to take my mind off all this, but I don't want to just mindlessly smith swords with no purpose in mind.

"Is everything okay?" Reya asked. "You've seemed off ever since we met Lillia."

"Everything is fine," Arwin said with a hurried shake of his head. "Just some old memories. You said you didn't have a class yet, right?"

Reya winced and nodded. "Yeah. You'd have thought I'd have gotten Thief by now, but somehow the only thing I've been handed is a fat zero. Why?"

"Just wondering," Arwin replied. "The Mesh gives you what you desire when you work toward it, you know."

"I've heard that before." Reya rolled her eyes. "But, if that were true, I'd have gotten a class by now."

That's true, unless the thing you were working toward wasn't at all what you actually wanted.

Arwin kept his musings to himself. Not for his sake, but for Reya's. The last thing she needed to do was start doubting her desires, and Arwin didn't know her nearly enough to start telling her how to live her life.

They stepped into the smithy – and Arwin’s eyes narrowed instantly. There was a slip of paper pinned to the wall with a dagger that had been wedged through it and into a crack in the wall.

He strode up to it, pulling the paper down and scanning over it.

We have given you enough time. Deliver Reya and the item she stole, or We shall be forced to act. Though We do not enjoy senseless slaughter, those who flaunt our kindness will be met with Our blade.

You have two days. If she is not returned, then your life and building will be taken in recompense.

The letter was unsigned, but it didn’t need to be. Reya’s face paled as she read over it and she looked up to Arwin, her hands clenching at her sides. “I’m sorry. This is my fault.”

Arwin didn’t respond immediately. With every passing day, it became more apparent that this was his new life – and he was starting to like it. And, if Arwin wanted to keep his new life the way it was, he was going to need to get stronger.

A lot stronger.

“I was just thinking that it might be time to make some money tomorrow,” Arwin said. “You can toss on a cloak and we’ll bring the stuff I’ve made that isn’t horrible to the city center. We can try to sell it for half price and make a bit of coin.”

Reya blinked in confusion. “What? Did you see the letter? You’ve been too kind to me. I’ll hand myself—”

“I’m not handing you over. We just need to get stronger,” Arwin corrected. He hadn’t been kind to Reya at all. He’d tolerated her, but that was a far shot from kind. The fact that she considered his actions kind spoke volumes for the kind of life she’d lived.

Deep within his heart, a feeling that he’d nearly forgotten re-lit itself. The sensation that had driven him in his early days of adventuring. The feeling he’d had before he’d seen all his friends die, when he’d still believed in the cause he’d fought for.

It’s been so long that I almost forgot why I fought. It wasn’t just to end the war. It wasn’t for the Adventurer’s Guild. I fought to protect the people who needed me. I fought to keep someone else from being forced to become who I became.

“Stronger than the thieves’ guild?” Reya asked in disbelief. “They have thirty men! All of them have classes!”

“Which is why we’ll go out hunting.”

Reya’s eyes widened. “The dungeon? But—”

“Not the dungeon,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “Not yet. Just normal hunting. We need materials and experience, and this will provide both. I just need a little more money to outfit us a little better first.”

“But... how? You’re a smith and I don’t have a class. If we run into anything powerful, we’ll be dead.”

A wry smile crossed over Arwin’s lips. He’d just made a new weapon, after all. Perhaps it was time to test it out. “You’d be surprised to find how misleading appearances can be. I’m going to show you just how much this mere smith is capable of.”

Chapter 12

Early the following morning, Arwin and Reya made their way into Milten proper. Reya carried the weapons that Arwin had forged in a bundle of leather, a hood pulled low over her head to keep anyone from noticing her.

Arwin wasn’t sure exactly how many enemies Reya had in the city, but he didn’t want to find out right now. It normally would have been safer to leave her back at the smithy, but he didn’t put it past the thieves’ guild to try something while he was out.

With Reya at the lead, they arrived at the edge of the city markets as the other merchants had just started to set up. They made their way over to a corner that was a little less populated than the other areas – and on the opposite side of the market as Taylor’s storefront.

I do feel a bit bad stealing his business, but we’re far out enough that hopefully it doesn’t hurt him too much. Besides, anyone buying stuff from two dirty people on the side of the street probably isn’t looking to spend their entire life savings.

Reya set the bundle of weapons down and rolled it out, adjusting everything so it looked a little neater. It still looked pretty suspicious, but at least they actually resembled dirty merchants rather than thieves.

“Now what?” Reya asked. “We put it out.”

“Well, presumably, we wait until someone wants to buy something.”

Reya scrunched her nose. She glanced around at the few passersby that were already wandering through the market. Nobody was showing them very much interest. Arwin couldn't say he was surprised. They probably needed to get at least one person's attention before more would follow.

“It's not working,” Reya said.

“We've been out here for less than a minute. It takes time.”

“You know what takes less time?” Reya's gaze drifted to the coin purse of a passing man. Arwin pointedly cleared his throat and she tore her eyes away.

“We're not doing that right now.”

“Why not? It's faster.”

“We've got a perfectly legitimate business right here. We don't need to get kicked out.”

“Need I remind you where the materials for that business came from?”

“Let’s not.” Arwin scratched at the side of his neck. “It might take a bit before we get any attention. If I had more magical weapons for sale, I’m sure that would be different.

Unfortunately, the only one I’ve got is the one that explodes.”

“Maybe you could try to sell it as a throwing weapon?”

“It’s a sword,” Arwin said. “You don’t fling swords.”

“I’m sure someone does.”

He chuckled. “Probably. But, even if they did, the damn thing isn’t even guaranteed to blow up. It just *might* blow up. That makes it pretty useless for both hand-to-hand fighting as well as throwing. Completely worthless.”

And I can’t even eat the damn thing because it might blow me up too. At best, it’s a prank gift for a powerful adventurer. No matter. It’s only a matter of time until I get someone’s attention. It couldn’t be that hard to sell a few weapons, right?

Three hours later, Arwin was starting to wish that he’d just gone with Reya’s plan. He sat beside the roll of weapons, watching everyone walk straight past them without a second glance. Reya was beside him, very pointedly not pointing out how absolutely nobody was buying anything.

Arwin resisted the urge to heave a sigh. Half the problem was actually getting people’s attention. It wasn’t like his weapons were bad, but he’d never been that much of a salesman.

Every time he tried to get someone's attention, it looked more like he was threatening to stab them than sell them the sword.

Reya wasn't much better, as she couldn't so much as show her face. And so, the two of them just sat there, completely unable to sell a single thing.

"At least it's nice out," Reya said. "Although it's kind of hot."

"It's only hot because you're wearing a cloak." Arwin rubbed his forehead. "But I must admit that this doesn't seem to be working nearly as well as I had hoped."

"Maybe you should try to show off your magic sword? Even if it's just a liability waiting to happen, at least it's cooler than normal weapons."

"Not a terrible idea, but I'm not sure anyone would really be that interested in a magic weapon that's just objectively worse than a normal one, especially if I don't have any others for sale."

And I'm not selling the last sword I just made. It's actually useful. You know, the more I think about it, what's the point of selling this trash? I have no desire to just be another smith – and do I even want to outfit adventurers that are part of the Adventurer's Guild?

"Arwin?" Reya asked.

He blinked, then turned to her. "What?"

"You were glaring. We're not going to get customers if you scare them all off."

Arwin grunted. He pushed himself to his feet and rolled the bundle of weapons back up, hoisting it over a shoulder and shaking his head. “Forget this. We’re leaving.”

“What?” Reya hurried to catch up with Arwin as he strode out of the market. “Why?”

“Because I realized this isn’t what I want to do,” Arwin said. “I’m glad nobody showed up. I have no desire to outfit more Adventurers that I don’t know – and selling subpar work rubs me the wrong way the more I think about it. When you make someone a weapon, aren’t they basically putting their life in your hands?”

“That seems a bit extreme. It’s just a weapon, and everything is about how the weapon is used, not what the weapon is.”

“To a degree, yes. But when you buy weapons or armor from someone, it means you’re trusting that they’ll hold. Your smith holds your life in their hands. Imagine if your dagger shatters midway through a fight against a powerful monster.”

Or if your smith plants a magical bomb in your armor.

“I guess I can see what you’re saying,” Reya allowed. She glanced over her shoulder at the receding market, then back to Arwin. “But what do we do about money? I thought–”

“We’ll earn it the proper way,” Arwin replied. “Forget selling trash or unstable magical weapons. We’re going hunting. Now.”

“But we don’t have any equipment or healing potions!” Reya exclaimed. She quickly realized she’d raised her voice too loud and lowered it back to a whisper. “Without classes and gear, there’s no way we’ll survive.”

“You have a dagger,” Arwin pointed out. He tapped the hilt of his sword. “And I have a sword. All we have to do is hit the monsters harder than they hit us.”

“You’ll have to forgive me when I say that I think the chances of that aren’t very likely. What about the monsters that are faster than we are? It doesn’t matter how hard we can hit them if we can’t land a blow first.”

“That’s simple,” Arwin replied with a shrug. “Just hit them first.”

Reya let out a series of displeased mutters, but she didn’t say anything else. The two of them continued out of the market, following the side streets until they drew up to the exit of the city.

It was still manned by a guard, but the man didn’t give them so much as a second glance as they passed him by. Once they’d put some distance between themselves and the city entrance, Arwin nodded to Reya.

“You know a little bit about the surrounding area, right?”

“Some,” Reya allowed.

“Great. Take us to the nearest area where monsters congregate. I trust you know of one?”

“I know of the dungeon. There are a lot of monsters around there, but the thieves’ guild is definitely watching it. I think there’s a valley that’s just a few hours away that we could try – but I’m telling you, we’re both going to get killed.”

“And yet, here you are,” Arwin said. “If you actually thought we were going to die, would you be here with me?”

Reya heaved a sigh and stepped off the beaten path, starting along the ankle-high grass and down the sloping hill. Arwin followed after her, the large bundle of weapons still slung over his shoulder.

The trip across the rolling hills took a little under two hours. Little was spoken throughout it, but Arwin didn’t mind. He enjoyed the sanctum of his own mind, and it was a nice day. There was no need to muddle it with fear.

He barely even noticed that they’d arrived until Reya slowed to a stop. They stood at the edge of a very gently sloping valley. There was a small forest within it, and Arwin could hear the chirp of birds and insects from where they stood.

“Here,” Reya said wearily. “I think the monsters in this area shouldn’t be that much stronger than Apprentice Tier. Maybe we could throw things at them in hopes of killing something before it gets close? You’ve got a whole bunch of weapons.”

It wasn’t a terrible idea, but Arwin couldn’t see any monsters yet, and tossing swords into the forest at random felt like a generally poor idea. He started down the valley, making for the forest. “Do you know how aggressive the monsters in this area are?”

“Not really. I’ve never done much more than look, and it was always when I was in a larger group,” Reya replied. She stayed behind Arwin, keeping the dagger out before her defensively. “I remember that there were some pretty big lizard things, though.”

“Lizards? Sounds like those could be useful.”

“Did you miss the big part?”

“Big means there are more spots to stab,” Arwin said. They drew up to the treeline a short while later and Arwin squinted into it. The forest wasn’t too dense at the edges, so he could see a good bit into it.

“Maybe we should be quiet,” Reya whispered. “What if they hunt in packs?”

“You know more about them than I do. Do they?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? I usually just saw one or two.”

Arwin shifted the roll of swords off his shoulders and set it on the ground. He unrolled it and took one of the plain swords he’d made in his left hand, drawing his magical one with his right. Reya’s eyes widened at the sight.

“You know how to use two swords at once? What kind of smith knows how to dual wield?”

Arwin didn’t respond to her question. His attention was transfixed on two motes of yellow light glimmering in the darkness of the forest. They were eyes, each roughly the size of his fist. Arwin bared his teeth in challenge. “I think I found one of your lizards.”

Perhaps it's a bit late to think about this, but it's been some time since I've actually properly fought a monster. It would be morbidly funny if I find out I'm nowhere near a match for them anymore, but confidence is half the battle. I will win because I must win.

Even if he couldn't speak the same language as the monster, he'd spent enough time fighting them to know how to communicate – and direct eye contact was a clear challenge that few would ignore.

Reya stiffened behind him as fallen leaves and sticks cracked. The draconic head of a six-foot tall lizard poked out from the darkness, its red tongue flicking out to taste the air. The rest of the monster's body followed after it.

It had long, curved claws that dug furrows into the ground and was covered with glistening green scales. A row of spikes ran along the back of its head and several crooked fangs jutted out from random spots in its mouth.

Arwin reached out to the mesh, and golden lettering shimmered above the lizard's head, visible only to him.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 5]

The lizard's mouth opened in a hiss and its tail whipped out, slamming into one of the trees. Wood shattered with a loud crash and the tree pitched to the side, slamming to the ground. The lizard's head tilted back and it let out a hissing roar.

Only three levels above me in Apprentice and it can already do this much damage. Monsters really do have it lucky, but this thing isn't the only one here that can hit hard.

“I think we might have made a mistake,” Reya said, clutching her dagger and swallowing heavily. “Can we run?”

“I don’t think that’s an option anymore. Remember our conversation about speed? Well, this thing is faster than me. I’ll do my best to keep its attention, but don’t get caught off guard. Fight or die, Reya.”

Chapter 13

Arwin cracked his neck, then took a step forward and reared back, flinging one of his swords at the lizard’s head mid-roar. It struck it with a thunk and the monster hissed in fury.

“What are you doing?” Reya exclaimed. “You just threw away one of your weapons!”

“I can’t dual wield,” Arwin said with a chuckle. He pointed his enchanted sword at the lizard. “Come on, then. Those scales of yours look like they’d be good to practice making armor with.”

That proved to be the final straw. Arwin still wasn’t sure if the average monster was intelligent enough to understand his insults, but it definitely picked up on the tone of his voice. Letting out a furious hiss, the lizard’s limbs blurred into motion and it charged.

Arwin moved to meet it, old instincts kicking back in immediately. It felt like it had been a long time since he’d been in a proper fight, and he didn’t have the abilities he’d had as the Hero, but he still had more than enough to work with.

The lizard's head snapped down to bite at Arwin's neck. He jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding the attack, and brought his sword down on the monster's neck while sending some magical energy through the blade.

A dull hum rang out as the blade rang against the Lizard's scales, failing to penetrate through them. Small ripples of dull, nearly invisible magic remained in the spot where he'd struck the monster.

Arwin jumped into the air as the lizard's tail whipped out and smashed into the ground where he'd been standing. His jump didn't take him nearly as far as he'd planned, though. Arwin dropped back to the ground far sooner than he'd expected and the monster lunged for him again.

Cursing, he threw himself into a roll. A loud crunch rang out as the monster's teeth slammed shut just above him, and Arwin slammed his sword into the same spot he'd struck before. More magical power left his body as the magic resonating on the lizard's scales intensified, but they were still whole and undamaged.

Reya stood on the other side of the lizard, frozen in fear. Arwin didn't blame her – the lizard was admittedly a bit stronger than he'd been expecting. If it was giving him this much trouble, it probably really would have been fatal if she'd fought it.

Well, this was a good exercise to see where I stand in my new body. Time to dial up the heat.

Arwin activated [Scourge] at its max power. Magic pumped through his body, but the lizard was oblivious to it. Having judged Reya a non-threat, it charged at Arwin again. Its massive mouth opened once more and it bit out at him.

Reya called out a warning as Arwin remained solidly in place, but it was too late. The lizard was upon him – and Arwin’s left fist was upon the lizard. His fist slammed into the monster’s open jaw from below, and a loud crunch echoed out.

Its head snapped back, mouth slamming shut. Arwin’s strike redirected the monster and it stumbled past him, tripping over its own feet. At the same time, a flash of pain flooded through Arwin’s fist and he swore.

If it wasn't for [Indomitable Bulwark] halving the injuries I get, I'm pretty sure I would have just broken every bone in my hand. Damn. This thing must weigh a ton.

And, even with the Title, Arwin’s fist stung furiously. He shook his hand off, gritting his teeth as the lizard’s tail hurtled for his head. Arwin ducked out of the way and ran at the lizard while it was still midway through turning back to face him.

The monster was pretty fast whilst moving forward, but it wasn’t anywhere near as swift in its rotations. It let out a screech of fury as Arwin lunged, using another [Scourge] empowered blow to drive his sword forward.

It punched through the scales of its side with a loud crunch, driving deep into the monster’s flesh. Blue blood splattered across the grass as Arwin ripped the blade free and hopped back, just barely managing to avoid the lizard’s tail as it spun again.

If there had been much intelligence in the monster’s head, it probably would have registered that Arwin was more of a threat than he’d initially appeared to be. Unfortunately, there wasn’t.

With another screech, the lizard charged him once more. Arwin could feel his energy starting to wane from the amount of power he'd pumped into [Scourge], but he didn't have any other choice. Using the ability at its max power was the only way he could properly damage it, but it also chewed through his energy at disturbing speeds. He was pretty sure he only had the strength for one or two more blows.

Ducking to the side to avoid a claw swipe, Arwin brought his sword down on the already-ringing section of the lizard's neck with all his might and let out a roar of his own. Scales shattered as the enchanted blade bit deep into the monster's neck.

Almost instantly, the resonating energy finally triggered. A shudder shook the lizard's body as Arwin ripped his blade free and blood sprayed out of the new wound. The lizard wasn't done yet, though.

It jumped at Arwin one last time, trying to crush him beneath his bulk. Even with [Scourge], Arwin didn't want to take the weight of a massive hurtling monster straight to the face. Just because he could lift something didn't mean he wanted to get hit by it.

Instead of trying to counterattack, Arwin directed [Scourge]'s power into his legs. He lunged to the side in a burst of speed, hitting the ground with a grunt and rolling across it in a rather undignified manner.

Behind him, he heard the lizard slam into the ground. He managed to stop his rolling and shot to his feet, acutely aware of just how little energy he still had left to work with. The lizard was already turning toward him, preparing to charge, but its eyes were unfocused. It was losing a lot of blood from the nasty wound in its neck and the one on its side – but it wasn't dead yet.

Arwin tightened his grip on his sword and sprinted at the monster, trying to take advantage of its weakness. It hissed a challenge, preparing to meet his charge. It was ready for him, but it wasn't ready for Reya.

She sprinted at the monster's back, thrusting her dagger into the open wound in its side. Despite all the momentum her charge had given her, she hit it like a toddler sprinting into a brick wall and fell back with a pained grunt, but the damage was done.

Her dagger had driven deep into the monster's already injured side, and it let out a pained scream. It spun toward Reya, making its final mistake. The momentary distraction was just enough for Arwin to close the rest of the distance between them. He brought his sword down, using the last dregs of his magic to drive his sword into the resonating wound on its neck.

The lizard thrashed and screamed as the power thrummed through it, and a mixture from the magic and the deepening wound finally won over. It crashed to the ground, Arwin's sword nearly all the way through its neck, and spasmed in death throes.

One of its thrashing claws caught Arwin on the chest as he tried to step out of the way. His flesh burned as he was thrown to the ground with a pained grunt. He rolled to safety and pressed a hand to his chest, feeling warm blood start to trickle down his chest.

“Arwin!” Reya yelled, running over to him. “Are you—”

The words died in Reya's mouth as she skidded to a stop, staring at the wound. It was little more than a nasty cut. It was bleeding pretty badly, but it was nowhere near the fatal wound it should have been. She blinked in disbelief.

“What? How? I saw its claw go right into your chest!”

“I told you,” Arwin said with a dry chuckle. He pushed himself to his feet, brushing the dirt off his back and sides. “I’m more than a mere smith.”

And still, that was closer than I would have liked. I overestimated my strength – but that was a good baseline for determining where I stand. I can probably handle monsters up to Apprentice 6 if I’m doing everything perfectly, but it’ll depend on how they fight. I’m at a huge disadvantage against anything faster than me, and I’m going to need some proper armor.

Reya looked from Arwin to the dead monster, disbelief and awe warring in her eyes. The awe won the fight and she ran her hands through her hair, then down her face. “I can’t believe it. You killed a monster. A crafter killed a monster stronger than him.”

“And you helped.”

“And I helped! How is that possible? How are we alive?”

“Pretty simple. We hit it harder.” A grin cracked Arwin’s expression at the glare Reya sent him. He trudged over to the body of the dead lizard. Reya’s dagger still stuck out of its side, and he nodded to it. “Take your weapon back. Did you get anything for helping me kill it?”

“No. I don’t have a class yet.” Reya finally snapped out of it and walked over to join him.

And I didn’t get anything either. Makes sense. I’m a crafter. The Mesh isn’t going to reward me for killing things – but that hardly matters. All the reward I need is right here in front of me.

Reya pulled her dagger out of the dead lizard with a grunt. She examined it for a moment, then wiped the blood off on the grass and returned the blade to its sheath.

“What now?” Reya asked wearily. “Please don’t tell me we’re going after another one. We barely made it through one.”

“Depends how fast we work,” Arwin replied as he knelt, wedging his sword beneath one of the scales near the wound and leaning on it. With a crack, the scale popped off and fell to the grass. “I’m not leaving until we scrape this thing dry of any useful materials. You keep watch and let me know if anything else is coming. I’ll cut this thing up, and then we can grab everything we can carry and head back to the city.”

Reya swallowed and nodded, squinting into the forest while Arwin got to work.

Perhaps it was because the corpse of the last monster that tried them was sitting in open view, or perhaps it was just sheer luck, but no other monsters emerged to attack over the next hour.

Arwin worked in silence, ripping scales and claws off as efficiently as he could. He’d never stripped a monster before, but to his luck, the lizard’s scales were so firm that they were hard to damage unless he actively started wailing on them.

“Is this really going to be enough?” Reya asked. “To beat the thieves’ guild, I mean. There are thirty of them, and some of them are at the top of Apprentice. Their leader is a Journeyman.”

“It’ll be enough,” Arwin replied. “It has to be, and so it will.”

“What kind of logic is that?”

“The logic of a man who is determined to win. It’s logic that you should adopt if you want to survive,” Arwin suggested. He straightened up, looking around at all the materials lying on the ground in wait for him. “For now, help me carry this. We’re heading back.”

Reya nodded and walked over, piling as much of the material as she could into the bundle of swords they’d brought along. Once that was full, they both stuffed their pockets and filled their arms before heading back up the valley and back toward the town.

“We have one day left, though. What are we going to be able to do in one day?”

“That’s a simple answer as well,” Arwin said, sending Reya a glance out of the corners of his eyes. “I’m going to make us equipment.”

Chapter 14

Arwin was unsurprised to find that Forest Lizard scales did not heat particularly well in the forge. In fact, they were slightly heat-resistant. And, even though they were made of harder material than the sub-standard metal he was growing used to working with, they didn’t tolerate shape changes nearly as much.

He lost count of how many scales he mistakenly shattered that day. Even though they’d returned from their trip with a good portion of daylight left, it was now already dipping well into the night and he’d only made minor progress along his plans.

Normally, Arwin was pretty sure that making armor from scales was best done by stringing the scales together like chainmail, but he didn’t have the leather to attach them to, nor did he have the talent to work with leather yet.

The only thing he'd really figured out how to do was hit things with a hammer – and that was exactly what he continued to do. He was confident there was a way to work with them, but if he didn't find it before the next day ended, it wouldn't matter.

Arwin chewed his lower lip as he stared at the scale on his hearth. It rested in a bed of [Soul Flame], glowing faintly with heat. He picked the scale up, bringing it over to the anvil to try again.

Almost as soon as it left the embrace of the fire, the scale's bright luster faded away. His lips pressed together in annoyance. It had only taken seconds for it to lose the majority of the heat that it had been building up, and attempting to change it would lead to the same result that he'd been continuously earning that day – another broken scale.

A thought struck Arwin and he turned back to his forge, putting the scale back in. He picked up one of the other scales within the flames, then pressed it between his fingers without taking it out of the fire.

He felt the faintest amount of give. It was so little that there was a good chance he'd hallucinated it entirely, but Arwin latched onto that feeling. He activated [Scourge] and sent energy into his fingertips, squeezing the scale again.

This time, it warped around his thumb. It was far from a perfect bend, but it had moved. Arwin pulled it from the flame, delight spreading across his features as the scale started to cool. He waited for it to lose the rest of its heat, then tapped the scale with his hammer.

It remained firm. Arwin gave it several stronger strikes, but it took a blow with his full, normal force to finally crack the scale. A laugh slipped from his lips and he turned back to the hearth.

Looks like this project will be one without a hammer. I'm going to have to put everything together by hand without taking it out of the hearth. The next problem is figuring out how to connect the scales.

Arwin tried just pressing them together and repeatedly striking the scales in attempt to get them to meld together, but it amounted to nothing. They weren't metal, and they held their shape far too well to merge together.

His next idea proved considerably more fruitful. Arwin made nails from normal metal, then slowly but steadily worked them into the scales. It was a fine line to work on. He did his best to move quickly and keep the nails from getting over-heated, but that meant he had a very limited amount of time to work on each piece before the nail lost too much of its strength and became soft.

If he struck it too hard, the nail would bend or break before the scales would. If he struck too light, the nail wouldn't even get any deeper into the scales. The key turned out to be a steady, constant stream of firm taps.

Nothing too hard, but nothing too soft. And, in that manner, one scale became linked to two and two became three. It was slow, tedious work, but Arwin loved it. Every single scale he nailed together felt like another step along his journey, and it filled him with delight.

He didn't even bother keeping count of the number of rows he'd need to make to outfit himself. Arwin just kept tapping away, sweat dripping down his forehead and rolling down his back.

There was only a little more than a day left before the time would come to use the armor. He didn't have time to fail. He didn't have time to take a break – and he didn't want to. There was only one possibility in his mind, and he was determined to achieve it.

“I told you that I'm not serving meals outside of the tavern,” Lillia said, pressing her lips thin as she glared at Reya. The young woman shifted uncomfortably beneath her gaze, averting her eyes.

The Hero is avoiding me? Perhaps it's for the best. I just about had a heart attack when I saw that oaf standing at my counter like he belonged there. I can't believe he was actually the first one to call a truce.

“Could you do it just this once?” Reya pleaded. “Arwin is really busy. He's... making stuff.”

Lillia raised an eyebrow. “Then he can take a break from making *stuff* and come here. If I want to build a group of regular customers, I need to make sure they come to my tavern, not summon me like some harlot.”

“He can't take a break! But, if he doesn't eat, I'm worried he won't have enough strength to fi – uh, to help.”

To fight? Who in the Nine Underlands is he fighting? There's no way he actually managed to keep his Hero class, is there? I didn't feel the strength that he used to have, and if my own Class was destroyed, I can't see why his would have survived.

Does that mean he's planning to fight someone without his powers? I suppose that lines up pretty well with him, actually.

“Perhaps he should do a little less fighting and focus a little more on the finer things in life,” Lillia said with a snort. The mere idea of running back off to fight after she'd finally broken out of that endless cycle made her want to retch.

The Hero clearly enjoyed the slaughter far more than she had, but that was little surprise. Humans had always reveled in death.

“It's not his fault,” Reya protested. She wrung her hands together and threw a glance over her shoulder. Lillia nearly let out a derisive snort. It wasn't like anyone else was going to be there. Despite her words, aside from Reya and one drunkard that Lillia had yet to learn the name of, she'd had absolutely no customers.

“How is it not his fault if he's running off to kill people? Sounds like it's entirely his fault.”

“He's doing it because I need help,” Reya muttered. She stared down at her feet, clenching her hands. “He's trying to make armor because I'm in trouble with the thieves' guild.”

“The what now?” Lillia blinked in surprise. “I think I'm completely lost. What do they have to do with any of this?”

“I'm in trouble with a lot of people,” Reya said, flopping down in Lillia's chair and burying her face in her palms. Her hands dug into her hair and she pulled at it with a groan, sinking down and letting her head thunk against the wood.

Lillia held a hand out, then pulled it back. She'd dealt with a lot of things in life, but not one of them had ever been comforting someone. It had been so long since she'd cared enough about someone to even think about their feelings that she could barely remember the feeling.

Everyone I've loved is dead at the hands of the Hero.

And yet, sitting in front of her was quite literally Lillia's only customer. The tiny spark that gave her hope that her tavern might one day become a true business. A place full of joy and laughter, where she could live peacefully.

If I don't do something now, how will I help my future customers? I need to help her.

"Maybe you could start from the beginning?" Lillia tried to make her tone as gentle as possible, but she wasn't so certain it was working. "I think I'm missing a lot of information."

"I ran into Arwin a few days ago," Reya said, her muffled words spoken into the countertop. "I was with a group of thieves that got mad I wasn't giving them my life earnings. Arwin killed one of them."

Sounds about right.

"They were part of a guild?" Lillia asked.

"No. They were just some assholes. The rest of 'em showed up, and Arwin dealt with them too. I realized he was pretty strong, so I decided to hang around. Thought it would be safe. It was stupid. I should have kept moving. But I didn't, and the thieves' guild found me, and then Arwin got involved defending me, and now he's trying to forge armor that will let him fight them!"

Reya's words quickened until they were spoken so fast that Lillia could barely make them out. The fact that she was face down on the countertop certainly wasn't helping her audibility.

"I see," Lillia said slowly. "So he's getting ready to fight the thieves' guild because they're after you?"

"Yeah," Reya mumbled. "I feel like such a piece of shit. I know he just wants to be left alone. He shouldn't be the one solving my problems, and I know I should just leave so he doesn't have to deal with them. I guess I'm just selfish. I don't want to keep running, but I'm not strong enough to change anything myself."

Lillia's back tickled in alarm. Reya couldn't leave – that would get rid of one of her three customers, and there was a good chance it scrapped Arwin as well. That would knock her all the way down to just the one homeless man, and she was pretty sure he'd only stumbled into her tavern on mistake.

"There's nothing wrong with being a little selfish," Lillia said hurriedly. She reached out, cringing slightly as she set her hand on Reya's shoulder. She half expected the woman to knock her arm away, but to her surprise, Reya didn't budge.

"Easy to say when you aren't the one being selfish," Reya said. "There are thirty of them. How is Arwin supposed to kill thirty people?"

Nine Underlands. Thirty? At the peak of my power, that would have been a heartbeat of effort. But now... that's not possible. Maybe in a few months, but now? What is Arwin thinking? Is it possible that he retained more of his powers than I did?

“Perhaps he’s stronger than you think?” Lillia asked. She went to take her hand back, but the moment it lifted off Reya’s shoulder, the girl stiffened. Lillia quickly put her hand back.

“He’s really strong for a smith, but he’s not going to be able to take out thirty fighters. We just went hunting and he just barely beat an Apprentice 5 Lizard,” Reya said miserably. “What should I do? Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t help him fight aside from maybe distracting a few people and gutting them from the dark. That’s not going to do an ounce of anything against thirty whole people.”

He took out an Apprentice 5 monster? I’d guess that’s pretty close to what I should be able to handle as well. Shit. He’s just a moron, then. There’s no way he’s going to be able to handle fighting thirty warriors.

That left Lillia with a pretty large problem. Arwin had never been one to back down from a fight, and Reya didn’t have a choice. That meant two of her customers were headed straight to their deaths.

Damn it all. I can’t believe what I’m about to say, but I don’t think I’ve got a choice.

“I might be able to help,” Lillia said.

Chapter 15

Reya sat up so fast that she nearly slipped out of the chair. Lillia caught her by the shoulders. “Careful!”

“You can help?” Reya asked eagerly. “Really?”

“Calm down,” Lillia grumbled, releasing Reya and letting out a heavy sigh. “Let’s just consider it an advance payment, yes? You aren’t allowed to go to any taverns other than mine. And, in exchange, I help out my most valuable customer.”

“Deal!” Reya said. She paused for a moment and her features crumpled again. “Wait. How are you going to be able to help? Your food is good, but they aren’t going to stop fighting us if you feed them.”

Didn’t you specifically come here just to get food?

“I’m more than just some mere tavernkeeper,” Lillia said. “I’ve dealt with a few rowdy idiots before, and three bodies against thirty is much better than two. If you think about it, that means we each just have to take out ten of them.”

“You know, that’s almost exactly what Arwin told me about himself. And you’re right!” Reya’s eyes lit with just a little hope. “That’s not too bad. As long as they’re all looking in the other direction and completely oblivious to my presence for the entire fight, I could probably do that.”

Do you want them to strip naked and point to their vital spots as well?

“Right,” Lillia said. She could still barely believe a single word coming out of her mouth, but it was too late to back out now. Despite what the humans had claimed about her kind, a demon did not go back on their word.

There was a moment of silence as the two regarded each other. Then Reya’s stomach rumbled.

“Do you think you could still make that food, though?” Reya asked, her cheeks reddening.

Lillia sighed. “Just wait here. I’ll be out in a moment.”

Bearing a plate laden with food, Lillia followed Reya out into the street and over to the smithy. Rhythmic thuds echoed from within it, just loud enough to ring in Lillia’s ears.

Reya stepped right through the crumbling entryway, but Lillia paused just before she entered. Her skin prickled, her body screamed warnings at her not to press further. She was standing at the domain of her greatest foe – the spot where he was most comfortable.

No. I’m not backing out. He walked right into my tavern like he owned the place, and I’m going to do the same thing.

Lillia ground her teeth and stepped inside. Arwin stood, his bare back to them and his arms buried up to his elbows in the roaring flames. He didn’t even look slightly bothered by the heat, and Reya held a finger to her lips as Lillia opened her mouth.

“Don’t distract him too much while he’s working,” Reya whispered. “You know, I could have just brought him the food myself. You didn’t have to come.”

“You’d have gotten used to taking food out of my tavern if I did that,” Lillia grumbled, but she kept her voice low. “I’m not letting that happen. This is a one-time thing.”

“Well, you might be waiting a while,” Reya said. She squinted at the forge. “I don’t think he’s anywhere near done yet, and if finishing that armor will give us a chance against the thieves’ guild, I don’t think we should bother him.”

Lillia pursed her lips. Food was always best when it was fresh. At least, she was pretty sure that was the case. It certainly wasn't going to get any better if they left it out – but any advantages for the upcoming fight would probably be invaluable.

“Fine,” Lillia said. She glanced around the smithy, then sat down and leaned against the wall, beckoning for Reya to do the same. “In that case, tell me about what we're up against. Maybe I can try to put some form of plan together while we wait for him to finish.

Reya nodded and sat down.

It was in that position that hours passed. The night squirmed away and the sun rose, but Arwin didn't budge from his spot at the forge. Lillia was pretty certain he had absolutely no idea that they were even there.

Her discussion with Reya only proved one thing, and that was that they were likely screwed. Going up against twenty-nine Apprentice Tiers and a Journeyman was a ludicrous fight. Sure, it was unlikely that all of the guild would be there at the same time, but there would still be far more enemies than they had any right to take on.

To make matters worse, Reya didn't even have a class. Lillia had been fairly certain that she was a Thief or an equivalent, but Reya didn't even have that. She had no Titles, no Achievements, and no skills. All she had was the dagger at her side.

This might well and truly be screwed.

Lillia pushed herself upright and brushed the gravel off her backside.

He's been working at that armor all night and a good part of the morning. I wonder if he's actually making any progress, or if he's just banging away at nothing.

Ignoring the look Reya sent her, Lillia crept closer to the forge. She kept her distance, making sure not to get close enough to startle Arwin, and squinted into the flames. Her eyes widened as she got her first look at the armor.

Layers of interconnected scales had been tightly woven together into a scale mail shirt. They all glowed with merry orange heat that Lillia could feel even from where she stood. It looked like there were only a few scales left to be placed.

The Mesh tickled at the back of her mind as she studied the armor. It wasn't magical – not yet – but it certainly seemed as if it would be. Despite the person forging the armor, a flicker of awe passed through Lillia.

He can make magical items this soon? It looks like I'm not the only one that got a Unique crafting class, then. I guess I shouldn't even be surprised. We've always been perfectly matched, so I don't know why this would have been any different.

Lillia made her way back to Reya and sat down.

“Well?” Reya whispered. “Is it working?”

“You could look yourself, you know,” Lillia said dryly. She looked back to Arwin, a thoughtful expression passing over her face. “But yes. I think it is.”

Arwin worked the final nail into the armor. His fingers were sore and exhausted, and even though his [Soul Flame] didn't burn him, his entire body felt like it had been baked in an oven.

He barely even noticed. Arwin lifted the scale mail, delight dancing in his eyes as he felt the Mesh come to life within it.

[Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Unique Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [I'm Special] has been earned.

[I'm Special] – *Awarded for forging your first Unique Quality item.* Effects: Upgrade one of your existing skills. *This achievement will be consumed immediately.*

[I'm Special] has been consumed.

Before Arwin could even think about what the Mesh had said, a list of his existing skills flickered to life before him, blinking impatiently.

[Awaken] (Passive)

[Soul Flame]

Getting his current skills upgraded was just as important as acquiring new ones, but Arwin's nose scrunched in distaste. As usual, the Mesh had given him absolutely no information about what the skill upgrades would actually be.

There were certain Titles and Achievements that gave more information on upgrades that he'd always found invaluable, but he didn't have the benefit of any of those this time.

Fortunately, he only had two skills to choose between.

It's not hard to tell what upgrading Awaken would do. I'd get magical items more often, and they'd be less likely to have detrimental effects. Soul Flame, on the other hand, I'm unsure. I'd assume it would become more effective.

Normally, I'd go straight with Awaken. At some point, I'd want to upgrade Awaken regardless. But... if Soul Flame gives me the chance to make stronger weapons, even if they happen less often, wouldn't that be the better choice?

Arwin's jaw clenched. It was just as possible that upgrading Awaken would result in the same improvement. It was difficult to tell because the description of the skill said that the component that affected his chances of making a trait was unknown.

After a few more seconds of deliberation, Arwin selected [Soul Flame].

Both skills were tempting, and he'd just upgrade [Awaken] the next time he got a chance. Going with either one was a bet, and if he was going to bet, he wanted to bet on the one that he had the most information on.

[Soul Flame] – *Passion burns within you with such intensity that it becomes manifest. You may draw out your Soul Flame, empowering the fire of your forge, but be wary – any magical damage done to the Soul Flame will transfer onto your soul. Your Soul Flame can consume magical items, pulling all the traits from within them and allowing you to transfer them onto other items.*

A delighted grin stretched across Arwin's face. It wasn't a direct upgrade to his actual items, but considering the random nature of the traits he was able to make right now, this change would be invaluable.

The catch is that I have to take all the traits, so I can't just separate off the detrimental ones, but this will still be useful if I get a strong defensive trait on a dagger or something like that.

Arwin let the skill fade away. He was mildly surprised – and pleased – to find that he hadn't reached the next level in his Tier. It got exponentially harder to advance with every level, and Unique Classes often took even more energy than normal to grow stronger.

To Arwin, that was a blessing. It meant more time to claim Titles and Achievements, which was exactly what he needed. Arwin summoned the Mesh once more, this time studying the newly made scale mail to see what rewards his efforts had reaped him.

Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Unique Quality

[Molten Fury]: This item was not just forged in flame – it is one with it. The wearer of this item gains heat resistance. Upon being struck, this item may forcibly draw magical energy and release a whip of molten flame at the attacker.

[Unique]: Once donned, this item will bond with its owner. It will change sizes so long as material permits to fit them perfectly, and anyone else who attempts to wear it may suffer retaliation. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

It possesses [1] concealed property.

The armor was beautiful. Its scales rippled in the firelight, shimmering like green gemstones. The description of the armor was short and to the point, but Arwin could see exactly why it had been marked as Unique. The word was rather self-explanatory. Being Unique wasn't

necessarily a good thing, but it did mean that the item would be different – and the addition of a concealed property was interesting. He had no way of knowing when it would show up or what it would do, but that just added to his interest.

Of course, Arwin could see the potential risks of the armor immediately. It didn't say how much magical energy it would draw, nor did he have any way to control it. Hypothetically, it could completely drain him the moment he took a single blow. On top of that, there was always the chance that the additional property was actually detrimental and would make the armor worse.

But, despite that, the armor was exactly what he needed. A wild card that would give them even the slightest edge up against the assassins.

He turned to the door so he could show Reya – and froze. Reya was there, but she wasn't alone.

Sitting beside her was the Demon Queen, and her eyes were transfixed on the armor, her mouth slightly askew in disbelief. She'd watched him forge a Unique magical item, and it looked like she'd been there for quite some time.

Shit. How much did she see?

Chapter 16

“Nine Underlands, that's the most beautiful piece of armor I've ever seen,” Reya breathed. “What god do you pray to, Arwin? I'm swapping.”

“It’s just scale mail,” Arwin said, his eyes locked with the Demon Queen’s. “Nothing special.”

“Nothing special my ass,” Lillia said. “How’d you make that? That’s impossible. You—”

She cut herself off before she could continue, but Arwin knew what she’d been about to say.

I’ve only been at this for a short while. I don’t have any formal training as a smith, and even though this item probably wouldn’t be anything special to someone far above our Tier, it shouldn’t have been possible for an amateur. But here I am. Maybe all the time I spent watching my equipment getting made transferred over.

It was a weak excuse and Arwin was all too aware of it, but he genuinely had no proper explanation for it other than that the materials seemed to beckon to him, begging him to form them into their proper forms. Even in the final stages of the scale mail, he’d felt the call of the scales directing his movements.

Making Average magical items was absolutely nothing to scoff at. The Mesh didn’t even recognize non-magical items in most circumstances. The only exception was when they managed to earn Titles and Achievements of their own, but that was rare.

The actual ranking of magical items scaled with the smith that made them and the materials that went into them. An Average item from Arwin, at Apprentice Tier, would be nothing compared to a Garbage item made by someone two tiers higher at Lord Tier.

But, even despite that, being able to make Average magical items with the amount of practice Arwin had... it was unfair, to say the least.

“Why are you here?” Arwin finally asked, snapping himself out of his reverie.

“To help!” Reya answered for Lillia. She picked a plate up off the floor and pulled the covering off, holding it out to Arwin so he could see the meat pie on it. “Also, we brought you food!”

It was cold, but Arwin grabbed it without hesitation. He still had some time before he’d need to eat another magical item, so his body didn’t necessarily need food, but the pie looked delicious.

“Thank you,” Arwin said, swallowing before he spoke. “But... Reya, you were meant to keep people *out* of the smithy, not invite them in. Besides, doesn’t the D – ah, doesn’t Lillia have a tavern she needs to run?”

“Unfortunately, I found out that two of my only customers were about to get themselves killed,” Lillia said, the irritation clear in her expression. “I had no choice but to come.”

“To hand deliver the food?”

“No, you oaf. Well, yes. But also to help you with your thieves’ guild problem.”

Arwin nearly choked on his own saliva. He waited for Lillia to burst into laughter at his expression, but her features were dead serious. She wasn’t joking.

The Demon Queen is offering to help us? She’s suggesting that not only do we call a truce, but we actually fight side by side?

“Isn’t it great?” Reya asked. “We actually have a chance of surviving!”

If anyone heard of this, they'd faint in terror. When I was still the Hero, I can remember people theorizing about ending the war by finding an enemy so great that neither the Kingdom of Lian or the Monster Horde could handle it on their own, so they'd have to work together.

I suppose now we know what that threat is. A second-rate thieves' guild that's after the key to a Journeyman dungeon that I never would have given a second glance at.

A laugh slipped out of Arwin's lips. It was so ludicrous that he couldn't even try to hold it in.

"What?" Lillia demanded.

"Nothing," Arwin said, wiping the mirth from his eyes. "I just never thought that you and I would be working together to fight off a bunch of worthless thugs."

The exact meaning of his words passed over Reya's head, but Lillia understood them immediately. She scrunched her nose and let out a laugh of her own.

"Yeah. I had a similar thought. I guess life finds it funny to play jokes on us."

"You can say that again," Arwin muttered. He glanced around the floor in search of his shirt, then located it near the anvil and pulled it on. Then, after a moment of hesitation, Arwin pulled the scale mail over his head.

As soon as it settled on his shoulders, he felt the material shift. It tightened against him until it sat perfectly on top of his shirt, not too snug but not so loose that it would flop around while he walked. The faint tingle of the Mesh prickled against his skin as he felt himself connect with the armor.

"Looks good," Reya said, giving him a thumbs up.

Lillia reluctantly nodded in agreement, but she still added, “for an amateur.”

“I’ve got more material.” Arwin looked back to the still-lit forge. “How long was I working? Do I have time to make another piece?”

“The note said two days, and today is day two,” Reya said. “If they’re going to be really strict on their timing, then I’d assume they’ll show up tonight.”

“It might be better to bring the fight to them. They won’t suspect it,” Lillia said.

“They probably also won’t send their entire guild just for Reya,” Arwin said with a thoughtful frown. “We might be better off waiting for them to show up here, killing the ones that do, and then taking out the rest of them afterward.”

“Which would work if they didn’t have any sort of information network, but they clearly respect that you’re a threat.” Lillia shook her head. “And that means that they’ll be watching to see how things go. If people start dying, the rest of the guild will either show up prepared or will be lying in wait. It’s much more efficient if we cut the problem out with one fell swoop.”

She had a fair point, but taking them out in *one fell swoop* was considerably easier to say than actually do. Sure, getting the jump on the thieves would probably give them a few free kills, but there were still thirty of them. If ten were off watching the dungeon, that still left twenty people to handle between the three of them – two, if Arwin didn’t count Reya due to her lack of experience.

The idea of trusting Lillia... I don't know. A truce is one thing, but fighting side by side is entirely different. I can barely even remember a time when I wasn't trying to kill her and she wasn't aiming to do the same to me.

Arwin had no way to know for certain, but he got the strong suspicion that the exact same thoughts were passing through Lillia's head. There was little choice, though. Unless they abandoned Reya to her fate, they *had* to work together.

There wasn't any way to prove anything or ensure Lillia wouldn't turn against him, she had no way to know if Arwin would hold to his word either. It was like a snake eating its own tail. No matter how hard it tried to consume itself, it would never be able to finish.

The only option was just to stop biting.

"Just this once, then," Arwin said, holding Lillia's gaze. "Until the thieves' guild has been dealt with."

"Just once." Lillia nodded. "I don't plan to make a habit out of killing people. I'm trying to run an upstanding business, so this is going to have to be a cheat day."

"So what are we going to do?" Reya asked, wringing her hands together. "Are we just charging in and killing people?"

"That's going to depend on where their base is," Arwin said. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, holding a hand toward the forge. The [Soul Flame] he still had sitting in it sputtered and flew into his hand, returning to his body as his fist closed around it. "I trust you know?"

"Yeah. I can show you, but they've definitely got lookouts."

"We've already established that it's likely they'll be watching us," Arwin said. "There's even a chance they know what I've been up to. And, speaking of which, hold on."

Arwin directed his attention to his armor, willing it to hide itself from anyone else's eyes. The metal rippled in response, but that was it. Arwin glanced at the others, then tapped his chest. "Well? Can you still tell what it is?"

"Not anymore," Lillia said with a shake of her head. "If I didn't know better, I'd just think it was normal scale mail. You still might stand out a bit, though. I don't see a lot of people walking around wearing Forest Lizard armor."

"Not yet," Arwin said with a low chuckle. He nodded over his shoulder at the pile of pieces left over from the Forest Lizard. "I've still got a good bit of material left, not to mention the claws and fangs. I'm going to need some better tools if I'm going to get around to using them anytime soon, though."

"We should probably focus on surviving this fight first," Lillia suggested. She went to continue, then paused as she took a closer look at the pile that Arwin had indicated. "Do... you think you might be able to make me some utensils? I don't have a knife. Or a fork. Or anything, really. I've just got a bent piece of metal that I've been using as a makeshift pan."

"What have you been using to cook if you didn't have utensils?" Reya asked. Lillia looked down at her hands, then back up to her. Reya grimaced and held a hand up. "Never mind. I'd rather be ignorant. Can we go back to the part where we try to figure out how to kill thirty people?"

"That's simple," Arwin said.

Lillia looked to him in confusion and Reya's eyes narrowed as she figured out what he was about to say before he could say it.

“Simple? How?” Lillia asked.

“All we have to do is hit them harder than they hit us.”

Lillia and Reya rolled their eyes in unison. Arwin chuckled at their expressions, then looked around the forge. There wasn't much he needed other than a sword and his armor. It would have been nice to have more equipment, but time just didn't permit it. On a whim, Arwin grabbed his explosive sword and slid it into one of the Brothers Six' sheaths before hanging it on his waist.

“Right,” Arwin said, giving Reya a sharp nod. “Lead on, then. It doesn't matter if they see us coming. It's time we check out this thieves' guild. If we're lucky, we'll be able to come up with a plan once I see what we're dealing with.”

“And if we don't have time?” Reya asked.

Arwin's features darkened and his hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. “Then we'll just kill them the old-fashioned way.”

Chapter 17

The thieves' guild was about a thirty-minute walk away through the alleys. It struck Arwin that Milten was considerably bigger than he'd thought it was, and it had a lot more back streets and dark alleyways than it had initially appeared to.

Something tells me the guard saying they didn't want beggars in the city was projecting a bit. I get the feeling that Milten has more than enough beggars and their ilk to share with the rest of the kingdom and not be left wanting.

But, as he took in the other parts of the slums, he did have to admit that he'd somehow chosen the ugliest, most run-down street in the entire city. Reya came to a stop at the edge of a cobbled road, then nodded across the street to a long two-story building. It was clearly old and run down, but it – and everything else on the street – was still in one piece.

A few people milled about the street both around the building and near the others beside it. The building didn't stand out much aside from its size, but it only took a little attention to realize that it was different from the others.

The people at its front were more attentive than random beggars, and Arwin could see the telltale bulge of weaponry poking against their clothes. His lips pressed thin, and he took care to keep to the shadows, not directing too much of his attention to the building to avoid standing out.

"They're organized," Lillia murmured from beside Arwin. Her hands twitched at her sides, and it struck Arwin that she didn't have a sword.

"Should we have gotten you a weapon?" Arwin asked.

Lillia shook her head. "It's fine. I'm not very eager to pick up a sword again anytime soon. There are other ways of dealing with people that work just as well. The problem isn't going to be us. It's going to be how we can handle this many opponents at the same time."

Nodding absently, Arwin rubbed his chin and dug through his mind in search of a plan. Charging straight into the guild was guaranteed to result in their death – there was no doubt in his mind about it anymore.

If they'd been chaotic or unorganized, there would have been a decent chance he and Lillia could have just carved a path through their men and made it out before they could retaliate.

But, with a watch and clear preparation for an attack, mounting an assault against a force ten times their strength wasn't going to work. He needed a different strategy, and it wasn't like he had an army to attack with.

If I was at all stealthy, I'd consider breaking in on my own and just killing the leader. That would throw them into enough chaos to make 'em forget we exist. I don't think that's possible, though. Unless...

"How stealthy would you say you are?" Arwin asked Lillia.

"Not very. I can be hard to spot, but that's a far cry from stealthy."

Arwin thought back to the oppressive aura that covered the entirety of Lillia's tavern and grimaced. That definitely wasn't what they needed. Reya was probably the sneakiest of the lot, and she wasn't going to be able to break into a den of thieves on her own.

I'm so used to taking things on with a group of adventurers that I can barely even think on how I'd do this with just three people. Ideally, I'd just walk straight in and crush everything that fought back, but that's no more realistic than me clanking up the walls in my new armor and hoping nobody notices me.

"I don't suppose you know of some sort of secret passage?" Arwin asked.

Reya shook her head. "Not really. I mean, we could try entering through the sewage, but I don't know where that is."

"I think I'll pass," Lillia said, scrunching her nose in distaste and grimacing. "I think one thing of note is their surveillance isn't *that* good. They still haven't noticed we're here. Or, if they have, they don't care."

“Probably means we’re a relatively minor problem for them,” Arwin said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re a branch of a larger guild. A lot of the small thieves’ guilds work together, and while thirty members is a lot to us, it’s hardly many in the long run.”

“Doesn’t that mean we’ll get into more shit if we kill the guild leader?” Lillia asked.

Arwin nodded. “Yes. Which is why I’m thinking about adjusting my plan. Not that I’ve managed to develop one in the first place, but I think trying to destroy the entire guild by ourselves isn’t the best idea. A more surgical strategy might be better.”

“What are we supposed to do, then?” Reya asked. “They’re not going to stop coming after me, are they?”

“No,” Arwin agreed. “Probably not. But we can make them think twice about it. If we show them that coming after us is more effort than its worth, then we get what we want.”

“How are we going to do that without pissing them off even further?” Lillia asked. “If I had an enemy that fought back, I’d strike back even harder to make sure they knew their place.”

“By hitting them hard enough that they think twice about coming after us again, but getting out before we cause a permanent vendetta.”

“How?” Reya asked.

The inklings of a plan started to tickle at Arwin’s mind. It wasn’t exactly the smartest or most effective strategy he’d ever thought of, but it was the best thing he could think of.

We’ll still probably have to kill a few people, but it’ll be better than having to take out an entire guild on our own.

“It might be simpler than we’ve all been thinking, but a lot of it will depend on you, Lillia.” Arwin said. “Reya, can you check to make sure nobody is eavesdropping near us? Come running back if you get spotted, though.”

Reya blinked, then nodded. "Sure."

She set off, and Arwin turned to Lillia. "Tell me, what is it that you’re still capable of?"

Arwin strode straight up to the front of the thieves’ guild, his hands resting on the hilts of the swords at his sides. As if it hadn’t already been obvious that the beggars at the entrance were more than they appeared, both of them stared at him with bored expressions. If they’d been paying closer attention, they would have noticed that his shadow was considerably larger than it should have been.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Arwin said. He nodded to the door. “I have business with your boss.”

The men exchanged a glance, then chuckled.

“That’s not how this works,” the man to Arwin’s left said. “If you want an audience, then you have to beg for one unless the boss expressly invited you. Did he?”

“No,” Arwin replied. “I don’t believe he did.”

“Then get lost, idiot.” The other man let out a raspy laugh. “Or feel free to stick around and donate whatever you’ve got in your pockets to us. Your choice.”

Arwin let out a sigh. He rubbed his chin between two fingers, then let his hand drop and shook his head. “No, I don’t think that was the answer I was looking for. See, your lot came to my smithy and asked for something of mine. I’ve come to discuss it.”

“We don’t discuss,” the first man said. “Did you bring whatever it was we asked for?”

“No,” Arwin replied. “Do I look like an idiot? If I brought it, I doubt you’d have much reason to bargain, would you?”

“There’s no reason to bargain at all. Bring the shit or get out.”

“I think we’ve possibly misunderstood something,” Arwin said. He drew the first magical sword he’d made, holding it loosely at his side and letting the two men get a good look at its information.

Short Sword: Garbage Quality

[Brittle]: This weapon has a chance of shattering on every blow. Upon shattering, the magical power stored within the weapon will be released in an instant, causing a minor magical explosion.

As their eyes transfixed on the sword, Arwin let [Scourge] slam into his body with full force, driving his open palm into the wall of the building beside him. With a loud crash, the stone shattered. Debris fell down all around Arwin as a cloud of dust rose up into the air surrounding him.

“See,” Arwin said, pointing his sword at the first of the men. “I’m in a rather poor mood. Your folks thought it would be fun to stride right into my smithy and pin a little note to the wall. I didn’t like that much, so here’s how this is going to work. Your guild leader and I are going to

have a chat. And, if he hides like a coward in this building, I'm going to tear the whole thing down. Come at me, and I'll shatter this sword myself and send us both straight to the Ninth Underland. Sound good?"

The thieves stared at Arwin in horror, and he suppressed the grin that threatened to split his face. People on the street hurriedly left, leaving it desolate aside from the guards and the growing shouts of surprise from inside the building. Even though he didn't have the power of a full Hero anymore, Scourge gave him far more power than anyone his Tier had any right to possess.

On top of that, the sword was a perfect threat. Nobody in a second-rate thieves guild like this was going to care about it more than they cared about their own life, and it wasn't exactly easy to counter an explosion.

"You're mad," the first thief said, taking a step back.

"No, I'm angry," Arwin corrected. "And you're my guide. Step to it now, lad. If you don't, I'm going to start killing people."

For a moment, none of them moved. The thief's gaze flicked from Arwin to the sword. Then he swallowed and gave him a nod. "Fine. It's your death warrant. Let's go."

Arwin just gave the man a cold smile, and the two of them headed into the building. The main room was surprisingly nice, with couches ringed its edges and a table piled high with food in the center. Thieves were already racing down to see what the commotion was, pouring into the common room and staring at the hole in the wall in shock. About a dozen of them had arrived, and they all stared at Arwin as he followed the man inside.

Flicking his sword, Arwin impaled a large apple sitting on one of the tables and brought it over to his mouth, taking a bite out of it. The more confident he looked, the less likely anyone would try something stupid.

“Carry on,” Arwin said, waving the sword with the bitten apple on its tip. Everyone’s eyes followed the blade, reading the information the Mesh gave them on its properties. Almost immediately, they paled and backed up.

It didn’t surprise Arwin. *Minor Magical Explosion* wasn’t exactly reassuring, as there was no way to know exactly how small minor truly was. Nobody stopped them as Arwin and the thief walked across the room and up to a large wooden door at the far end of it.

“The boss is through here,” the thief said, watching Arwin warily, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. “I hope he kills you.”

“Your sentiment has been noted.” Arwin drove his foot into the door, using [Scourge] to add just enough force to his kick to slam it open to reveal a long, well-decorated room. It had a high ceiling and a second floor that was mostly cast in shadows aside from a few lanterns running along its edges.

A man with a salt and pepper goatee and a small moustache sat at a desk, his arms crossed in front of his chest and his green eyes focused directly on Arwin. Rows of tables covered with shimmering items and gold lined the sides of the room, making it resemble the banquet hall of King Midas.

“Did you miss the explosion outside?” Arwin asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind himself.

“I had trusted that my men would be competent enough to handle it themselves. I have better things to do,” the man said, rising to his feet. He moved with the grace of a killer – this man was no stranger to fighting.

“Not the best men if they leave you alone to fight an unknown threat,” Arwin said.

The man chuckled and snapped his fingers. Several clicks rang out, and Arwin recognized them as the telltale sound of crossbows being cocked.

“I’m not alone,” the man said. “But you are. I’ve never had someone so bold as to break straight into my dwellings on their lonesome. Who are you?”

He doesn't have an Identify Skill that'll let him see information about me or my class, then. Good. I was betting on that, but you never know.

“I’m hurt,” Arwin said. A large portion of his shadow broke away and slipped into the darkness, but he didn’t let his eyes follow it. “You sent Jin to my smithy to leave a threat on my wall and you don’t even know who I am?”

“You’re the smith?” the guild leader blinked, then started to chuckle. “A lone smith has come to challenge my guild?”

“Who said I was alone?” Arwin asked. “I’m just the one speaking with you.”

“You’re claiming to represent an organization?” the guild leader watched Arwin carefully, clearly trying to read if he was lying or not. “There was no information about a guild on that street. It sounds to me like you’re bluffing to keep that key your girl stole.”

“We were a bit delayed on announcing it,” Arwin said with a shrug. “Consider this our official announcement. That shitty little street is ours. Keep your paws off it.”

“I think we’ll just take what we want instead,” the guild leader said softly, raising a hand. Arwin’s skin prickled. He couldn’t see the other thieves in the room, but he could tell their weapons were pointed straight at him.

“You know what that sounds like?” Arwin asked, keeping his tone even and tilting his head to the side. “A declaration of a guild war.”

“You don’t have a guild! There’s no war if you’re alone, and the girl certainly doesn’t count. She doesn’t even have a class.”

Arwin smiled. There was a soft thud from the upper decks. Arwin and the guild leader both turned as a man’s head rolled over the edge of the balcony and fell to the ground, striking it with a splattering squelch.

For an instant, nobody spoke. Then the guild leader’s eyes went wide. He jerked his hand down. “Kill him! We’re under attack!”

Chapter 18

Five bolts screamed through the air toward Arwin, but he spun, holding his hands over the back of his neck and his eyes. A bolt slammed into his forearm with a thud, but Arwin ignored it and sprinted over to one of the tables, activating [Scourge] and lifting it into the air with a roar. Gold spilled to the ground, and an idle part of Arwin’s mind noted that the clinks it made as it hit the stone weren’t the right pitch. The gold was fake.

Arwin hurled the table – not at the guild leader, but at the double doors. Even as they started to open and the guildmembers tried to pour in, the table slammed into them and drove them shut.

Not deterred, Arwin strode over to another table and lifted it while the crossbowmen reloaded, tossing the table next to the first. People pounded against the doors, but the tables were heavy – they weren't going to get through them too soon.

Another arrow struck Arwin's armor. He grit his teeth as he felt a rush of magical energy siphon from his body. The air around him heated as a molten strand of magic whipped from his armor and hurtled into the darkness. A man let out a pained scream, but it was abruptly silenced.

Arwin turned back to the guild leader, ripping the arrows out of his arms and dropping them to the floor. They'd barely penetrated an inch into his skin, and the wounds were nothing more than painful.

Coils of flame danced across Arwin's armor, rising up into the air around him as if waiting for another person foolish enough to test its powers.

"That's two," Arwin said, stalking toward the man. This was the most important part. Killing a few Apprentice Tiers was well within his and Lillia's powers, but taking on a Journeyman was not. It was unlikely that he'd be able to do so much as injure the guild leader before his people managed to knock the doors down, and then he'd really be in trouble.

Luckily, this was never a fair fight. Like any guild leader running a group of rabble, he'll try to show his strength off by making them do the hard work. No point wasting energy when you're in charge.

That just means I have to scare the shit out of this guy. He doesn't know my exact rank, so as long as he thinks the fight isn't worth taking, we win.

"Who are you?" the guild leader demanded. "You aren't a smith. Was this a setup?"

“Does that matter?” Arwin asked. “I’m not asking for much... what was your name again?”

“Briggs.” The guild leader watched Arwin through narrow eyes, ready to call on his own powers and jump into the fight at a moment’s notice. His eyes traced the explosive sword in Arwin’s hands – likely more worried about his belongings than his life. Arwin doubted a Journeyman would get taken out by something like this, but all that mattered was that he had Briggs’ attention.

“Briggs. Good name,” Arwin said. He tapped the sword on the ground as he walked, hoping that taps didn’t count as strikes. It would have been morbidly funny if he mistakenly blew himself up whilst trying to be threatening. “Well, Briggs, I don’t have any problem with you. What I do have a problem with is people shuffling around on the territory of my guild, leaving threats around like they own the place.”

None of the thieves on the upper level were shooting their crossbows anymore. Briggs looked from Arwin to the barricaded door behind him. People were banging on it, but it was clearly going to hold for at least another minute.

“You’re stealing from us,” Briggs growled. “You really think I’m going to give a key to a dungeon up just like that?”

“You’ve already spent two lives on it,” Arwin said. “How many more is it worth? I can’t say I have a taste for killing, but my friends are different.”

He lifted his gaze to the balcony. Briggs followed it, and the man’s face went as pale as a sheet. Standing beside the railing, the head of a thief gripped in its clawed hands, was a Minor Imp.

The monster's dull red skin glistened with blood and its yellowed claws nearly wrapped all the way around the head in its hands. Jagged teeth filled its mouth, so long that it couldn't even close its mouth properly.

"Nine Underlands. You're allied with demons?" Briggs asked, terror seeping into his voice.

The monster dropped the head and stepped back into the darkness, vanishing from sight as if it had never been there.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," Arwin said. "You might be seeing things, Briggs. I've heard that happens to people that are about to die."

Briggs swallowed heavily. "You're mad. What fool is stupid enough to make a deal with a demon? Haven't you heard what they do to men?"

"I've seen it firsthand, actually," Arwin said. "It's not pretty, Briggs. It's unfortunate. Something tells me the Hero is too busy to come all the way out to this backwater city and handle a threat of demons from the lips of a tiny little thieves' guild. But, who knows. I could be wrong. What do you think?"

The two men locked eyes, and Arwin could see the exact moment that Briggs' self-preservation won over his greed. The man's lips pressed thin and he jerked his chin. "Fine. Keep the damned key. The dungeon is likely worthless."

"And the girl?"

"By all means, we don't want her back." Briggs spat on the floor. "She's a curse, and I hope you both get devoured by the monsters you cavort with."

“It was a pleasure doing business with you,” Arwin said. A shadow flitted through the room and attached itself to his, and this time, Briggs didn’t miss it. The man’s face paled even further. “Stay off my street.”

“Only if you stay off mine,” Briggs said, finding a tiny spark of righteous fury to draw on. “Back me into a corner and you’ll find out just how dangerous my men are.”

Arwin chuckled. “Don’t worry, Briggs. I don’t have any desires for your street. You can keep it. Just don’t let me catch your men in my shop again unless they’re there to buy something.”

The banging on the door grew louder, and the tables started to scrape along the ground as the thieves on the other side slowly forced it open. Arwin nodded toward the exit.

“You might want to stop them.”

Briggs ground his teeth. For a moment, Arwin wondered if he’d pushed too far and if the man was about to snap and order everyone to attack. The moment passed and Briggs snarled in anger.

“Stop!” Briggs roared. “Go back to your damn stations. Everything is fine.”

The grinding stopped. Confused murmurs rang out on the other side of the door.

“I told you to leave!” Briggs yelled again. “Get back to work!”

Footfalls echoed out as the thieves broke rank and left. Arwin didn’t bother saying anything else to Briggs. There was no point pushing his luck any further. He grabbed the first table with one hand, using [Scourge] to toss it to the side.

The second table followed after it, and Arwin pulled the doors open. He strode out, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of all the thieves as he left the building. Their gazes bore into his back as he continued out into the street, following him all the way until he turned a corner in the alley and was entirely out of view.

Even still, Arwin didn't allow himself to relax for another ten minutes. He followed the alleyways to the best of his memory, then finally came to a stop as he saw two familiar forms. Lillia and Reya sat on a pair of barrels, at the end of the alley.

The shadow at Arwin's feet broke away the moment he saw Lillia, flitting across the ground and entering her own shadow. The alley was so dark that Arwin only noticed because he'd grown used to watching the shadows while he fought, and Reya missed it entirely.

"Arwin! You're back! Did it work?" Reya asked nervously, glancing around the alley. "Are the thieves after you?"

"I doubt I would have made it out of there if it hadn't worked," Arwin said with a dry laugh. He followed Reya's concerned gaze to his bleeding arms and waved her away. "Relax. I'm fine."

"It looks like you got shot. A lot."

"I did," Arwin said. "I'm not exactly walking around in full plate here."

Though I really should be.

"I can't believe that worked," Lillia said, shaking her head in disbelief. "You really just strolled in there and they listened to you?"

“Having certain threats in the shadows can go a long way,” Arwin said. Now that it was all done, he wasn’t so sure how he felt about feeding a Minor Imp a meal of fellow humans. It was probably the only reason he’d managed to pull this off, though. “People are terrified of – well, you know. Really, really scared.”

He’d been one, at one point. Demons had been something reviled – and something feared. They were among the most despicable monsters, taking delight in their slaughter. At least, that was what Arwin had learned, and it was likely what just about everyone believed. Now, he wasn’t sure what he believed.

Fortunately, it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was that everyone *else* was just as scared of demons as he’d used to be. That had been what their entire plan had hinged on.

When Arwin had asked Lillia what abilities she’d retained, he’d expected it to be something to do with the darkness based on how her tavern felt, but he’d been initially thrilled to hear she could still summon a Minor Imp. The monsters were nasty little buggers that only obeyed their masters, and they had the ability to hide in shadows. Most people didn’t know the capabilities of the average demon, though.

A wry smile crossed Arwin’s face, but he wasn’t sure if it was born of bitter amusement or relief. He’d killed more Imps than he could count, and now he’d worked together with one to kill.

“How many of those things do you have to work with?” Arwin asked.

“Why do you ask?” Lillia asked, sending Arwin a suspicious frown.

“Just curious,” Arwin said, shaking his head. They all set off down the alley, heading back toward their run-down street. He’d have more than enough time to come to terms with what he’d done later.

Like it or not, I’m not the man I used to be. I can’t be.

Realizing that he’d started to lag behind the others, Arwin increased his pace to catch back up with them. The thieves guild was dealt with – for the time being – and that meant he had time to get back to doing what was important.

I need to get stronger.

Chapter 19

Flame licked at Arwin’s hands as he worked the lizard scales together, winding the final scale onto his third attempt at making a piece of armor for Reya. The first and second tries sat in a pile off to his side. The first had turned into a decent set of armor, but he’d failed to capture any magic within it.

The second attempt hadn’t turned out much better, but he’d worked out a few issues in his methodology. It was a lot easier to make himself a piece of armor than it was for him to make one for someone else.

That felt like a no-brainer after Arwin realized it, of course. When he was working for himself, he knew exactly what he wanted. And, while he didn’t have any complete proof for it yet, Arwin was confident that when his will aligned with that of his materials – that was when he could make a magical weapon.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the easiest to put himself into the shoes of someone else when he was specifically trying to make something for them rather than just a random piece of armor that happened to be magical.

And yet, as Arwin finished working the last scale into the chest piece and held it up before the forge to get a good look at the finished product, he felt the telltale tingle of the Mesh race against his skin.

[Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [Shoe Thief] has been earned.

[Shoe Thief] – *Awarded for forging an item made specifically for someone other than you.* Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

Arwin's lips creased with a smile. If he'd been earning this many Achievements back when he'd been this Tier as the Hero, he probably wouldn't have even flinched when the black gem had blown up.

Also, it doesn't look like scales have to be quenched. Wonder if that's due to their magical properties or if it's because I'm just doing it wrong.

That would be a problem to deal with later. He already couldn't wait to see what his next skill options would be, but that would come when it came – and, if he was *really* lucky, after he got another Achievement or two. Arwin turned his attention back to the scale mail shirt in his hands, examining it with the Mesh.

Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Average Quality

[Shimmerscale]: This item was made to protect a woman that stumbles into trouble a little too often. Upon being struck, this item may forcibly draw a small amount of magical energy and release a flash of light, blinding anyone looking too closely.

Arwin smiled and nodded. This was exactly what he needed. Even though he hadn't had a specific enchantment in mind when he'd been making the armor for Reya, it was definitely custom made for her.

Well, I was just thinking I didn't have confirmation that my thoughts truly influenced the kind of magic that goes into the equipment. This is that confirmation. I wonder if I can control the exact enchantment somehow.

Arwin dismissed the Mesh, then laid the armor out over the anvil as the last of the heat dissipated from its scales. Even though it wasn't hot to him, it would be unfortunate if Reya tried to put it on and ended up burning herself.

To Arwin's mild disappointment, Reya wasn't there when he scanned the shop for her. It had been a little over a day since they'd gotten back, and he couldn't tell if she was just enjoying her newfound sense of freedom or felt so bad about having to rely on him and Lillia that she'd been working overtime.

Either way, she'd been out ever since, only coming back to sleep. Arwin considered going to look for her, but a familiar pang in his stomach stopped him before he could start.

It was still small, but he doubted he'd ever forget the sensation. The Hungering Maw was active again, and he needed to feed it a magical item if he wanted to avoid dying. Arwin took Reya's new armor and draped it over a fallen piece of rock to free up the anvil.

I'm not wasting any of the armor, and I'd rather not lose either of the swords. Guess I'll make something new and hope I can get it done before I run out of time. Worst comes to worst, I'll eat the exploding sword. As long as I don't hit anything too hard, I should be fine.

Arwin grabbed a piece of metal and set it in the hearth, using the bellows and the enhanced heat of his [Soul Flame] to bring it up to heat. Once the metal was burnt orange, Arwin took it out and set it on the anvil.

His hammer sang as he struck the metal, not even entirely sure what he was trying to make yet. If the metal had something it wanted to become, then he was more than willing to let it guide him.

Minutes stretched on and Arwin returned the metal to the forge, pulling it back out and setting back to work once it was hot enough. The impurities slowly left the metal – or at least, as many of them as one could possibly remove from a piece this low quality.

The faint glow of magic guided Arwin's strikes as he formed the metal into an ingot, then narrowed it out into the shape of a dagger, hardly even aware of his own actions. The gnawing in Arwin's stomach grew, but he hadn't gotten a warning from the Mesh yet, so he was more focused on making sure that he got it right on the first time.

It took record time for Arwin to finish the metal parts of the weapon. It was nothing more than a blade with a tang jutting out of the end for him to fasten the handle around, but he was still more than proud of his results.

Even though the Mesh had yet to properly recognize the dagger, he could still feel the magic lying in wait beneath its surface. Arwin grabbed some wood and cut away two small chunks, whittling them down with the base of a sword until they were hemi-cylinders.

Arwin then used the unfinished blade to carve out a spot for the tang to sit before putting the halves of the handle around the tang. He grabbed some of the nails he'd forged, hammering them into place with just a few blows to secure the handle in place.

Time for water. I hope my trusty hole is still there.

He re-heated the blade and headed out of the smithy and over to the makeshift quenching station near the ditch. To his delight – and relief – the pool was still there. It must have been connected to a small wellspring. Either that, or someone really liked pissing here.

That less than tasteful thought in mind, Arwin plunged the blade into the water. It bubbled and hissed, frothing around his hand and forcing him to squint through the steam until it subsided.

He got to scraping off all the crud that had built up on the top of the blade, using [Scourge] to make his fingers strong enough to remove them. After a few more minutes yielded a relatively clean blade, he held the weapon aloft.

The faintest traces of magic shimmered around the finished dagger, as if the Mesh could sense that Arwin was done working on it. Realistically, he was pretty sure that it could.

[Dagger: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

[Sharp]: This item is abnormally sharp. It will cut through many things – including the hands of whoever is holding it.

Almost on cue, Arwin cursed as he felt something nip at his fingertip. He dropped the dagger in surprise, shaking off the small cut on his hand.

“Wow,” Arwin said dryly, the pang in his stomach growing slightly stronger. “Lovely. Almost forgot about the detrimental bit, but color me reminded. I wonder what happens when I take on the properties of being sharp. I really hope I don’t grow spikes.”

He lifted the dagger up to his mouth, pausing for a moment. The idea of chowing down on a piece of metal still wasn’t appealing, but biting into something that wasn’t just sharp but *abnormally* sharp felt like it was definitely a good way to cut his insides open.

Then again, not eating this is a good way to blow up. Or implode. I’m not actually sure what would happen if I don’t eat magic in time, but I’m not going to sit around and wait to find out.

His hesitation was rewarded with another cut on his hand – he had no clue how, but the literal handle of the dagger was somehow managing to slightly injure him, even through the defenses of [Indomitable Bulwark].

Not wanting to wait any longer, Arwin started at the back of the blade, taking a careful nibble out of it. The metal melted beneath his teeth, ripping away easily. It still wasn’t the most pleasant activity, but the pain in his stomach relented.

Arwin worked his way around the dagger, eating the rest of it without too much difficulty. Every bite he took just turned into what felt like hot, metallic soup in his mouth. A

warmth grew, spreading out through his entire body as he finished eating until the pain had completely vanished.

Well, at least I've got a cool party trick. Does that always work, though? Or is it only when I'm hungry? Actually, for that matter, does it even have to be magic at all? If I can eat a magical object, would I be able to eat a normal one as well?

Arwin glanced around the smithy, then grabbed a bar of steel. He raised it before his mouth, studying it doubtfully. It didn't look any more edible than the dagger had, but if he could just chew through anything in his path, that was something he could incorporate into his fighting.

Not that I fancy the idea of trying to chew through my enemies, but if my life is on the line, it can't hurt to find out.

He brought the bar to his mouth and nipped at it. The metal seemed... well, metal. It certainly didn't feel particularly edible, but Arwin wanted to be absolutely certain just in case he was psyching himself out.

Opening his mouth a little wider, Arwin carefully bit at it, applying pressure but not enough to mistakenly break his teeth. And it was fortunate that he did – the bar didn't give in the slightest. It was about as edible as a bar of metal should have been, and that was to say that it wasn't edible in the slightest.

"Damn," Arwin said, lowering the bar. He turned, only to find Reya standing in the entrance of the smithy, staring at him with wide eyes. She hurriedly cleared her throat.

"I didn't realize you were busy."

Arwin opened his mouth, then looked back to the piece of metal and tossed it onto the ground, heaving a sigh. “I’m not even going to try to explain. Is that real food?”

“Yeah,” Reya said. She tried to suppress a smirk and failed miserably. “If you were so hungry, you should have gone to get something. I can’t bring you food right now because Lillia is insisting that we eat at her tavern, but I didn’t realize things got this bad.”

Arwin rolled his eyes. “Laugh it up all you want. It was an experiment.”

“Right,” Reya said, attempting to straighten her face and failing miserably.

Arwin shook his head and grabbed Reya’s armor from the stone he’d laid it on, holding it out so she could get a look at it. “Well, when you’re done laughing, you can come take a look at what I made for you.”

Chapter 20

The smile vanished from Reya’s face instantly, replaced by wide-eyed disbelief. Her mouth dropped open and her gaze fixed on the armor in Arwin’s hands. She started to reach out, then caught herself and pulled her hand back.

“You made that for me?”

“I told you I was going to outfit us, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but you’ve only made yourself one thing so far,” Reya stammered. “And I didn’t think you meant you’d make me more *magical* equipment. I thought it was just going to be a leather cuirass or something!”

“I haven’t figured out how to work with leather yet,” Arwin said. “And I did consider making myself some more scale equipment, but I already know how to make a chest piece and I haven’t figured anything else out yet. Do you want it or not?”

“I can’t afford anything like this,” Reya said. “It has to be worth at least a few hundred gold. If you sold this—”

“I’m not selling it. I decided when we went out to the market a little while ago,” Arwin said. “I won’t be selling magical equipment to anyone I don’t know.”

Reya blinked in surprise. “What? But you could be rich! If you can make stuff like this, the Adventurer’s Guild would pay thousands of gold just to keep you on staff! Or if you wanted to remain independent, you could probably earn even more.”

Arwin’s features darkened and he shook his head firmly. “I won’t be working for the guild, and I’m not outfitting anyone that isn’t with me.”

I won't make weaponry for someone that I may have to eventually fight. I don't have any interest in crafting for normal adventurers either – not magical items, at least. The best things I make will be reserved for people that actually deserve them.

Reya bit her lower lip. Her eagerness finally won out over her humility and she edged forward, carefully taking the armor from Arwin’s grip. She ran her hands over its surface in mute awe, then quickly pulled it on over her shirt.

She twisted her body, then stretched her arms over her head and swung them around in a few circles. The scale mail clinked slightly with her movements, but it didn’t impede them.

“Whoa. This is incredible. I’d have thought it was a Unique item if it didn’t clearly say it was Average,” Reya said. “This is the nicest thing I’ve ever owned. Other than that dagger you gave me, that is. I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to pay you back.”

“Your continued work will be more than enough. I need my allies to be competent,” Arwin said with a wave of his hand. The delight in Reya’s eyes was a little too much to handle. It felt eerily similar to the gazes people had given him when he was still the Hero.

But, at the same time, it was different. Arwin had fought for those people, but he’d never truly known any of them. They’d just been a teeming mass in the back of his mind – an ideal rather than individuals.

“It fits, then?” Arwin asked, breaking himself from his thoughts to make sure the silence didn’t stretch on so long it grew uncomfortable.

“Like a glove,” Reya said. She glanced at her hands, then cleared her throat. “Actually, it fits like scale mail. But it does it really well, you know? Kind of like a glove, but for my chest.”

“I get the picture, I think,” Arwin said dryly. “I’d recommend putting another shirt over it, or you might get people getting a little too interested. Once you’ve got a Class, you’ll probably get something that lets you conceal the equipment you’re carrying. Then you can wear it normally.”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Reya said seriously.

“Good. In that case, we’ve spent enough time on this. Did you hear anything interesting this past day? Is the thieves’ guild actually holding up to their word and avoiding us?” Arwin

headed over to the pile of metal scrap and started to shuffle through it in search of something useable.

“Yeah.” Reya gave him a nod. “At least as far as I can tell, none of them have shown up in the area. I don’t exactly have much of an information network, but I’ve been prowling around the street and it’s been mostly empty.”

“Mostly?” Arwin found a large piece of iron riddled with impurities and picked it up, turning it over in his hands to try and feel it out. “What’s that mean?”

“Well, Lillia’s been doing her best to get more people in the area, and I think her efforts are kind of working. She’s been going out to some of the other streets and even the edges of the city, trying to bribe beggars over to her tavern with free food.”

A small grin flitted across Arwin’s lips. He brought the piece of iron back to the forge and set it in the hearth, letting fire roar up around it and starting to work the bellows.

“Is that so? And that’s working for her?”

“Well, I did say kind of working, not working. I think most of them took the food and left, but I do think I’ve seen one guy come back twice. Her tavern is pretty creepy.”

“It is,” Arwin agreed through a grunt. “She should really play into it more if she wants to draw more attention.”

With the enhanced heat of his [Soul Flame], the iron was soon glowing hot. Arwin took it from the forge and grabbed his hammer, starting to beat the impurities out of the metal.

“Play into it?” Reya tilted her head and waited for gaps within Arwin’s strikes to speak. “What do you mean?”

Arwin didn't respond until the iron started to cool down and he was forced to return it to the forge. He brushed the flakes of metal away while the piece he was working on heated once again.

"If she's not going to be able to get rid of the creepy aura, she should pretend like it's intentional," Arwin said. "Think about it. Instead of a shitty old building in the corner of the road, it could be a haunted tavern."

"Nobody would want to go to that," Reya said with a shudder. "Ghosts are terrifying!"

"It's fake," Arwin said.

"What do you mean? I thought you said she should make it haunted."

"No. She should *act* like it's haunted," Arwin corrected. "Think about it. People can pretend like the tavern is haunted, and her servers can wear sheets or something and pretend to be ghosts. Maybe that's too much, but you can see where I'm going with this, can't you? She could have a spooky theme. The Monster Tavern, or the like. People love stuff like that."

"Huh. I never thought about that, but it would be kind of fun to get waited on by a giant hulking monster," Reya mused. Her eyes lit up and she burst into laughter. "Wait. I've got it. Lillia could pretend to be the Demon Queen! Could you imagine that? Go to a tavern and have the Demon Queen herself waiting on you. I bet she could find some people to dress up as monsters from the horde. Adventurers would love it!"

Arwin turned away from the forge to stare at Reya, but she was so busy laughing to herself that she didn't even notice. His eye twitched.

I can't tell if Reya is an idiot or a genius. She somehow stumbled onto the actual truth of the situation and doesn't even realize it.

“Perhaps that would be funny,” Arwin said with a small grin. “I’m certain Lillia would find that idea fascinating. You should suggest it to her.”

“I will,” Reya said with an excited nod. “Probably tomorrow, though. It’s kind of late.”

Arwin pulled the metal from the forge and went back to work on it, pounding out the impurities. He once again worked until it cooled, then returned it to the flames. He glanced out the cracks in the wall at the dark purple night sky. Reya was right – it had gotten pretty late.

“I’ll be wrapped up here soon,” Arwin promised. “I just want to get this finished up before tomorrow.”

“What are you making?”

“I haven’t quite figured it out yet,” Arwin replied. “I’ll let you know once I get there.”

That wasn’t entirely true. He did have an idea of what he wanted to make, but he didn’t want to say it out loud yet. Saying it felt like a curse. Logically, he knew it wouldn’t change anything, but that didn’t change a thing.

Reya just shrugged and watched Arwin silently as he pulled the metal from the fire once more. He set it down on the anvil once more, but this time, he wasn’t just trying to remove the impurities. He was shaping it.

Faint shimmers of magic guided Arwin’s hands as he hammered the iron into form. He’d chosen this piece for a specific reason, and it wasn’t because it was the highest quality piece of metal he had.

In fact, it was one of the worst ones. But, despite that, it had a desire. He could feel the faint draw the metal had – the longing to become something. But, unlike much of the other pieces in the pile, this one didn't want to be a sword or a dagger.

It didn't want to be any sort of weapon. No, this piece wanted to be a pan. That was it. A simple goal, and while Arwin would swear up and down that it wasn't the one he'd set out to make, it did happen to coincide with the request that Lillia had given him.

Strike by strike, the piece of metal slowly flattened out and started to take a flat, roundish shape. It wasn't perfectly smooth, nor was it even close to it. But, as the bed of the pan started to take form in Arwin's hands, he still found himself satisfied with it.

He returned it to the forge once more to finish shaping it, then set it down and grabbed another piece of metal. He heated and shaped it into a handle, then used two nails to connect the handle with the bed, putting it back into the flame and twisting the tips of the nails down into rounded nibs with [Scourge].

His work completed, Arwin took the pan from the fire and set it on the anvil to cool. It wasn't magic – the Mesh didn't recognize his work as anything particularly special, but he didn't care. It was a good pan. At least, it felt like it would be. He was far from a pan expert.

“Can you give this to Lillia when you get food from her tomorrow?” Arwin asked. “She asked for some utensils. I'll look into making some utensils for her later.”

“Okay!” Reya said. “Why don't you give it to her yourself?”

“I'll be busy tomorrow. I'm going to be going hunting again.”

“You are?” Reya blinked. “Am I not coming?”

“Not until I get a better idea of what we’re fighting in that forest. You can come next time,” Arwin said. “I imagine that you’ll be given a Class fairly soon, but we can’t have you getting killed before that.”

“Okay,” Reya said, a note of reluctance in her voice. “By the way... what is it that you actually want?”

Arwin tilted his head to the side, holding his hand out to draw the fire out from the forge. “What do you mean?”

“Well... Lillia wants to have a tavern. What do you want?”

Arwin’s brow furrowed. He almost said that his only goal now was to live a peaceful life, but that wasn’t so true. The Adventurer’s Guild had to be dealt with, and the more he forged, the more he realized that he wanted to do more. Just living wasn’t anywhere near enough.

I was mostly improvising when I spoke with Briggs, but maybe I spoke more of the truth than I realized.

“You know what? I think I’d like to start a guild.”

Chapter 21

Arwin woke to silence the next morning. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as sunlight filtered in through the cracks in the ceiling and walls. His back was stiff from the uncomfortable floor, but he’d yet to get around to buying a proper bed.

Reya slept on the other side of the smithy, curled into a ball beside one of the walls. She'd taken the Forest Lizard armor off and had wrapped herself around it, clutching it like a blanket.

A small smile flitted across Arwin's lips, and a distant memory prickled at his mind. His mother had gotten him a themed blanket of a movie he'd really liked for Christmas – Arwin couldn't remember the movie, nor could he remember what was actually on the blanket, but he remembered holding onto it like the most important object in the world.

Arwin ran his hands through his hair, straightening it out a little to avoid looking like he'd just woken up, even if that was exactly what he'd done. He grabbed his two swords and strapped their sheaths onto his sides before heading out of the smithy.

He had a lot of ground to cover today, and the sooner he headed out, the sooner he'd hopefully be able to land eyes on something interesting and bring it back to turn into more equipment.

The street was as quiet as it always was, and Arwin set off in the direction of the gate, musing to himself as he walked.

I'd like to make some greaves and gauntlets next. A helmet and boots are also on the list if I want to really outfit myself to the point where I can hold my own without having to rely on [Scourge].

He could always hunt more of the lizards, but he needed to find a better way to fuse their scales together. Making a chest piece was one thing, but he didn't want to be running around jingling like a jester.

I want plate armor. Heavy, scary ass plate armor. I'm sure I'll be able to get some better techniques to work with some of the more unique materials like lizard scales soon, though, so getting more scales is still a good idea. I can start with that and see where things take me. I doubt I'm far from reaching the next Tier at this point. Probably going to reach it with the next magical item I craft.

Arwin's thoughts occupied him all the way out of town and down the road. He only paid enough attention to his surroundings to make sure he was heading in the same direction that Reya had took him the last time they'd gone to hunt.

Some time later, Arwin found himself rudely pulled from his reverie by a loud crash. He blinked, his mind snapping back into his body as he searched for the source. He'd already arrived at the edge of the valley and wasn't too far from the forest below.

The sound had definitely come from within the forest. Arwin's eyes narrowed as he squinted, trying to make out what had caused it. It wasn't like sounds happened for no reason. Either two monsters were fighting, or –

A man in full plate armor sprinted out of the forest, clutching onto his helmet with one hand as his legs pumped as fast as he could move them. He had a woman slung over his shoulder with the other hand. Judging by her flowing white robes and the staff she held in her arms, she was some form of mage. With every step the man took, the large satchel on his back bounced frantically. And, even from the distance Arwin was at, he could see the panic on their faces.

No more than a second later, a massive lizard burst free of the treeline. The monster was several feet larger than the previous one that Arwin had fought. Its limbs scrabbled for purchase

on the ground as it pursued the fleeing people, in what would have likely been fairly amusing if they hadn't been one bad step away from a grisly death.

There were several cuts along the lizard's body, and some of its scales had been scorched black. Clearly, the two adventurers had bitten off a fight that was more than they could chew, but at least they hadn't completely failed to hurt it entirely.

Adventurers or not, I'm not going to sit around while someone gets ripped to death in front of me.

Arwin reached out to the Mesh even as he burst into motion, checking how big of a threat the monster posed.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 8]

I think I should be able to handle that with the aid of the items I've made. It would be better if I had full plate mail, but it's already wounded, which gives me an advantage I can use to tip the scales.

Arwin's feet pumped as they hit the ground. The lizard was gaining on the adventurers, but both groups were running straight at Arwin. He activated [Scourge], funneling power into his legs and bounding forward with a roar.

Shifting the focus of the magic into his arm, Arwin reared back and drove his fist into the monster's nose. A wave of magic rolled through him and the lizard's head snapped back, its momentum redirected. It tumbled across the ground and slammed into a rock with a loud crack.

Tremors raced down Arwin's hand and he shook it off with a muted curse, feeling pain pulse in his knuckles. [Indomitable Bulwark] made it so that his body could handle some of the nastier attacks he could make, but it didn't remove their impact entirely.

I'm pretty sure I just fractured a knuckle.

Even so, the strike had been to devastating effect. The lizard's scales had cracked around the impact zone and when it rose again, it staggered woozily. Blood dripped from its eardrums and its eyes were unfocused as it turned toward Arwin, baring its teeth in a warning hiss.

Arwin flexed his other hand and drew his sword, pointing it at the lizard and baring his teeth in challenge. He'd already eaten a good ways into his magical reserves, but he had enough for one or two more max power strikes.

That would be enough time for the adventurers to run for freedom, and with any luck, it would finish the lizard off as well and he'd be able to strip the entire thing of everything it had without having to share.

But, to Arwin's surprise, two pairs of footsteps ran up beside him. The man and woman skidded to a stop beside him.

"You've got good timing!" The man yelled, slamming his face visor down and drawing his own sword. "We've got your back!"

A wave of energy passed over Arwin, its warmth wrapping around his arm. He felt the cracked bones in his hand shift and re-connect. An immediate rush of relief washed over him, and the woman on his other side gave him a firm nod.

“I don’t have much energy left, but I can heal one more wound,” the woman said, her voice terse from exhaustion.

I honestly would have preferred if you both ran, but I suppose I can’t complain about them being respectable.

The lizard let out a screech and shook itself off. Its tongue flicked out and its claws dug into the dirt, launching it forward as it charged at them once again. Arwin and the armored man both stepped forward.

A glow enveloped the other man’s sword and he let out a battle cry, bringing it down for the charging lizard. The monster’s tail flicked out and he was forced to duck out of the way, his blow scraping across its scales but failing to land a meaningful strike.

Arwin took the opportunity to strike at the lizard with his own sword, thrusting it for one of the monster’s eyes. It hissed and pulled back, narrowly avoiding the strike. It retaliated with a swipe of its claw.

He twisted to the side, avoiding the majority of the attack but failing to dodge it completely. With a loud clang, the lizard’s claws cut through his shirt and hit the scale mail armor beneath it.

A rush of heat ran through Arwin’s body as the armor activated, yanking away a portion of the power he’d been saving up for another [Scourge] empowered attack. Before he could even curse, a whip of molten fire snapped out and struck the lizard straight across the face.

It let out a pained scream and staggered back, flailing blindly. The other adventurer lunged, taking advantage of the monster's distraction to drive his sword for a large wound just below its shoulder.

His sword lit with a golden glow even as it drove deep into the lizard's flesh. It screamed in pain, and the man was forced to abandon his sword within it and jump back to keep himself from getting crushed.

He wasn't quite fast enough to completely dodge out of the way and the monster's tail snapped out, catching him in the leg and shattering armor and bone alike. The man cried out in pain and crumpled to the ground, falling onto his back and scrabbling to move himself away from the monster.

The Lizard thrashed as it tried to free the blade free from itself. Arwin ducked under a claw and jumped over its tail, driving his open palm toward the other man's sword. He drew on most of his remaining reserves to activate [Scourge] and drove his palm into the hilt of the blade.

It sunk all the way into the lizard, wreaking havoc on its internal organs and punching straight through its heart. The monster let out one final pained hiss and crashed to the ground before Arwin, lifeless.

Arwin turned as the woman ran up to the fallen man's side, a faint white glow emanating from her hands. She tugged on the armor on his legs, but the injury had warped it so badly that it was impossible to remove normally. Arwin strode up to join them and knelt beside the woman.

"Move," Arwin said gruffly. "If you heal him now, the armor will just rip his leg up."

He grabbed the top of the man's greaves and, finally using the last dregs of power he had left, activated what he could of [Scourge]. Gritting his teeth with effort, Arwin pried the greaves open like a lobster shell.

It creaked in protest but pulled back, revealing the man's mangled leg. Arwin pulled until it finally snapped and fell away. The woman immediately sent her magic into the wounded adventurer and his leg straightened, the injuries slowly fading away.

He'd been hurt considerably worse than Arwin had, so the healing took nearly thirty seconds. None of them spoke until the man finally let out a breath and flexed his toes. "Thanks, Anna. Good as new."

"Forget me, you idiot," Anna said, looking to Arwin with an appreciative smile. "What's your name? You saved our asses."

"Arwin."

"I'm Anna, and this is Rodrick," Anna said, helping the man sit up. "I don't know if I'd recommend going into the forest right now. The monsters in there are all way more aggressive than they normally are. We had a small group of them collapse on us and we barely made it out."

"There are more coming?" Arwin asked in alarm.

"No, this was the last of them," Rodrick said with a laugh. "You really did save our asses, though. I was basically all out of energy, and Anna wasn't far behind. Anyone ever tell you that you've got great timing?"

"I try," Arwin said, letting out a huff. He pushed himself back to his feet.

"Are you an adventurer?" Anna asked. "I haven't seen you around Milten."

Arwin hesitated for a second, then shook his head. “No. Nothing like that. I’m just a…”

Just a what? I can't say I'm a smith. Shit.

“...a wanderer,” Arwin finished lamely.

Rodrick pulled his helmet off his head, letting a mop of brown hair fall around a handsome face. “Just a wanderer, huh? Well, for not being an adventurer, you’re one strong bugger. Any way we can pay you back?”

“I’ll take the lizard’s body,” Arwin said, jerking a thumb toward it. “They’re useful.”

Rodrick tugged at his ear, then shrugged. “If that’s all you want, sure. Normally, people don’t help out for that little. You aren’t going to ask for gold or something?”

I could have done that? Well, too late to do it now. The body is more useful anyway.

“This is more than enough. No need for me to be greedy.”

“World could use a few more people like that.” Anna sent a pointed glance at Rodrick, whose cheeks went red.

“We would have been fine if we had a full party. We almost handled all those lizards on our own. Imagine how much better it would have gone if we had someone else to keep them off you,” Rodrick said, clearing his throat sheepishly. “Anyway, thanks for the help, Arwin. If we ever see you in a tavern, I’ll get you a drink.”

I can think of at least one tavern you might see me in, but I'm not sure it's ready for new customers quite yet.

“Thanks,” Arwin said, starting to turn toward the lizard. “I’ll be going, then.”

“Actually, do you have a moment?”

Arwin and Rodrick both turned to Anna in surprise.

“What is it?” Arwin asked.

“Well, you handled yourself pretty well and traveling alone is dangerous,” Anna said.

“Do you think you might like to temporarily join our party?”

Chapter 22

Arwin nearly choked on his own saliva. “I’m sorry?”

“You don’t just ask people to join your party, Anna,” Rodrick scolded. He adjusted the remains of his greaves, looking down at the shredded remains of his pants and coughing into his fist. “We could use another member, though. No commitments or anything, but I’d really like to get a bit deeper into the forest.”

Arwin nearly refused on the spot, but he hesitated before the words could leave his mouth. In his current form, he really couldn’t fight more than one monster every hour or two before running out of energy.

Having some help from people that knew what they were doing would be pretty useful. Anna and Rodrick seemed fairly genuine as well. Of course, they were still adventurers – but having two extra bodies to stand by him so he could push deeper into the forest was hard to deny.

Reya isn’t going to be ready for anything like this for a bit. She doesn’t know how to fight and doesn’t have a class yet. These two are trained. I think it might actually be beneficial to take them up on their offer.

“Just for today,” Arwin said after a few more seconds of deliberation. “But it isn’t going to be a regular thing, and you’ll have to help me carry some of the loot. You can keep anything we get that isn’t from the monsters, but I want the bodies.”

Anna and Rodrick exchanged a glance, then both nodded.

“That works!” Anna said. “We need around an hour to recover.”

“That should be enough for me as well, and I need to take this thing apart anyway.”

Arwin jerked his chin toward the body of the Forest Lizard. If they were going deeper into the forest, he doubted he’d be able to strip every single piece of every single monster he fought, so the claws and teeth would have to be abandoned. The scales were considerably more useful to him at the moment, and they were also much easier to carry.

By the time Arwin finished with his work, his hands were covered with blood and he had a small pile of scales at his feet. He’d discarded all the damaged ones – it wasn’t like they were going to have any shortage of material, so he had no reason to bring along anything that wasn’t high quality.

Arwin wiped his hands off on the grass and rose to his feet. Rodrick and Anna sat a few paces way from him, where they’d been watching him descale the monster. Both had offered to help, but neither had a sword or a dagger small enough to safely remove anything without damaging it – and Arwin wasn’t about to lend his potentially explosive weapon out.

“All finished?” Rodrick asked, mirroring Arwin and standing up. He brushed the dirt off his backside, then helped Anna up. “I’m just about ready to go, so you’ve got some good timing.”

“I just need to find a way to carry this,” Arwin said, chewing his lower lip and scratching his back sheepishly. “I didn’t bring a bag.”

“I’ve got you.” Rodrick pulled the bag off his back and unbuckled the belts holding the top down, revealing it to be largely empty aside from a change of clothes and an empty potion vial or two.

He and Arwin scooped the scales into the bag, filling it a good half of the way up. Compared to the number of broken and damaged scales littering the ground, it felt like a rather small amount.

I definitely would have gotten more if the thing wasn't so beat to hell. But, if I kill a few more of them, it'll hardly matter. I'm more interested to see what this forest has to offer.

“Thanks,” Arwin said with a nod as the two of them straightened back up and Rodrick slung the bag back over his shoulder.

“No problem. It’s easy enough, but you might want to get a bag at some point in the future if you’re going adventuring alone.”

“I’ll add it to the list.”

“How deep into the forest are you comfortable going?” Anna asked. “We’re just trying to get some kills to get stronger, but I’ve heard there are some pretty choice monsters deeper in there. There’s also the Unique roaming around somewhere.”

Arwin tilted his head to the side, his interest piqued. “A Unique monster? Do we know anything about it?”

“You don’t?” Anna sent Arwin a shocked look. “Isn’t that the main reason to come here?”

“I just like scales.”

Anna’s eyes flicked down to his exposed scale mail and she covered her mouth, letting out a small laugh. “Okay, fair enough. There’s a Wurm somewhere in the forest. Nothing too crazy, rumored to be at low Journeyman Tier. But still, it’s a Wurm. Could you imagine if it had a hoard?”

Could you imagine what I could do with that thing’s body?

Wait, that sounds off. I didn’t mean—

“No need to be scared,” Rodrick said, completely misreading the expression on Arwin’s face. “Wyrms stick to their dens. They’re related to dragons, but in the same way that a normal lizard is related to the bugger we just killed. It might have a hoard and some interesting shinies, but nothing that it’ll abandon to kill us.”

Unless you’ve got fresh meat of anything they consider prey on you. That’s a great way to lure them out of their nests, though. Wyrms are dangerous because they fight in enclosed spaces. Get them outside and they’re easy pickings.

“Arwin?” Anna asked, a note of concern in her voice. “If you’re not comfortable with the Wurm, we could always stick to the edges of the forest. There are more than enough monsters to fight in the area.”

“No, no. I just got distracted,” Arwin said with a wave of his hand. Either Rodrick and Anna didn’t know how to fight Wyrms or they just didn’t mention it because they had no plans of fighting the monster. Either way, he wasn’t anywhere near prepared to handle a Journeyman Tier. Not yet, at least.

“I’m good with going deeper, but let’s take things slow,” Arwin suggested. “You said the monsters were being unusually aggressive, right? It’s pretty warm out, so it could be mating season.”

Anna stared at him. “What?”

“What?” Arwin mirrored. “Is something wrong?”

“What does mating season have to do with how the monsters are acting?” Rodrick asked. “And why do you know that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Arwin countered. “If you want to master fighting an enemy, you need to understand them. It’s not enough to just know how to swing a stick around. Knowing the circumstances that changes monsters’ actions is just as important as being able to fight individual monsters.”

“You... study that?” Anna asked slowly. “Is that what you are? Some form of monster researcher?”

Oh, shit. Is this really not common knowledge? I thought everyone knew about it, but I did spend years studying monster behavior whilst fighting the Demon Queen. It was hard not to pick up on a few things. I figured the Guild would have taught something as basic as this, though...

“It’s just a hobby,” Arwin said with a dismissive wave. “Either way, if it’s mating season, we just have to avoid the groups of monsters and go after the loners that couldn’t get the interest of another monster. We should be able to avoid getting swarmed that way.”

“That’s... kind of sad,” Rodrick said. A grin spread across his face and he gave Arwin a sharp nod. “But, if it works, that would be huge. I was starting to wonder if we needed to get a bigger party or if the monsters were forming into a horde.”

“Well, we don’t know for sure. I’m just taking a guess at it,” Arwin said with a one-shouldered shrug. “Only way to find out is to head in and see what we find.”

“True enough.” Rodrick hoisted his sword and gestured to the forest. “Shall we?”

Arwin nodded, and the three of them set off into the woods.

Sticks crunched beneath their feet as they walked, Arwin and Rodrick taking up Anna’s sides to make sure the more vulnerable mage couldn’t get ambushed. As they continued, Arwin found that he was spending considerably more attention on his new companions than he was on his surroundings.

This was far from the first forest he’d been in, and it wasn’t anything to write home about. It had trees, dirt, and a general scent of distant rain. He’d probably been in about twenty others just like this one, and the only thing missing from those scenes was the thick stench of blood.

Anna and Rodrick, on the other hand, were new. Arwin had traveled with a lot of adventurers. He’d been pretty confident that he’d met just about every kind of person that entered the trade.

All the men and women that joined to pursue riches, and the ones that just reveled in slaughter. The rare ones that did it to protect others, and the ones that liked being the center of attention.

These two didn't seem to fall into any of the categories. As they walked, instead of keeping to a tight formation, they spoke in hushed words, tiny smiles and laughs dancing between them.

It was like they were out on a picnic, not in enemy territory. Arwin couldn't tell if it was driving him up a wall or intriguing him. He'd bantered with his former colleagues, but only before and after the jobs were done, or if they were doing something so easy that it didn't require any attention.

Rodrick and Anna weren't nearly that strong. They should have been as careful as possible, checking every shadow to make sure nothing lurked in it. But, instead, they were having fun.

They're being fairly quiet, so it's not like they're stupid. They're just... carefree. Odd. It's certainly more relaxed than I'm used to, but it does make me wonder what'll happen when we get closer to a monster.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. Rodrick held a hand up and Anna abruptly snapped her mouth shut, freezing in place. Arwin mirrored the motion, having seen similar gestures more times than he could count.

Rodrick nodded into the forest, then leaned in closer to them to whisper.

"I'm picking up some movement in that direction. Sounds like a few different things." Rodrick tapped the side of his helm and sent a look at Arwin. "I'm a Warrior, by the way. Have a few sense enhancements. I'm a bit new to this whole thing, but I'm getting the hang of it."

Yeah, the mad sprint out of the forest was definitely the sign of someone who has the hang of things.

“How many of them are there? Are they headed toward us?” Anna asked in a hushed tone.

“Can’t tell. Probably four. And they don’t seem to be heading in any direction in particular. They’re just moving around next to each other.”

“Maybe Arwin was right,” Anna said. “Let’s just avoid them. Can you pick anything else up?”

Rodrick started to shake his head, but he stopped a second into the motion. A small grin passed across his lips and he turned to the side, squinting through the trees. “It’s kind of distant, but there’s something shuffling around over there. Not too big, I don’t think. It’s not cracking a lot of leaves.”

“Sounds like it could be a good target,” Arwin said.

Fast swap from being relaxed to working. They aren’t new to this.

“Lead the way, then,” Anna said.

“With pleasure,” Rodrick said. “Say, how do you think the lizards taste?”

A bit like really dry chicken.

“Probably horrible,” Anna said.

“Probably,” Rodrick agreed. He set off into the forest and the others moved alongside him, their conversation dropping off as they did their best to avoid making any more noise while closing in on their prey.

Chapter 23

It wasn't a lizard they found but a large, silver-furred wolf curled up against a tree. Rodrick was the first to spot it, but by the time he'd pointed the resting monster out, Arwin had already located it himself.

There were probably a number of things he could do with a wolf pelt or its claws, but none of them were anything he knew much about yet. Still, it would have been rude to refuse to fight something purely because he didn't need to.

Besides, maybe I could make a rug out of it or something. Or a bed. Now that I think about it, I could definitely use it.

Rodrick gestured to the wolf, then raised his sword and nodded to Arwin, indicating that he'd attack first and that Arwin could follow up behind him. Arwin inclined his head in agreement, and Rodrick crept forward.

He moved with surprising grace, avoiding most of the dry foliage on the ground as he advanced. Whether by accident or on purpose, they were downwind of the monster, so it wasn't going to pick up on their smell.

Rodrick's sword shimmered with light as he lifted it into the air and brought it down with a sharp chop. The monster's eyes snapped open at the motion, but it was too late. It barely even

got a second to react before the blade struck home, carving through its neck and killing it in a single blow.

That was well executed.

“Clean,” Arwin said with an approving nod. “Have you been an adventurer for a long time?”

“Nah,” Rodrick replied with a shake of his head. “My dad was a woodsman. Taught me a bunch of stuff before he retired. I only became an adventurer after I met Anna. It’s just that a lot of the skills overlap.”

That would explain his more carefree attitude. If he’s spent his whole life in the forests, then it would only be natural for him to be more comfortable within them.

“How does a woodsman not know about monster mating seasons?” Arwin asked.

Rodrick’s cheeks reddened and he cleared his throat as he wiped his sword off on the grass. “I wasn’t a woodsman. My dad was. I was, ah, how do you put it? More—”

“More interested in being a flirt,” Anna finished with a smirk. “He only went into the woods to hunt things to show off to me. Can’t say it didn’t work, though.”

“And, more importantly, it looks like Arwin was right,” Rodrick said. He glanced around, then lowered his sword. “No monsters. They’re all off screwing each other.”

“Mating season it is,” Arwin said. “There’s a phenomenon where all monsters start mating at the same time in an area, even though they’re entirely unrelated species that have no compatibility. One group starts, and then the others all follow.”

“Sounds like they’re hor—”

Anna shot Rodrick a sharp look and he cut himself off with a cough.

“Well, shall we continue?” Rodrick asked.

“Sure,” Arwin said. “But first, let me try to get the fur from this wolf. It could make a nice rug. By the way, how was it that you and Anna got surprised if you can hear this well?”

“That would be because I was being lazy,” Rodrick admitted as he rubbed the back of his head and his shoulders slumped. “Having my hearing like this takes a toll on me. Gives me a headache like no tomorrow with all the noise I have to filter through, and we’ve gotten pretty used to this area since we moved to Milten a few months ago. Didn’t think I’d need to be using all my strength out here.”

“Complacency is usually the way people get killed,” Arwin said as he dug his sword into the wolf and started to separate the flesh from the pelt as best he could.

I wish I had a dagger, but I'm not taking back the one that I gave Reya. It's not all that useful to me, and using it to gut animals would be a huge waste. I'll take one of the ones I got off the Brothers Six when I get back.

“It sounds like you’re speaking from experience,” Anna said softly.

“I am.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope we haven’t offended you.”

Arwin shook his head. “The dead aren’t going to sleep any better if I tiptoe around them. It’s in the past. Just be careful if you don’t want to join them.”

After Arwin liberated a rather ragged pelt from the wolf, he and his newfound party trawled the forest for three more hours. Using Rodrick's advanced senses, they avoided several other large groups of monsters and picked off the lone ones they came across. Between avoiding the groups and the time it took Arwin to remove the pieces from the monsters, they only ended up killing three more – one wolf and two lizards.

Arwin draped the wolves' pelts over his shoulders and stuffed Rodrick's bag completely full of scales until it bulged at the seams. Even though they'd only taken out a few more monsters, none of the fights had been anywhere near as dangerous as the first.

When they made their way back out of the forest, Arwin couldn't deny that he was pleased. It was a far better haul than he could have gotten on his own, and now he had enough materials to really practice with the scales and hopefully find some new ways to put them together.

The trio made their way back to Milten, only coming to a stop when they passed through the gates and entered the city.

"Whereabouts do you live?" Rodrick asked. "I don't mind dropping your stuff off for you."

Arwin paused. He hadn't thought through what he'd do with all the loot *after* they got back. Nobody other than Reya and Lillia knew where he lived, and he rather liked it that way. Of course, he'd have to reveal it at some point when he started selling his normal weaponry, but the only thing he had to show was a broken-down smithy that definitely didn't look livable.

"Not everyone wants to share where they live," Anna scolded. "Just give him your bag. He can give it back next time."

There was an unspoken invitation in her words, and it was one that Arwin was surprised to find he wasn't opposed to.

"What do you think?" Rodrick asked.

"I wouldn't mind it," Arwin allowed. "I'm not sure when I'll next be hunting, though."

"That's fine. Just ask for Rodrick or Anna at the Glowing Swordfish," Rodrick said. "It's an inn we've been hanging out in. Fair warning, though. Place is run by a greedy asshole that'll try to charge you for breathing. Just ask one of the patrons for us, not the bartender. He completely runs our pockets. I'd kill for a tavern that actually lets people stay without trying to rinse them clean."

"Stop complaining," Anna said. "We're lucky there was an inn that accepted adventurers that weren't part of the Guild."

Arwin blinked. "Wait, you aren't in the Guild?"

"No," Rodrick said. He pulled the pack off his shoulder and held it out to Arwin. "Didn't make the cut when I tested for them a year ago. I reckon I could make it now, but haven't bothered. Anna was part of them, but she left when I couldn't get in."

"You aren't missing out," Arwin said. He took the pack from Rodrick with a nod. "Thanks for this. Did you want to take anything out before you gave it to me? I'll give it all back, of course. It just might be a day or two."

"We'll be fine," Anna said with a smile. "Looking forward to working with you again."

“Likewise,” Rodrick said. He raised a hand in farewell and set off with Anna at his side. Arwin turned and left in the other direction, making for the dark alleyway at the back of the city that he called home.

I can't wait to see what I can make with all this extra material.

“You look more energetic than normal today,” Lillia said as she stepped out of her kitchen with a plate of what she was *fairly* sure were pancakes. She'd learned the recipe by spying through the window of another tavern the previous night and had memorized the majority of the ingredients that went into them.

Getting her hands on the ingredients had been considerably harder, but she'd managed to scrounge up enough coin from what Reya had been paying her to splurge. She set the pancakes on the table and Reya's eyes widened.

“New dish?”

“Yeah. What do you think?” Lillia asked, taking a step back.

“Well, it's kind of hard to see in the darkness,” Reya hedged. “I do see a stack of stuff, though. That's probably a good thing.”

Damn it. I really need to do something about the environment if I ever want to get more customers.

“It's fine!” Reya said hurriedly. “I'm sure it tastes great! I can't wait to eat!”

Lillia stepped to the side and Reya shifted. A small frown flitted across Lillia's face.

“What are you doing?”

“Doing? What do you mean?”

“You’re hiding something.”

“What? How’d you know?” Reya demanded, glaring in Lillia’s direction. She missed by a few inches, but she was just a human, so Lillia didn’t blame her.

Damn darkness.

“I know a lot of things. What do you have? Ingredients?”

“Something better,” Reya said. She lifted her hands, setting a package on the table. It had been wrapped in discarded brown paper and had an odd, oblong shape. “It’s for you.”

Lillia pulled the papers apart, her nose picking up the faint scent of blood. She was pretty sure Reya had found the paper discarded at the butchery, but the package didn’t smell nearly enough of meat to be –

Her eyes widened. Before her eyes, which were adapted perfectly to see in the dark, was a beautifully made pan. She ran her hands over its surface, feeling the individual hammer strokes that had molded the metal.

“Where’d you find this?” Lillia asked in awe. “It’s incredible. Did you steal it?”

“Nope! Arwin made it for you! I did steal the paper, though. You should probably wash the pan before you use it. The paper was lying crumpled out back of a butchery when I found it, and I think a few people might have stepped on it. Still, some wrapping is better than none.”

“Arwin made this?” Lillia asked, tearing her gaze away from the pan and looking to Reya.

“Yeah. Last night. He said he’d try to get some utensils as well at some point.”

I didn't think he'd actually make me anything. Is he expecting pay? I barely have enough money to keep cooking right now. Or is this a trick? It's not magical is it?

Lillia squinted at the pan, but it appeared to just be a normal pan. There was always the chance it was Unique and could hide its properties, but that felt like a little too much to do. Besides, they *had* called a truce.

“I – oh. That was... kind of him,” Lillia said, the words feeling strange in her mouth. “Was there something he wanted in return?”

“It’s a gift, as far as I know,” Reya said. “He just said to give it to you.”

Why didn't he bring it himself then?

“Oh!” Reya exclaimed, cutting off Lillia’s thoughts. “We also talked about your tavern.”

“You did?”

“Yeah! Arwin thinks you should make it scarier.”

Lillia stared at Reya. “He thinks I should make my already inhospitable tavern... worse? Is he trying to make sure I never get a customer?”

Reya shook her head hurriedly, holding up a hand as her brow creased in thought. “Wait, I got too excited and ended up misspeaking. Not just scarier. He thinks you should lean into the stuff about you more, and I think he’s right. It’s really hard to change yourself into something you think will attract people, so you should focus on the things that you already do and make those better instead.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Lillia said. “You’re saying I should make it even *darker* in here?”

“Not darker. Scarier. Make it more like the lair of a monster, and then sell it as a monster inn or something. The rest of the alley already fits that motif anyway. I was thinking you could dress up as the Demon Queen! It would be hilarious. People would love the atmosphere because of how ridiculous it was.”

Lillia choked, coughing as her saliva went down the wrong pipe. She pounded a fist against her chest and cleared her throat, staring at Reya through squinted eyes. The girl looked completely sincere.

What in the Nine Underlands, Arwin? I thought we had a bloody unspoken agreement!

“That was Arwin’s suggestion?” Lillia asked in disbelief.

“No, I came up with that myself. He just said you should dress yourself and the other waiters – when you get them – like monsters. Don’t you think that would be pretty unique?”

Lillia tilted her head to the side. It was tempting to laugh in Reya’s face, but she was so genuine that she had to take a moment to actually consider the idea. And, to her surprise, it wasn’t as horrible as she thought.

Things were often easiest to hide when in plain sight. Going so far as to pretend to be the thing that she quite literally was – that was so ludicrous that it was unlikely anyone would ever see through it.

“Hmm,” Lillia said, mulling over the sound as she rolled it around in her mouth. “I can’t believe I’m admitting this, but that actually sounds like it might have some potential.”

“We could start bringing some bodies to hang from the walls,” Reya offered.

Lillia grimaced, but it slipped off her face as excitement started to take root. “Let’s hold off on that and stick to small things for a bit longer, shall we? I’m going to need to get some money if I want to do anything, but I think you might have given me some ideas as to how.”

Chapter 24

Arwin’s hammer broke.

If anything, it was a surprise that it had lasted this long. He’d been working on trying to hammer the scales whilst they were still in the hearth, which probably hadn’t been his smartest idea, but he wanted a way to connect them that was better than scale mail.

Even though Arwin had taken care to avoid letting the wood get too close to the fire, there was only so much he could do. It wasn’t like the hammer had been in great shape to start with, and the extra stress on it finally proved to do it in.

Arwin didn’t even bother trying to pull the handle from the fire. He watched it burn beside the red-hot scales, his nose screwed up in annoyance. It had been two days since he’d gotten back from the hunting trip, and he’d spent both of them completely focused on working with the scales.

If he’d focused on making what he already knew how to make, it wouldn’t have been a problem to make a few more magical items. But, instead, Arwin put everything he had into figuring out how to make himself greaves.

He’d made several pairs of scale mail greaves without too much difficulty, but that had taken hours and the majority of them had all been either completely non-magical or detrimental.

Their actual shape had been decent, which was at least something to be proud of. His practice had started to spill over, but they still weren't perfect.

He made a few more attempts, managing to make a grand total of two normal, non-detrimental sets of scale mail greaves before he decided to push things a bit farther.

He attempted to hammer the scales together into a single plate rather than individual links, and Arwin had been pretty sure that he'd been making progress – but all of that had ended with the breaking of his hammer.

“Well, that's annoying,” Arwin said. He tossed the head of the hammer in his hand, chewing his lower lip as he tried to figure out what to do next. There wasn't a good answer beyond the most obvious one – he had to go buy a tool to work with.

At some point, I need to make myself a hammer, but I need a hammer to make a hammer. Now isn't that a paradox? Armor first, though – or greaves, at the very least. I feel like a moron walking around with just my chest piece.

That meant he needed to go shopping, and shopping meant he needed money. He'd been unwilling to sell anything subpar the last time he'd gone to the market, but things had changed slightly since then.

Arwin had absolutely no plans of putting anything magical up for sale, but even though the two non-magical scale mail greaves weren't the greatest things he'd made, they were definitely still nothing to be ashamed of.

Reckon I could probably sell these for enough money to buy myself a hammer and maybe some more metal to work with. The problem will be actually selling them in the first place.

Nobody wanted to buy anything the last time we went to the market.

Either way, I might as well return the bag to Rodrick and Anna while I'm at it. I don't want to hold onto this thing forever when they're waiting for it back.

Arwin gathered the two pairs of greaves he'd made and slung them over his shoulder. He snagged the bag that Rodrick had given him and headed out of the smithy. Reya was still out doing whatever it was she did during the day, but Arwin wasn't all that concerned about someone breaking in. He had all his magical items on him and it wasn't like there were many people on the street in the first place.

He made his way through the city, keeping to the side of the road to avoid drawing too much attention. Arwin was more than aware that his clothes were still the ratty, filthy ones that the Brothers Six had worn, and he probably didn't look particularly friendly in them.

Just another thing I need to eventually invest in. Gah. I really need a good way to start making money, but I refuse to make magical weapons for random people. Selling these greaves will be a good start.

Once I build a name for myself, maybe I could interview people that want magic items. I could even sell it as me personalizing it for them, and then just refuse to make things for people I don't like.

I rather like the idea of that, actually.

A small grin slipped across Arwin's features and his pace increased as he continued through the city. He didn't actually know where the Glowing Swordfish was, but after wandering around pointlessly for a while he accosted a few passersby until one of them directed him in the direction of the inn.

The Glowing Swordfish was a three-story stone building that looked like it had been made in the previous century. Shingles hung crooked on its tall roofs, and many of the windows had been boarded over.

A wooden sign bearing the faded carving of a blob with a point at its end that was probably meant to be a swordfish hung askew above a wooden door whose knob had fallen off. Arwin approached it and hooked a finger into the hole to pull the door open.

The smell of dust and stale bread greeted him as he stepped into the common room, which was surprisingly busy despite the depressing exterior – and, for that matter, interior. There were half a dozen tables with mismatched chairs scattered around the room across from a bar that seated four people.

Around three quarters of the tables were populated with adventurers, and fairly decently equipped ones at that. Many of them had armor that made Arwin's Mesh tingle in recognition, but he couldn't see the information on most of their equipment, which meant they'd gotten strong enough to hide it from weaker outsiders.

That wasn't saying much given Arwin's return to the Apprentice Tier, but it felt off to see so many relatively strong looking adventurers sitting around in such a dump. He would have wondered if the food here had something special about it if he couldn't smell it in its complete and utter mediocrity.

A chubby man in a dirty smock that Arwin presumed to be the bartender stood at the other end of the bar, his nose buried in a book. Arwin took a moment to study the bar, checking to see if it was doing anything to draw customers that Lillia could do.

The thought caught in his head a moment after he thought it and a small frown flitted across his lips.

Why do I care what the Demon Queen is doing with her time? She's not hurting anybody, and that's all that matters. It was my job to kill her, not help her.

Arwin shook his head and glanced around the tavern in hopes that Rodrick or Anna would already be down eating somewhere. Unfortunately, he had no such luck. They'd specified that he wasn't to ask the bartender about them to avoid getting scammed, but the idea of just belting their names out at the top of his lungs didn't feel particularly inviting.

Oh well. I don't feel like dancing around this for too long.

Clearing his throat, Arwin drew in a deep breath and called out Rodrick's name. Several people glanced up at him, but not a single one so much as reacted. An annoyed frown played across the bartender's face, but he didn't speak a word.

Looks like they're used to it. How cheap do you have to be to refuse to let people know when others show up looking for them? Wouldn't you make way more money by having an inn that people want to stay at?

Arwin didn't have to sit around wondering for long. After about a minute, footsteps rang out against the stairs as Rodrick headed into the bottom floor of the inn. Arwin barely recognized him in his normal cloth clothes rather than his armor.

“Good to see you again,” Rodrick said when he reached the bottom of the stairs and made his way over to Arwin.

“Came to deliver your bag.” Arwin held it out to Rodrick. “I appreciate it.”

“Any time,” Rodrick replied. “Really, we’re the ones that got away with the biggest wins. You barely dealt the finishing blow on anything.”

Arwin shrugged. He wasn’t about to tell Rodrick that dealing the finishing blow was completely worthless for him. Whoever finished the monster off drew more of its life energy into themselves and advanced to the next Tier faster – but when Arwin didn’t get energy from killing things at all, it didn’t even matter if he participated in the fight at all.

Now that I think about it, aren’t crafting classes almost guaranteed to get more skills than combat ones are? You grow at a much faster rate when killing monsters than it feels like you do by crafting. I wonder if that’s intentional – like a way to balance things out.

“Don’t worry about finishing blows. I was interested in the materials far more than anything else,” Arwin said with a shake of his head.

Rodrick looked to the greaves on Arwin’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “It looks like you put them to pretty quick use. You brought them to a smith to see if they could make anything good?”

“Something like that,” Arwin said. “I didn’t love how they turned out, though.”

“Why?” Rodrick asked. “They look decent enough. Do you prefer heavy armor or something?”

“I do,” Arwin said. “But they’re also non-magical, which is less than ideal. I’d prefer my gear to be of higher quality.”

A bark of laughter slipped out of Rodrick’s lips and he slapped Arwin on the shoulder, nodding as if Arwin had just said a hilarious joke. “Wouldn’t we all? I tell you – I wouldn’t settle for anything less than Legendary gear, and it’s all got to be part of a synchronized set. Nothing else is worthy.”

A full set of legendary gear would be rather nice, actually. I’m not sure what the funny part is meant to be. Does Rodrick not have any magical gear at all?

“How much are you looking to sell that stuff for? I usually use heavy gear as well, but my greaves got mauled – though I suppose you were there for said mauling. I need a replacement and haven’t found anything in budget yet,” Rodrick said.

“I haven’t put too much thought into it yet,” Arwin admitted. “I was planning on taking them to a smith and seeing if they’d buy them at a cut cost to sell themselves.”

“Buy from one smith, sell to another? What are you trying to do, start a crafter turf war?” Rodrick snorted. “What about twenty-five gold? You’d probably be able to get better if you went to a real merchant, though.”

Twenty-five isn’t bad. I paid about ten for a bunch of materials from Taylor, the other blacksmith. He blatantly overcharged me, so I think I’d be making decent money from this. Enough to save myself some trouble, at the least.

“I wouldn’t argue that at all, twenty-five sounds good to me. You might want to make sure they fit, though,” Arwin said, holding the greaves out to Rodrick, who dug around in a pouch at his side to count out the gold.

“We’re not that different in size, so it should be fine,” Rodrick said, exchanging the gold for the pair of greaves with a nod. “And you cut me a pretty good deal, so I don’t mind if it’s a bit loose. Damn, though. Look at these things glitter in the light. They’re pretty.”

Rodrick held the greaves up, to the dirty windows, and Arwin was pleased to agree that they shimmered pleasantly. Even though they weren’t magical, he was pretty pleased with how they’d turned out.

“I hope they serve you well,” Arwin said.

“I’m sure they will. I’m pretty sure you cut me a great deal. What are you going to do with the other pair?”

“Probably still try to sell it. A little more gold would go a long way.”

“How much?” a woman asked. Arwin and Rodrick both turned toward its source – a middle-aged woman sitting at a table alone, clad in normal clothes but with a well-worn sword hanging at her side. There was a twinkle of interest in her blue eyes, hidden behind strands of black hair. “I haven’t seen anyone try to make anything out of Forest Lizard scales before. You found a pretty interesting blacksmith there, lad. If you’re still looking to sell, then I’d be willing to bargain.”

Chapter 25

“You want to buy these?” Arwin asked, trying not to sound surprised. Sure, he’d fully planned to find someone to sell his work to, but Rodrick almost felt like he didn’t count. He’d met the other man already and they’d worked together, so it was different.

The woman at the table – at least as far as Arwin was aware – was someone he’d never seen before. A small part of him was mildly surprised that someone he didn’t know would want to buy some of his work.

“That’s what you’re aiming for, isn’t it?” she asked, holding a hand out. “I’m Tix.”

“Arwin.” He shook her hand.

“Pleasure, Arwin. Mind letting me take a closer look at those fancy little things?”

Arwin shrugged and handed over the greaves. Tix ran her hands over the scales, checking the inside of the armor out. Her expression was unreadable, but Arwin could tell she was interested by how much time she spent staring at the way he’d woven the metal through the scales.

He derived no little amount of pride from that. It had been a huge pain to weave metal and scale together, and even though it wasn’t a style he had any interest in making a lot more gear in once he found a better way or material to work with, it had still been a lot of work.

“This is quite the piece,” Tix mused. “What was the name of the smith that made these? They’re not from around Milten.”

“He’s a little reclusive,” Arwin said. There was no need to throw caution to the wind quite yet. “How’d you know he’s not from the area, though?”

“Nobody in this backwoods little town bothers experimenting,” Tix replied with a smirk. “The person that made this was clearly trying to improve, not just churn out the same piece of shit over and over again.”

“Well, I’ll pass your compliment along if I ever see him again,” Arwin said.

“That’s not to say this is perfect. There are some pretty obvious imperfections,” Tix said, tapping some points on the greaves where the metal hadn’t been perfectly bent or twisted and where some of the scales had been slightly tarnished. “Still, this is a nice piece. You sold one to the other bloke for twenty-five gold, yeah?”

“I did,” Arwin confirmed.

“I’ll do the same, if you’re offering it.”

“That was a friend rate,” Rodrick pointed out. “Shouldn’t you offer him a bit better?”

Tix shrugged. “I’m buying it as a novelty, not to use. You never know where people will go in the future, and it could be worth a lot in the future – or perhaps it’ll be worthless. Twenty-five is a fair price for the time Arwin would save trying to sell it to some hawker that would take two hours before settling on thirty.”

“Fair enough,” Arwin said with a shrug. “Twenty-five works for me. I’m not planning to make a living off selling scale mail greaves, so that’s more than enough coin for my purposes.”

Tix pulled a small bag out of her pocket and counted coin into it, tossing it up to Arwin. He grabbed it, then tucked the bag into a pocket.

“Pleasure,” Tix said. “Did you say where the smith lived?”

“No,” Arwin said. “I did not.”

“Real reclusive, eh? Well, do you know if he’s got any plans of showing himself in the near future?” Tix asked, tucking the greaves under an arm and rocking back in her chair. “I’d love to have a chat with him.”

“I don’t know, but if he does decide to do something, I’ll let him know to try and get the word out,” Arwin said smoothly. Getting extra gold was great, but he wasn’t about to give away his living situation to someone he didn’t know.

“Any idea where word might get out?” Tix asked, tilting her head to the side. “Maybe an inn that he frequents? Here, perhaps?”

Something gripped Arwin. He wasn’t sure quite what it was, but he spoke before the thoughts fully processed in his mind. “I heard that someone was thinking about starting a monster themed tavern somewhere in the city. Maybe an inn too – I’m not sure. It was just rumor, but the smith said he’d likely be around that area. He liked how secluded it was. Keep an ear to the ground for that.”

“A themed tavern?” Tix inclined an eyebrow, then smiled. “That sounds rather fun, actually. Thanks for the information and the greaves, Arwin. Today was just a little bit more interesting than I was expecting.”

With that, Tix pushed her chair back, downed the rest of her tankard, and headed up the stairs at the far side of the dining room. Arwin and Rodrick watched her leave, then exchanged a glance.

“You know her?” Arwin asked.

“No. Never seen her before,” Rodrick replied. “She carries herself like a warrior, though. Seems like a pretty strong one at that.”

“I was thinking the same.”

“Speaking of warriors,” Rodrick hedged, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. “Were you planning on heading out to hunt monsters again anytime soon? Anna and I are running a bit low on gold and we need to start taking on jobs again.”

Arwin scratched the side of his chin. Right now, he was a little more concerned with upgrading his smithy and getting back to work than he was with killing more monsters, and he still had a good amount of scales to work with.

“I’m not sure I had anything planned yet, but I suppose it depends what you were doing. My... friend is working on setting out to earn herself a Class, and I was planning on helping her get that fairly soon. I have some preparation I need to do before I set out hunting again. When were you planning on leaving?”

“No rush, I’d say.” Rodrick cleared his throat, then amended himself. “Okay, a little rush. The end of the week?”

It took Arwin a few seconds to remember that it was Thirdday. The days had lost a lot of their meaning when he was locked up in the smithy working.

Six more days, then. I can handle most of what I need to do by then, and I’ll be needing to make a magical item to eat as well soon. I’ll probably have used up most of my supplies by then as well.

“That should work,” Arwin said. “I might even free up a little earlier, but if you end up finding a different person to head out with you, feel free to work with them. If not, I’ll swing by the inn again in a few days.”

“Perfect,” Rodrick said with a grin. “Thanks again, Arwin. I’ve never been happier to have gotten my ass saved from a horny lizard by a random homeless man, but I’m looking forward to working with you again.”

Arwin glanced down at his clothes. “Is it really that bad?”

“In more ways than one.” Rodrick tapped his nose pointedly, then smirked. “We can’t all be perfect, though. I’ve dealt with some nasty bastards in my time, and I know Anna has seen worse. Some adventurers wouldn’t know what a brick of soap was unless it had a Title associated with it.”

Arwin coughed into his fist as Rodrick chuckled and waved farewell, heading back up the stairs to his room. He left the inn, his pockets fifty gold heavier. It had been a long time since Arwin had done any proper shopping, so he wasn’t exactly certain how far fifty gold would actually take him, but based on what the smith had sold him for ten, he was pretty sure it would be enough.

His first task wasn’t getting more materials, though. As tempting as that was, he had a basic level of hygiene that he still had to keep, and Arwin didn’t want to think about how long it had been since he’d last properly cleaned himself.

He stopped by a tailor, buying three sets of clothing that he was pretty sure would fit him. He went with one of the cheapest options they had, opting to pay just two gold for the lot. None of it was worth writing home about, but it was better than what he was currently wearing.

Arwin then set a course for the nearest bathhouse and lightened his purse by a gold, getting nine silver back in return. That in its entirety took about two hours – Arwin barely wanted to leave the bath once he got in, but he eventually dragged himself out and changed into his new clothes before setting off to handle the real task for the day.

Priority number 1 is a hammer, one made entirely from metal rather than one with a wood handle. After that, I can split the gold between materials and things I can use to repair the smithy a bit. It really does need some patching up. A proper bed would be good too – I don't want to sleep on a wolf pelt. It'll be a great rug, though.

Arwin meandered his way across town and to the market square. He wasn't sure where to get most things in Milten, but he did know the location of a blacksmith. This time, though, he'd just be a normal customer.

Taylor's smithy had a few people milling about in it when Arwin arrived, which was just fine with him. He didn't need the extra attention right now. His eyes scanned the room and quickly landed on a plain metal hammer made from rough black metal at the back of the store.

Picking the hammer up, Arwin tested its weight in his hands. It felt good. Not too heavy, but definitely heavier than the previous one. It had a sturdiness to it that sat right in Arwin's grip.

Solid. This should suit my needs perfectly for the time being. Wonder why the previous smith didn't have one of these.

Arwin spent a little time looking around the rest of the store, taking in the weapons and armor hanging from the walls. The majority of Taylor's goods looked to go for between ten and one hundred gold, depending on their detail and size.

A few of them, such as an ornate breastplate, were a much heftier four or five hundred gold, but none of it caught Arwin's eye. All the items were mundane.

The more I think about it, the more I wonder how rare magical items actually are. When I was the Hero, everyone had them. But I suppose those were the best of the best – is it difficult to get magic weapons as a random adventurer? I'll have to be really careful with how much I share if that's the case. I don't want some crazed guild to try to kidnap me or someone to beat down the doors of my smithy begging for an item.

Arwin brought the hammer up to the front desk and laid it down before Taylor.

“Ten gold,” Taylor said, glancing at the hammer whilst in mid conversation with another customer. Arwin didn't say anything – he just quietly dug the gold out, set it on the counter, and departed the shop with his new hammer in tow.

Perfect. Now, some things to make that damn place a little more livable. First off, it needs a door. A door and two beds. The other stuff can come later. Who sells beds, though?

Arwin looked around the market for a few minutes, not particularly optimistic about his chances. A carpenter would definitely be somewhere in the general area, but there was no way Milten had enough demand for beds that there would be an entire store for –

There was an entire store for it.

Arwin squinted at the wooden building in a mixture of shock and disbelief. Faded paint across the arch above its door identified the building as *Sleepy John's*. And, through the dirt-covered windows, Arwin could just barely make out rows upon rows of beds within the store.

Barely able to believe it, Arwin stepped through the door and was instantly greeted by the strong smell of dust and cobwebs. A small bell rung, announcing his arrival, and a tired looking man at the back of the store raised his head from where it rested at a desk.

“Oh. Welcome in,” the man said through a yawn. “Can I do something for you?”

“I – uh, how much is a bed?” Arwin asked, looking around the surprisingly large store. It was hard to believe that it made anywhere near enough money to be this large. He was the only customer in sight.

“Depends on the bed. You looking for something fancy?”

“Something relatively easy to move and not too expensive. I need two of them, so being on the smaller would actually be nice as well. Have anything for ten gold or less?”

“I’ve got an eight-gold option. Comes with a frame and a feather mattress. Just don’t ask me what the feathers come from. I don’t know, and you don’t want to know. It’s eight gold.”

Arwin snorted. He looked around the store again, but there wasn’t a single part of him that wanted to spend more time in here than he had to. “Two of those, then. Do you have a cart I can use to carry them?”

“We’ll deliver it.”

Bullshit. You can’t sell more than one bed a week. How do you possibly afford to not only have a store like this but also deliver stuff to your customers?

He glanced around to see if there were bandits hiding in the rows of beds to ambush him, but that would have required someone else to have been in the store. Finally, Arwin shrugged. As

suspicious as it was, he doubted Milten would allow a business to blatantly rob people in broad daylight. That was the job of Milten's government, not the stores.

“Sixteen gold, then?”

“Plus four for delivery.”

Ah. That makes a little more sense. Four gold for delivery seems really damn steep, but I don't want to lug two beds across town.

“Fine,” Arwin said, pulling twenty gold out and walking across the store to hand it to the employee. In turn, the man handed him a small wooden badge. Arwin felt the Mesh tingling within it as it rested in his hand.

“Just keep that on you and the movers will find you by tonight,” the man said, yawning. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I'd say this is it,” Arwin said. He tucked the badge into his pocket. “Thanks for your time.”

The merchant didn't even respond. He just sank back into his desk and laid his head in his arms, falling asleep. Arwin made a beeline out of the store, then glanced back at it as he headed down the street just to make sure it was still there and hadn't been some form of illusion.

Ah, well. That's that. I have what I needed. Time to get back to work, then. I know I'm close to making some proper scale plate greaves, and I'm going to make them before it's time to train Reya with Rodrick and Anna at the end of the week.

I'm looking forward to this.

Chapter 26

Scales glowed in the flames of the hearth, heated as far as the [Soul Flame] could take them. Arwin hefted his new hammer, adjusting his grip on the haft. The rough metal wasn't the most comfortable, and it was a good bit heavier than his previous hammer.

Sitting around and staring at the scales isn't going to do anything, though. Only way to learn is to try.

Arwin arranged two of the scales so that they overlapped slightly, leaving them within the hearth. He then hefted his hammer, holding it near the head to avoid getting a little too much momentum in the swing and risk damaging the hearth.

Maybe I need to find a way to super-heat the surface of my anvil instead of working inside the hearth? That could work as well, but it's a problem for a different time.

The hammer fell, striking the scales with a loud thud. Sparks flew up and a powerful vibration raced down Arwin's arms with such force that he nearly dropped the hammer, even though he hadn't even hit the scales that hard.

"Shit," Arwin muttered. "Forgot that metal carries the vibrations far better than wood. That's going to be a pain in the ass."

Arwin activated [Scourge] and steadied his grip on the hammer before striking the scales once more. The vibrations still slammed into him like a runaway horse, but he weathered them and swung the hammer once more as they faded.

With every strike, Arwin could see the material of the scales start to meld together. It was far from perfect, but it was working. His idea had been correct – so long as he tried to forge them within the fire, they could connect.

It didn't take long for Arwin to completely connect the two scales, but he was far from done. As soon as he'd confirmed that their material could be connected, he set about building a set of greaves.

Even though he was distributing his usage of [Scourge] to withstand the hammer, Arwin's magical reserves couldn't last forever. He continued working on the project until his energy expired, then rested – leaving all the scales within the flame – until he'd built up enough to get to work again.

In that cycle, Arwin continued to work on the greaves. The ring of his hammer echoed through the old smithy, each strike another step toward his lofty goals. Sweat rolled down Arwin's face and dripped from his lips as the heat caressed his body.

Even with his magically enforced strength, soreness and exhaustion bit at Arwin's body. His arms ached and his back groaned with every swing. While he was far from weak, he didn't have the muscles he once did as the Hero – and that was just how he liked it.

Every blow was another step toward power. His own step. Not granted to him by the guild. Not given to him by someone that had already supposedly thought through every inch of his progression to ensure it would be ideal for the future of the Kingdom of Lian.

There was none of it.

All that remained was Arwin's body, the roaring hearth, and the scales within it. Blow by blow, hour by hour, Arwin forged.

He wasn't sure how much time passed as he worked. At some point, he was aware of Reya passing through behind him, but Arwin was so focused on the greaves that he barely registered it beyond a passing thought.

His ears rung violently, and the smell of steel and cinder filled his nostrils. He'd stopped sweating at some point, his body no longer possessing the water to lose. The temptation to stop was there – but it wasn't nearly as strong as the siren call of success.

Arwin's fingertips tingled with power from the Mesh as it swirled around him and the pair of glowing greaves that were steadily coming together before him. They guided his movements, just as eager to become whole as he was to make them.

And then, tremors running through his entire form from the repeated shocks the hammer had delivered unto him and with just the dregs of his magical power left, Arwin found that there was nothing left to do.

All the pieces of the greaves he needed were finished. He wasn't done yet, though. They had to be connected and slotted together before the pieces were fixed in their proper places whilst inserting hinges to avoid limiting movement.

Arwin was exhausted, but he would be damned if he waited to do that later. He grabbed a handful of the nails he'd forged, dropping his hammer and setting to work with his hands. After the nails were heated, he got to work working them into the scales in the same manner that he'd woven them with, pressing the nails into the tough material and then warping them into clasps so the greaves could close around his legs.

He worked over every single piece of the armor with painstaking effort, connecting joints and testing them to ensure they functioned properly. And then, once he'd finished one leg, he moved on to the other.

Arwin wasn't sure where the energy to continue came from. Part of him suspected that he just hadn't realized how tired he was, but it was a moot point. His mind had made the decision that he would continue until the work was done, and his body would obey.

But finally, his work came to an end. Arwin finished the last touches on the second leg and, even as he let his hands come to a rest in the curling flames, he felt the Mesh come to life within the armor.

[Forest Lizard Scale Plate Greaves: Unique Quality] have been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Your Tier has raised by 1 rank.

Arwin waved the Mesh's words away. He'd deal with the advancement in a moment – right now, the most important thing to him was seeing if his work had yielded results. There was always the potential of a detrimental trait that could completely ruin all his efforts. Information shimmered to life in golden letters before Arwin as he watched with bated breath.

Forest Lizard Scale Plate Greaves: Unique Quality

[Heat Resistance]: The wearer of this item gains heat resistance.

[Shock]: The tremors of a thousand mighty blows run through this item, attuning it to kinetic energy. This will passively store a portion of any impact it receives, lessening the damage to its owner.

[Awe]: The tremors within this item long to be released. Upon reaching its limit, this item will free the kinetic energy within it at once, empowering its owners next movements for a short amount of time. The timing and duration of this effect cannot be controlled.

[Unique]: Once donned, this item will bond with its owner. It will change sizes so long as material permits to fit them perfectly, and anyone else who attempts to wear it may suffer retaliation. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

Arwin let himself have a relieved smile. He hadn't just gotten greaves. He'd gotten exactly what he needed. He'd have to test just how much energy the armor would absorb, but even a small amount would go a long way in making him considerably tougher to injure.

The extra effect of speeding him up was also interesting. It was clearly partially detrimental without the ability to control its activation or duration, but power was still power. It just meant they would be harder to use. Beyond that, the skill was incredible. It was an alternative to using [Scourge] to empower his legs, which would save him a huge amount of magical energy.

On top of that, getting movement skills for a non-combat class was probably borderline impossible. Arwin hadn't spoken to any smiths extensively before, but not once had he ever seen one of them sprinting at the speed of a warrior, even for a short amount of time.

"Absolutely fantastic," Arwin breathed. The armor had kept the heat-resistant properties of the scales and was already cooled off, so he started to pull it on. He couldn't bring himself to leave them off any longer and risk somehow letting someone else don them first.

Arwin didn't imagine there was someone sitting around and waiting to put his pants on, but there was no need for paranoia when the problem was already solved. As soon as he fastened the final clasp, he felt the armor shift and tighten around his legs.

He moved his weight from one foot to the other, then raised a leg. The armor shifted seamlessly, perfectly melded to his form. He could still feel its weight, but they weren't nearly as hefty as metal would have been.

"Light. Effective," Arwin said, well aware he was complimenting himself. His smile stretched even wider and he ran his hands through his sweat-soaked hair.

I feel better than I've felt in years. This is amazing.

Arwin walked in a circle around the smithy, then hopped from one foot to the other. Everything about the greaves felt completely natural. He picked his hammer up, giving it a few test swings to see how it felt.

An eruption of soreness in his muscles quickly made Arwin reconsider that decision. He stumbled, nearly dropping the hammer in his haste to lower it. There was only so far that his adrenaline and elation would take him.

Exhaustion had been knocking at the door for longer than Arwin was aware, and he was suddenly reminded of just how thirsty and drained he felt. He blinked heavily, bracing himself against the wall and weathering the wave of weakness that passed over him.

Once it passed, Arwin sent a thought to his greaves, causing them to hide their properties from any prying eyes. If anyone figured out he was strolling around in two Unique items, he suspected that he'd be in trouble.

There had been a time when he hadn't thought much of it – Unique items varied greatly. They were barely even a proper rarity, as they could both be better than Legendary items or worse than Garbage ones. But the more Arwin realized that not many people actually possessed magical items, the more he realized that it wouldn't matter *what* his items did. What would matter would be the fact that he had them.

Arwin licked his parched lips. Even though he didn't have to eat anything other than magic, a nice drink sounded fantastic. He sent a glance around the smithy, but it was empty. Based on the sunlight filtering through the cracks in the wall, it wasn't quite nighttime yet either.

It was time to see what rewards all the achievements he'd earned over the past few days had earned him. He called out to the Mesh.

Name: Arwin Tyrr

Class: Living Forge (Unique) (Tier: Apprentice 3)

New Skill Choice Available.

[More than Average] has been consumed.

[Shoe Thief] has been consumed.

Two of your Skill options have been upgraded.

You may select one of the following skills.

[Bleeding Heart] (Passive) – *Repeated attempts to protect your allies grants all the armor you wear faint magical properties. All those you consider an ally within a set radius of*

yourself will receive a portion of the defenses your armor grants you, scaling based off your Tier.

[UPGRADED] [Arsenal] – *You live and die on your equipment, so you might as well make it part of yourself. Bind yourself to [3] pieces of equipment, summoning and dismissing it at will. The number of equipment you can bind to scales with your Tier, up to a total of 10. Unbinding a piece of Equipment will make this skill inactive for 1 day.*

[UPGRADED] [Firewrought Blow] – *You have spent so much time within the flame that it has become a part of you. Spend a portion of magical energy to empower your next hammer strike, releasing a burst of Soul Flame upon impact.*

Chapter 27

Arwin studied his new skill options for several minutes, re-reading them to make sure he perfectly understood every single one. All the achievements had definitely been worth the effort – the results he'd received were incredible.

[Firewrought Blow] was a good combat skill on its own – but there was more to it than just a mere attack. Sure, releasing a blast of fire when hitting something was useful, but it wasn't just any fire. It was [Soul Flame] – which meant any upgrades he got to his [Soul Flame] would affect it as well.

On top of that, he could use the ability whilst forging. That would probably go a long way in improving his abilities and letting him forge new weapons. It was an incredible ability – but the others were just as interesting.

[Bleeding Heart] caught Arwin's attention even though it hadn't been upgraded by the Achievements. It wasn't immediately useful, but the better equipment he got, the more powerful it would become. If the other two abilities had been just about anything else, Arwin would have chosen it on the spot.

It would make training Reya so much easier, and if I want to start a guild, then abilities like this would be invaluable. But [Arsenal]...

At first glance, [Arsenal] didn't appear incredibly strong. It was basically a glorified storage method, but it only took a little thought for Arwin to realize just how dangerous the ability was.

It let him summon and dismiss equipment *at will*. There was no delay. He could carry a set of the heaviest plate armor in the world around with him, swapping into it the moment he needed to fight.

And, beyond that, he could swap weapons mid-fight as well. A sword swing could turn into a hammer blow, and that effect would be compounded even farther the more equipment he got. The potential for the ability was basically limitless so long as he had the right gear on hand.

Every single one of the abilities was tempting, but it didn't take Arwin much longer to come to his final decision. He selected [Arsenal] without an ounce of regret and the glowing words of the Mesh shimmered and faded away, his choice complete.

Arwin wasted absolutely no time in testing it out. He pressed his hand to his chest, feeling the tingle of the Mesh as he drew it to his will. The pressure in his ear changed with a subtle pop as he bound the Forest Lizard Scale Mail to himself.

No sooner than he imagined the armor disappearing did it vanish with a pop. He could still feel a faint pressure on his chest even though the armor wasn't there anymore. With another thought, Arwin summoned it back.

The armor reformed instantly, as if he'd never taken it off. Arwin grinned, then bound his greaves and sword as well. He dismissed and resummoned each piece a few times before dismissing all of them.

[Arsenal] felt completely natural to use, as if it had always been a part of him. A small thrill of excitement ran down his back. Arwin had never been one who had particularly looked forward to fighting, but he really wanted to see what the new ability would do for him in a real fight.

It'll take some training and better equipment before I can truly master [Arsenal], but I can already picture just how effective this will be.

Arwin wiped the sweat from his forehead and let out a satisfied sigh. He was more than pleased with the results of the past few days, and now he'd bought himself some time to relax and do a little more preparation before he took Reya out with Rodrick and Anna.

Maybe I'll just take a day off and enjoy not having to do anything at all. After that, I want to start looking into getting some more armor made for Reya and the others. Maybe I'll figure out what I'll need to make my hammer as well.

So much to do, so little time. I don't even know where to –

[The Maw within you hungers for power. If you do not consume a magical item within 1 day, your body will collapse.]

“Oh, goddamn it,” Arwin muttered, a familiar clench wrapping its icy grip around his stomach. It didn’t feel like it had been that long since the last time he’d eaten a magic item, but evidently the time had flitted by far faster than he’d realized. “At least I got a whole day of warning this time. Can’t complain about that. Guess I’m smithing more before I do anything else.”

Arwin’s gaze passed over the forge. He didn’t really want to spend a huge amount of effort in making an item he was just going to consume to survive, but it would be a good idea to get around to making some magic items he could eat in a combat situation that would give him a boost in power with Hungering Maw’s beneficial ability that let him temporarily absorb a trait from an item.

More shit to deal with later. For now, I just need to focus on not dying.

It only took Arwin another half an hour to forge a crude magical bracelet. It had a detrimental effect that made it so that attacks against him had a chance of summoning a small gust of wind, but Arwin didn’t particularly care – he just stuffed the whole thing into his mouth so he could get on with his day.

The pain in his stomach didn’t recede. Arwin’s brow creased. He waited for a few seconds, trying to see if he’d somehow tricked himself into thinking the ache was there when it wasn’t, but there was no mistaking it.

The pit in his stomach was just as intense as it had been before if not worse. It was as if he hadn’t eaten anything. Arwin stood frozen in place, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. He’d done what the ability required him to.

“Why isn’t it working?” Arwin muttered to himself, starting to pace around his anvil as he racked his mind in attempt to figure out where the mistake was. But, try as he might, only a single thought came to mind.

A chill ran down Arwin’s back and he grabbed several pieces of metal, returning to the forge and throwing his [Soul Flame] into it. If he was wrong, he’d be even more screwed than he was now.

I’ve got to be fast, but not too fast. I can’t afford to make another crappy item. This one is going to need to be decent.

Arwin waited until the metal was hot enough, then got to work forging once more. With the metal as his guide, he set about making a plain dagger. It wasn’t anything special, but it still took considerably more time than the bracelet had.

After about two more hours of work, Arwin was done. An average quality magical dagger sat in his hands, still warm from the forge. Its only Trait was being more resilient than normal, which was perfectly fine with him. Arwin stuffed the weapon into his gullet, devouring it in two bites.

The pain relented almost instantly, and Arwin felt a surge of energy course through his body as he absorbed its Trait. A relieved sigh slipped from Arwin’s lips, but it carried with it the disturbing knowledge that his guess had been right.

[The Hungering Maw] doesn’t just need me to eat magical items. It needs me to eat stronger magical items. I can’t just sit around and keep making the same crappy bracelets or I’ll starve to death. If that holds true... God, will I be eating Legendary weapons at some point?

A laugh of disbelief forced its way out of Arwin's lips, and he sat down on his anvil, running his hands through his hair. The costs of what he'd have to do if he wanted to survive were going to be astronomical.

That didn't stop a small voice in his head from pointing out that, if he pulled it off, his power would eclipse what he'd wielded as the Hero by an enormous margin.

The Mesh was nothing if not fair. If he was walking around eating powerful Unique and Legendary weapons just to survive, the Mesh would have to be giving him equivalent benefits. He couldn't imagine how big the boons would be to someone who was forced to consume a Legendary weapon every week, but he knew they'd be immense.

"All I have to do is survive," Arwin muttered to himself. "In the end, this doesn't change my plans in the slightest. I knew I had to get stronger. This is just a bit of encouragement."

Very strong encouragement. Nothing more motivating than not spontaneously combusting – or whatever it is that would happen to me if I don't feed the Hungering Maw.

Stone shifted near the door. Arwin glanced over as Reya walked inside, stepping over the wolf pelt at the door and raising a hand in greeting when she realized that he wasn't working the forge.

"Arwin! I was wondering if you were ever going to stop. It's been like four days," Reya said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Don't take this the wrong way, but are you okay? I'm starting to think there might be something seriously wrong with you. Did you even stop to eat?"

"Yes. It was just a very brief stop."

That is technically not a lie.

“Right,” Reya said, not looking like she believed him in the slightest. “Where’d your armor go? The last time I was in here, it looked like you’d nearly finished it. What happened?”

Arwin’s response was to summon the greaves using [Arsenal]. Reya’s eyes widened as the scale plate armor materialized around his legs.

“I can’t see any information on it, but they just appeared out of thin air. Does that mean—”

“They’re magical,” Arwin confirmed with a slightly smug nod. “I did it.”

“Another Unique item. You’re ridiculous. How is it that you can keep making these? Do you have some magic dust somewhere that you’re just sprinkling on everything you make?”

“I’m just incredibly talented,” Arwin said, keeping his face completely straight.

Reya squinted at him. “Was that a joke? Did you just make a joke?”

“No. I would never do something like that.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking as well,” Reya grumbled. Her frown fell away.

“Thanks for getting the beds, though. They’re amazing. I honestly can’t remember the last time I slept on something soft.”

“Beds?” Arwin blinked. He vaguely remembered ordering them at a sketchy store, but he didn’t recall anything ever actually showing up. He’d been so caught up in his smithing that he’d entirely forgot about the purchase.

“Yeah. Right there.” Reya pointed to the corner of the smithy and Arwin turned to follow her gesture. Sitting at the side of the smithy, nestled into a corner that was a little less cracked and broken up than the rest of the building, were two beds.

What the hell? When did those show up? I didn't notice anybody.

“I – uh, yeah. I did buy those,” Arwin said.

“Why does it sound like you’re trying to convince yourself? Did you not buy them?”

“No, I did. I just didn’t notice that they’d shown up,” Arwin said, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a frown. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’ve been caught up working. Has anything important happened?”

“Nothing vital.” Reya shook her head. “I’ve mostly been hanging around Lillia’s tavern and trying to help her out with a few things whist keeping an eye out and making sure nobody too weird shows up at our door.”

“Too weird? We’re the only ones on the damn street aside from Lillia and the one drunkard that passed through.”

Reya glanced at Arwin out of the corners of her eyes. “That’s not entirely true anymore. Someone else was here! Someone new!”

“Today?”

She cleared her throat. “No. He showed up yesterday and ate at Lillia’s tavern while I was there, then left pretty soon afterward. But still, a new customer! She was really excited.”

“That is good news,” Arwin said, pulling the [Soul Flame] from the hearth and back into himself. “And I’ve got more of it.”

“You do?” Reya blinked. “What is it?”

“You said four days have passed? Then... in three days, we’re going hunting.”

“We are? What for? More materials?”

“That’s part of it, but it isn’t the main goal,” Arwin said with a small smile. “We’re going to get you your class.”

Chapter 28

“Seriously?” Reya asked, her eyes going wide. “You aren’t messing with me?”

“Why would I joke about something like this?” Arwin asked. He stretched his arms over his head and yawned. Now that his work on the greaves was done and he’d gotten his tier advancement, he was exhausted. “I’m dead serious.”

Reya swallowed. “I – thank you. I don’t know if it’ll work out, but I really appreciate it. I’m not so sure I’ll be able to get a class. If I could, wouldn’t I have gotten one by now?”

“We aren’t always dealt the hand we want, and the Mesh can be strange. From my experience with it, the thing you desire will come to you so long as you work toward it. If you don’t have a class yet, it’s not because you can’t get it. It’s because you haven’t been in the situation where you’ve been doing what you truly want to.”

Reya didn’t look completely convinced, but she gave Arwin a nod. “Okay. I’ll trust you, so just tell me what to do. Shouldn’t I... I don’t know, train or something?”

“Do what you want. I’m not an expert on this,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “For today, I’m done doing anything other than sleeping. I’m about an inch from passing out on my feet. Just make sure you’re around three days from now.”

“I will!” Reya promised hurriedly, her eyes flashing with a mixture of excitement and determination. She caught herself and cleared her throat sheepishly. “Thank you.”

“Stop thanking me for something that hasn’t happened yet,” Arwin grumbled. He trudged over to his bed and tested it with a hand. It sank beneath his palm – not as much as he might have liked, but it was still far softer than the floor.

One more step toward making this place a real home.

Reya edged toward the door. “I’m going to go practice, if that’s okay. I don’t think I’m going to be able to sleep anymore.”

“Suit yourself, but don’t be out too late and end up exhausted when the time comes for us to do the real work,” Arwin warned as he sat down on the bed. “Just relax. You’ll be fine. I’m confident you’ll do just fine. And, even if you don’t, I won’t let you fail.”

A soft breeze passed through the open doorway, reminding Arwin that he still needed to get a door for it – and to find a way to patch the walls while he was at it. It was past time to make the smithy into a proper building rather than just a crumbling pile of stone.

“Why?” Reya asked softly.

Arwin’s head tilted to the side. “Why what?”

“Why are you doing so much for me? You’ve never asked for anything in return other than the most basic information on the area. I just don’t understand what you get out of this.”

“Do you need a reason to help someone else?” Arwin asked after a few moments. He wasn’t so sure he had an actual answer to Reya’s question. He didn’t have a reason to help her – not a logical one, at least. “I’m helping you because we’re a guild.”

“Not in name,” Reya said, clenching her hands and averting her gaze. “We aren’t registered, and there’s only two of us! How can two people be a guild?”

“A guild is not about its size.”

“The Adventurer’s Guild would beg to differ.”

“I don’t give a shit about them,” Arwin said brusquely, waving his hand with a snort. “A guild isn’t about the number of people in it. It’s about the people that are. It’s not like getting officially recognized as a guild changes anything anyway.”

“I guess not. But... why me?” Reya asked. “I’m not special.”

“That’s hardly true,” Arwin said with an amused snort. “To be frank, you’ve got more problems than anyone of your standing has any right to. It’s beyond me how you’ve gotten yourself into this much shit, but that’s a talent. It doesn’t matter in the end. You’re the one that decided to throw her lot in with me, and I’m not going to leave a member of my guild unable to properly defend themselves. Everyone has problems, but the guild can’t always help every single individual member. It’s the responsibility of the guild leader to make sure everyone can handle their own problems whenever possible. And, when a problem that’s too big for one person to handle on their own shows up – that’s what the guild is for. That’s all.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“That’s fine,” Arwin said, pulling his dirty shirt off and tossing it to the ground as he got into the bed. “You will.”

Reya stood in the doorway silently for a few seconds. Then she gave him a small nod before turning and slipping into the night. Arwin watched her leave, then laid his head back against the mattress and let out a satisfied sigh.

It had been so long since he'd properly rested on something comfortable that the instant he let himself relax for an instant, sleep rushed up to pull him into its embrace.

When Arwin woke the next morning, Reya was still out. He didn't particularly mind – there was more he had to handle before it was time to go out on their trip, and he'd need as much time as possible to get it all done.

There was also a small part of him that felt it better for Reya to not be present for his current work. If she was around, she'd see what he was working on, and then the surprise would be ruined.

Arwin ambled over to the forge, sending a spark of [Soul Flame] into the hearth and pumping it with the bellows. Once the fire was roaring, he tossed some scales into it and waited for them to heat. If Reya was going to go out and fight monsters without a class, she needed a way to avoid getting killed by the first blow she took.

Anna seems like a good healer, but no healing magic is perfectly reliable. Fatal wounds can happen faster than anyone expects. Prevention is far superior to reaction.

And, with that thought in mind, Arwin got back to work. He worked the scales, piecing them together one by one within the crackle of the flames. He worked quickly, moving faster than he had when making the greaves.

A part of that was because he knew how to work the scales better, and a part of it was because he didn't need to make perfect armor this time around. He could feel the pull of the scales as he worked, but it wasn't as strong as they had been for the greaves. They were muted, and it wasn't hard to guess why.

Right now, Arwin needed to complete a set of armor for Reya that would last her until she had her class. She already had a chest piece, so what she needed now was something for her lower body. There was no point to make it too specifically tuned, though – it would likely become irrelevant if her class ended up being something that couldn't use it. Making magical plate armor for someone trying to move stealthily would be quite the waste.

What I need is a set of armor perfect for someone who hasn't gotten their class yet. Something that protects them but doesn't constrain them to a specific fighting style. Something fast, effective, and easy to move in.

Arwin didn't know what Reya's measurements were – a problem that the scales fortunately seemed to understand. He still wasn't sure how much of it was their own desire and how much was his own magic, but as time slipped by, a set of greaves started to take shape in the forge. They were mostly made from scale mail, but he added curved plates to protect her knees and solid lines down the outside of the legs that would hopefully serve to deflect a glancing attack better.

Arwin didn't work through the nights this time around, not wanting to be exhausted when it came time to set out with Reya. He stopped whenever it grew dark, retiring to his new bed and leaving the armor in a pile under it so Reya didn't see what he was working on.

His work came to a close on the third day, just before the morning of when they'd set out with Rodrick and Anna to get Reya her class. Reya – at least as far as Arwin was aware – had no idea of what he'd been working on.

She'd spent the last few days out and had always come back late and weary, dropping into bed without much more than a muttered greeting. He could see the stress weighing on her shoulders, but there wasn't much he could say to alleviate it.

Reya was already asleep by the time Arwin finished, which made it considerably easier for him to put everything away without her seeing it. He slipped all the pieces of the armor under his bed, then laid down on top of it and let himself drift off to sleep.

When the night came to a close and Arwin's eyes drifted awake the following morning, he found Reya already awake and pacing in front of the door. Her eyes snapped over to him as soon as she noticed he was awake.

"Is it time?" Reya asked, wringing her hands together and shifting from foot to foot.

"You don't have to be worried about it. If things don't work out, we'll just try again a different day," Arwin said through a yawn. He rose to his feet and stretched his arms out, rolling his neck and wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Not if I die," Reya said.

"You're not going to die. We've got two other adventurers with us, and they're both pretty good at what they do. One is a healer."

"But what if I slip while I'm fighting? I've only properly fought other people. We're going to go fight some really powerful monster or something, aren't we?"

“What makes you think that?” Arwin tilted his head to the side with an amused grin. “We could just be going after some weak ones.”

“If I haven’t gotten a class yet, then killing a bunch of pushover monsters isn’t going to change anything.”

“That’s likely true,” Arwin allowed. “Technically I think it would depend on exactly *how* you killed the monsters, but fighting something stronger is more likely to get you a good class. If we can get you an Achievement or Title in the process, even better.”

“Before I even get a class?” Reya shuddered. “Are you trying to get me killed? All the Achievements for that kind of thing always come from defeating something way stronger than you. I’ll get ripped in half!”

“No you won’t,” Arwin said. He knelt beside his bed and pulled out the greaves that he’d hidden beneath it the night before. Reya made her way over to him, looking curiously over his shoulder.

“What’s this?” Reya asked. “That looks a bit... small for you.”

“You would be correct.” Arwin’s voice was as dry as the desert. “It isn’t for me. It’s for you.”

Reya snickered and rolled her eyes. “Right, sure. Did you get commissioned by the other adventurers or something? I bet these would go for a good amount. They look great.”

Arwin just raised an eyebrow. Reya’s smile flickered and fell away. She looked from the armor to Arwin, then swallowed. “You weren’t joking?”

“Dead serious. It’s to keep the dead in the serious and not in you if you get hit by something nasty,” Arwin said. The joke had sounded considerably better in his head, but Reya was so engrossed with the armor that she didn’t even notice.

She hurriedly donned the greaves and fastened everything before rolling her shoulders and hopping from one foot to the other. The set he’d started some time ago was complete – at least for the time being. The greaves weren’t magical, but they were still more than enough to keep her safe.

I hope they are, at least.

As far as Arwin could tell, the armor fit her perfectly. A small smile flickered across Arwin’s face. He’d been more than a little worried that it would have been the wrong size, but his powers hadn’t failed him.

“I think this might be the nicest thing anyone has ever gotten for me, much less made,” Reya murmured, running her hands along the scales in delight. “This is incredible. It’s such a huge step up from what you were making just recently as well. Were you holding back on purpose? Wait. I can’t afford this, and you already gave me a magical chestpiece. I–”

“You aren’t buying it,” Arwin said through a laugh. “It’s a gift. Just keep yourself from getting killed and I’ll consider it a worthwhile investment.”

Reya blinked heavily. She bit her lower lip, then turned away from him and wiped her face with the back of her hand. When she looked back, all that remained on her features was a determined expression.

“I’ll make sure I live up to this,” Reya promised. “I don’t know what we’re doing, but I’ll do it.”

“Let’s just start by surviving,” Arwin suggested. He tried not to show how pleased he was that Reya liked the gift, but he was pretty sure his efforts failed. He clapped her on the shoulder, then nodded to the door. “Come on. Let’s put that new armor to use. You’ve got a class to claim.”

And I have some new abilities to test out.

Chapter 29

Arwin led Reya to the front of the Glowing Swordfish, where Rodrick and Anna were already standing outside and waiting for them. Rodrick, who was wearing the old set of scale mail greaves that Arwin had sold him, did a double take as he saw the armor Reya was wearing.

“Arwin,” Rodrick said, raising a hand in greeting. “This little lady must be your friend, then? It looks like she’s certainly outfitted for a fight. More than I am, actually.”

“That’s because you keep breaking your armor,” Anna admonished. She sent a small smile in Reya’s direction. “It’s nice to meet you. Arwin bailed us out of some trouble a little while ago. I’m Anna, and the oaf beside me is Rodrick.”

“I’m Reya. It’s nice to meet you.” Reya shifted, clearly uncomfortable with all the attention being directed toward her.

“Did you bankrupt yourselves on getting all that armor? Or is that smith friend of yours doing loans?” Rodrick asked. “That’s some real nice looking gear you’ve got. It’s probably too late for me to order anything right now, but you’ve got to tell me who’s making this stuff.”

Reya sent a surprised glance at Arwin, and he realized he’d forgotten to tell her that he’d hidden his identity from the two adventurers. He just shrugged, speaking before Reya could say anything.

“I’m sure he’ll come around eventually, but we’ve got things to do today. Shall we get on with it?”

Thankfully, Reya picked up on what was going on and said nothing that would jeopardize his identity. Even though it probably wouldn’t have been a big deal one way or another, it was still a bit of an inconvenience that Arwin preferred not to deal with on this particular day.

“Gladly. Lead the way,” Rodrick said. “Back to the forest, I assume? Pretty good distribution of monsters in there that shouldn’t be impossible for someone new to the job to handle, especially with armor like that.”

“It’s a good spot to start,” Arwin agreed. “Hopefully the monsters there have calmed down a little bit. It’ll be a little annoying if we have to constantly avoid large groups.”

They all set off down the road, making for the town gate. Arwin couldn’t help but notice that Reya was getting a few lingering glances from passersby. Nothing too concerning, but her armor was definitely drawing attention, and possibly a little more than he’d originally planned.

This is good. At this rate, I might get enough attention that people come looking for the smith that made her armor. Then I’ll be able to sell non-magical equipment and start making

some money without worrying about arming someone with a terrifying weapon that they don't deserve.

“So, what kind of class are you looking to get?” Rodrick asked as they left the city and started through the hills. “Some kind of warrior?”

“I’m not sure,” Reya admitted sheepishly. She scratched at the back of her head and craned her head back to look at the receding city behind them. “Probably not someone that’s on the front of the battle.”

“A mage of some sort?” Anna guessed. “Magic can be incredibly rewarding. It’s a lot of work and can be pretty risky, though.”

“I’ve always wanted magic,” Reya allowed slowly. Rodrick was shaking his head before she finished her sentence.

“Don’t go muddling her goals, Anna. Anyone can get magic. Mages just focus entirely on it, and you get blown over by a light fart because of it.”

“You’re not wrong,” Anna admitted with a laugh. “I don’t have any good ways to defend myself. If I was a combat mage, then I’m sure I’d be able to blow things up before they got to me. I went with healing instead, though. It wasn’t easy, but there’s few people that help a group more than a healer. I just can’t fight very well.”

“Not being able to fight seems like a pretty significant drawback,” Reya hedged.

“It would be if I didn’t have this idiot to stand in front of monsters for me,” Anna said with a laugh, shoulder-checking Rodrick. He shifted to the side and rolled his eyes – Arwin was pretty sure Anna couldn’t have moved him if she’d wanted to, so he was just going along with it.

I almost forgot how close they were. It reminds me of things I'd rather not remember.

Arwin shook his head to clear his thoughts while Reya worked to gather her own.

“I think I'd rather be a bit farther away from the thick of things whenever possible, but being able to hold my own when the time calls for it would definitely be nice,” Reya said. She idly ran her hands over the hilt of the sheathed dagger at her side.

“Maybe some form of archer?” Rodrick guessed.

More like an assassin, I'd say.

“I hope not,” Anna said, giving Reya a quick look. “She's not carrying a bow. You're not going to get an archery class if you don't have a bow on you.”

“I'm a horrible shot, so archery isn't really my thing. Daggers aren't bad, though.”

“A rogue, then,” Rodrick concluded. “That makes sense. You've got the right build for it, and you look pretty fast. Suppose the only way to find out is to actually see, but that'll happen soon enough. I haven't seen many rogues decked out in fancy armor, though.”

“It's more about the way she fights than what she's wearing,” Arwin said with a shake of his head. “As long as she doesn't rely on the armor to block every single blow, Reya should be able to get the class she's looking for. It's just a precaution.”

The other two adventurers nodded, and they all fell silent for the rest of the trip away from the city. Some hours later, the four arrived at the valley leading down into the forest. It was mostly silent, the only sounds being the faint chirp of the birds and the rustle of wind through the leaves.

“Start behind us,” Arwin advised as they started down toward the treeline. “We need to make sure your opponents are the appropriate level of strength. Challenge is good, but putting you up against something you have no way to defeat is just suicide.”

“Trust me, I won’t take a step that you don’t tell me to,” Reya promised. “I’m not so sure I’ll be able to handle anything here myself, but I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” Anna said with a comforting smile. The group continued on, and Rodrick moved up to the front to use his enhanced senses and guide them toward a possible target.

This time, no lizards were waiting in ambush. They walked for several minutes, taking a few turns. Rodrick occasionally paused and held up a hand to listen closer but would then resume moving in another direction shortly afterward.

After a few minutes of walking, Rodrick drew his sword. Anna moved to stand behind him and Arwin readied himself, using [Arsenal] to summon his sword to his hands. He didn’t call his armor out yet, not wanting to encumber himself until he actually needed the defense.

“Lizard up ahead,” Rodrick said. “At least, I think it’s a lizard. About the right size for one, a little bit on the small side. This could be you, Reya.”

Reya licked her lips and tightened her grip on the hilt of her dagger. Her eyes darted around the forest and Arwin could practically see her breathing get faster. She bit her lower lip and gave them a sharp nod.

“Okay. I- I’m ready. I think.”

“We still have to make sure it’s the right strength,” Arwin reminded Reya. He followed Rodrick’s gaze and squinted into the darkness of the forest before them to see if he could make anything out, but the monster was still too far out.

They all crept forward, taking even more care to remain silent. If the lizard hadn’t noticed them yet, then they had a chance to get the jump on it. And, if Reya was looking to be a stealthy class of any sort, that was probably a step in the right direction.

It didn’t take long for their efforts to be rewarded. After passing just a few more trees, they arrived at the edge of a small clearing with sunlight filtering in through a gap in the canopy. A lizard laid on its back, its feet curled up before it as it basked in the light. The monster was indeed one of the smallest that Arwin had seen thus far – Rodrick had done a good job in avoiding all the stronger enemies.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 2]

“That’s the one,” Arwin whispered, nudging Reya’s shoulder. “Go. If you slit its throat before it notices you, you should be able to kill it before it can even fight back. It’ll be easier if you go from a bit to the left so you’re downwind of it.”

Reya swallowed. Her fingers twitched and she gave Arwin a curt nod before creeping away from the party and toward the lizard. The others all watched her leave quietly, not wanting to distract her.

“I’ll keep an eye out for anything else in the area,” Rodrick said in a soft tone. “This should be a pretty fast kill, though. That lizard is completely oblivious to everything. It’s got absolutely no idea we’re here.”

“Almost makes you feel bad for it,” Anna said, her hands clenched around her staff as her eyes traced Reya’s steps.

Interesting. She’s actually concerned for Reya even though they only met a short while ago. I made the right move in throwing my lot in – at least temporarily – with these two. They’re decent folks.

“It’s a monster,” Rodrick said. “It wouldn’t feel bad for us if we got caught with our pants down.”

“Maybe not, but isn’t that the very reason we’ve got to be better? We have the capacity to be more, so we should be.”

“We’re not getting into this argument again,” Rodrick grumbled. “You can be kind to other people and intelligent beings, but no feeling bad for the bloodthirsty creatures that want nothing more than to rip us to little shreds and snack on our bones.”

“Not every monster is unintelligent,” Arwin said quietly.

Rodrick sent him a surprised glance. “You’re the one that brought us out here to hunt, man. Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” Arwin said, and he meant it. “A lot of innocent people get hurt in war, and I don’t think that all monsters are intelligent. Creatures like the lizard in front of us aren’t mentally developed enough to have much intelligence beyond their desire to kill and survive. But others are different. There are... occasions where killing them may not be the right choice.”

“How so?” Anna asked curiously. “I haven’t met many warriors that hold that viewpoint. You’re certainly an odd one, but don’t take that in the wrong way.”

“I won’t,” Arwin said. He paused, watching Reya as she snuck closer to the lizard. They were close enough to intervene if something went wrong, but not so close that he could completely block a blow if she completely screwed up. “And it’s just something that comes with experience. Some things don’t need killing.”

Reya arrived beside the lizard. It had still yet to notice her presence – it really was the most oblivious creature that Arwin had seen in a long time. All that remained was for Reya to deliver the killing blow.

Her knuckles whitened around the hilt of her dagger. She started to draw it but froze midway through the motion. Seconds ticked by. Arwin’s brow furrowed as Reya let the dagger slide back before it could clear the sheath.

Does she not want to let Rodrick and Anna see that it’s magical? She should just be able to put her back to us so they don’t see the blade, and I’m sure she’s got another dagger from those idiot brothers I had to kill.

Reya backed away from the lizard, letting her hand drop from the blade as she drew back alongside them, her jaw clenched.

“Is it okay if I don’t kill this one?”

“Why not?” Rodrick asked. “It’s a free kill.”

“I know,” Reya said, her cheeks flushing with shame. “But that’s the problem. I’ve killed before. You have to if you want to survive. But I’ve never had a choice, you know? It’s been death or life. That’s it. There hasn’t been another option.”

“You don’t want to kill at all anymore?” Arwin asked. He couldn’t fault Reya for that, but she wasn’t going to be able to become any sort of adventurer if she didn’t want to fight.

“I don’t think it’s that. I’m fine with killing. Just... I’d prefer to kill something that’s going to fight back or something that deserves death. For once, I want to make my own choice instead of being forced into one.”

“It’s a lizard,” Rodrick said. “It’s probably too stupid to even realize what death is.”

Reya bit her lip and nodded. “I know.”

“So?”

“I still really don’t want to do it. I’m sorry.”

Arwin studied Reya for a second, then glanced back to the lizard. It really did look quite content. He shook his head, his lips curling in slight amusement. “It really does look too peaceful. The next fight isn’t going to be this easy, though. Are you sure it’s wise to pass up a free kill?”

“I’m sorry,” Reya repeated. “But it just feels wrong. I’d rather take a harder fight.”

“Well, she knows what she wants,” Rodrick said with a shrug. “That’s half the trouble with the Mesh in the first place. Your call, lass. I can find us another monster in the area, but Arwin was right. I doubt we’ll get a chance as good as this one again.”

“Better a difficult fight than a cheap one.”

Not exactly the words of an assassin.

“Onward, then,” Arwin said with a nod. “Rodrick is correct. Standing by your ideals is something that many forget to do in the pursuit of power. Let’s go find you something that’ll fight back.”

Chapter 30

Arwin’s thoughts drifted as Rodrick led them in search of their next potential monster for Reya. Her refusal to kill the monster echoed dimly through the halls of his mind. It wasn’t like the lizard was really worth thinking about, but he couldn’t get it out of his head.

He’d killed thousands – probably more if he was honest with himself – of equivalent monsters. And, despite everything, Arwin didn’t regret any of the kills he’d made. They’d been done to save himself and to protect others.

It wasn’t the fact that he cared about the lizard’s life either. He hadn’t been exaggerating about its intelligence. The monster wasn’t anywhere near smart enough to understand what had happened.

Really, calling it a monster is a rather odd choice. Lillia is a monster as well – a demon. And yet, there’s no more relation between her and that lizard than there would be with me and a dog.

I’d have put the lizard down if it had been me that was fighting it, and I likely still would now if it tried to attack me or stood in my way. But... perhaps it is worth adjusting my thinking a little more.

Not all the monsters I encounter are going to be as soulless as this one. Some may have some degree of intelligence, and if the Adventurer's Guild is not my ally, then am I truly their enemy?

“What’s wrong?” Anna whispered, moving closer so her voice wouldn’t carry too far into the forest. “Is something happening?”

“Nothing like that,” Arwin said with a small smile. “I was just lost in thought. Reya’s an interesting one, isn’t she?”

“The way you say that makes it seem like you’re older than she is. Are you her brother or something?”

Arwin chuckled. “We don’t look that alike, do we?”

“Siblings are made in spirit, not flesh.”

“Fair enough.” Arwin inclined his head in surrender. “No. She’s not my sibling. She’s just someone that I’ve picked up on my journeys that needed a little bit of a helping hand. Her perspective is surprisingly fresh. Makes me think about some stuff that I didn’t think I’d be thinking about.”

“That’s one of the things I like most about adventuring,” Anna said with a soft smile. It fell away as her features darkened, and she glanced to the side. “Meeting new people and finding out just how different they are to you. It is – was – incredible.”

“Ever regret leaving the Guild?” Arwin asked.

“Not for a second.” Anna sent a look at Rodrick’s back and the smile returned to her lips. “I’d trade it and more away every single day just to keep things the way they are. Sure, I’d love

to try to strive for more and the Adventurer's Guild was a great way to do that, but the cost of remaining there was more than what I was willing to pay."

"I know what you mean."

They came to a stop as Rodrick lifted his hand. Reya, who stood a few paces ahead of Arwin, just beside Rodrick, stiffened. Something shifted in the shadows of the trees before them, and the tingle of the Mesh brushed across Arwin's skin.

There was a loud crunch as leaves and sticks were crushed beneath the weight of something large, and the flash of yellow eyes within the forest told Arwin that a monster had spotted them coming.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 3]

"Shit. Didn't notice the bugger because he was up in a tree. You think you can handle this one?" Rodrick asked in a low tone, placing his hand on the sword at his side. "Apprentice 3 might be a bit rough for someone without a class."

"You're the one that said that I'd not get another easy shot," Reya said, setting her jaw. "It's not going to get any easier if I keep waiting."

"We'll have your back," Anna promised. The lizard let out a warning hiss, and Reya drew her dagger. For a moment, Arwin was worried that she'd just revealed the magic weapon to the other two, but the Mesh didn't register the blade.

It was just a normal weapon, not the one he'd made.

That's probably for the best. I like these two, but power can make people do some pretty bad things. Better to take it one step at a time and avoid any unwanted incidents.

“Remember that it’s more important to survive the fight than kill your enemy,” Rodrick said. “Live and you can fight again. Victory means nothing if you don’t live to tell the tale.”

“Says the man who goes down in almost every fight,” Anna quipped. “Get out there, Reya. You have this in the bag.”

The lizard’s tongue flicked through the air. It hissed, crawling toward them with measured movements that did nothing to betray the explosive power that Arwin knew to be within its body.

Reya held her blade before her and edged closer to the monster, staying on the tips of her toes. For a few moments, the forest was silent save the sound of her feet scuffling across the dirt and the lizard’s dull hisses.

Then they burst into motion in unison. The monster’s thick tail whipped out, hurtling to slam into Reya’s side. Reya skipped back, dodging the attack with far more room than she needed to have moved, and then sprinted forward with a cry.

The lizard snapped out at her and Reya stumbled, throwing herself into a roll. She landed gracefully and sprung back to her feet, staggering and narrowly avoiding the monster’s fangs as it snapped for her head.

Arwin’s body tensed and the urge to rush into the fight gripped him, but he restrained himself. The Mesh wouldn’t recognize Reya’s work if he ran in to save her. She needed to handle this on her own – and he needed to trust that she could do it.

And that's not to mention the way she must be feeling. Ever since she threw her lot in with me, I've been bailing her out of trouble. She doesn't feel like she's in control of herself, and if I step in again here, that feeling may cement itself even further.

“Aim for weak points!” Arwin called out. “You can't break its scales with the dagger, so bide your time until you have an opportunity to strike! Don't overextend too early.”

If Reya heard him, she gave no acknowledgement. She bounced from foot to foot, watching the lizard warily and prepared to jump out of the way of its next attack. Even though she had no experience fighting monsters, only a fool would have said that she wasn't used to combat.

She moved with the grace of a street urchin that had grown up dodging pursuing guards their entire life, and while that wasn't enough to put her toe to toe with some of the rogues Arwin had known in his years, it was more than enough to give her a fighting chance against a lizard – even if she didn't have a class.

The monster lunged, snapping at Reya and trying to strike her with its long claws. She dipped to the side, then lunged as it tried to regain its balance. With a cry, Reya brought the dagger's point down toward one of the monster's bulging eyes.

It twisted its head at the last second, and the loud scrape of her dagger against the scales ground through the air. The blade shattered from the force of the impact. Arwin took a step forward, but Reya wasn't done yet.

She threw herself out of the way, discarding the broken remains of her dagger, and ducked behind a tree a moment before the lizard's tail smashed through the trunk, sending splinters and dust flying everywhere.

The tree pitched forward and crashed to the ground with a resounding thud. Reya dashed out from behind it, leaping into the air and throwing herself straight at the lizard's head in display of either stupidity or bravery and possibly a mixture of both.

Arwin felt the Mesh tingle in his mind as Reya ripped a dagger free of her belt. He only had an instant to look at it before Reya plunged the weapon into the lizard's eye with all her might and momentum, functionally sheathing it within the monster and snuffing the tingle in his mind before it could reveal any information.

The monster let out a screech of pain and Reya launched herself off its body, narrowly avoiding a tree branch as she hit the ground, holding her arms close to her chest to avoid breaking anything.

She rolled several feet and thumped to a stop against a tree, scrambling to her feet the moment she stopped moving. The lizard let out a hissing scream, thrashing and spitting as blood dripped down the side of its head and splattered against the forest floor.

"Don't rush to finish it!" Rodrick warned, his expression just as scrunched in worry as Arwin felt. "Take it slow! You're on the right track!"

Reya's breath came out in short, adrenaline filled pants. Her hands and limbs twitched as her brain sent furious signals to them, but she forced herself to stay still and watch the monster.

The lizard was far less patient. It let out a scream and charged toward Reya. Its steps were lopsided and heavy, but that didn't stop it from closing the small gap between them in just seconds and lurching in an attempt to take her down with it.

Reya dropped to the ground, and the lizard hurtled over her head like a scaly missile. It slammed into a tree, shattering it, and rolled across the ground in a flailing mess of limbs – and then it vanished.

Arwin blinked, then looked to the others. They looked equally as confused. There was no sign of the lizard. If it wasn't for all the destruction in the area around them, it would have been as if it had never been there.

“What the hell?” Arwin asked. “Where'd it go?”

“Are you okay, Reya?” Anna asked.

“I'm fine,” Reya said, pushing herself up to her feet and frowning as she fought to catch her breath. She squinted into the forest. “What happened?”

Arwin walked in the direction the lizard had gone, his sword held at his side and ready to spring into action. He couldn't place exactly what was causing it, but the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

He inched closer to where the lizard had vanished, peering into the darkness, and froze as the breath caught in his throat. There was a huge hole, roughly the size of a house, in the middle of the ground.

And, looking straight out of it were two large green eyes, each the size of a shield. Glistening gray scales made up the draconic body surrounding them, and the tip of a forest lizard's tail stuck out of a mouth chock full of pointed yellowed teeth.

Arwin's skin tingled as the Mesh identified the creature before him, but he barely even needed it.

[Forest Wurm – Journeyman 8]

A series of cracks split the air as the Wurm chewed once, its powerful jaws grinding straight through the lizard's scales and bones alike. It chewed once more before swallowing the lizard in a single gulp. A dull rumble built in its chest as it reached up with a clawed hand nearly as large as Arwin and pulled itself out of the hole.

Arwin took a step back, staring up at the massive monster as its maw split open. Hot breath bearing the scent of carrion washed over Arwin as he locked eyes with the massive monster.

It was a whole tier stronger than he was, and even with the help of the others, they were nowhere near strong enough to even think about trying to defeat it.

The only thing that the eyes of the Wurm held was death – and, judging by the way its tongue flicked out and tasted the air, it was still hungry.

Chapter 31

There was only one thing that Arwin could think of doing that wouldn't result in their immediate death.

“Run,” Arwin breathed, spinning and dashing in the opposite direction.

He grabbed Reya by the arm, yanking her along and out of her stunned reverie. Rodrick and Anna both fell in beside them, their legs pumping as they ran as hard as they could. Behind them, a roar split the forest and the Wurm burst into pursuit.

“What in the Nine Underlands is the Wyrm doing here?” Rodrick screamed, throwing a glance over his shoulder and nearly running straight into a tree in the process. “It’s meant to stay underground!”

“I don’t know!” Arwin yelled back. Trees shattered behind them as the Wyrm plowed straight through their trunks, too large to even bother trying to avoid the obstacles. “Focus on running, not thinking!”

He dodged away from a tree, nearly tripping over himself as another roar ripped through the forest. Hot air wafted over his back, and Arwin didn’t want to think about how close the huge creature was to them.

“I don’t have to kill that, do I?” Reya screamed. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to get close to its eyes!”

“Forget killing it! Just run!”

Arwin’s feet slammed into the ground as he empowered his steps with [Scourge], using just enough to keep up with the others. It was only a temporary solution, though. There was only so far they’d be able to run before the Wyrm caught up with them, and if it was still chasing after them after they escaped the forest, they were all dead.

We’re only still ahead at all because the big bugger has to run through trees while we can avoid them. In open air... there won’t even be a fight. I need to do something to get this thing off us.

“Keep going!” Arwin yelled. “I’m going to try to stall it!”

“Do you have a death wish?” Anna yelled back. “You’ll get eaten in one bite!”

“So will the rest of us if I don’t do something. Just keep going and don’t turn back.”

Arwin spun, activating [Arsenal] and summoning his greaves and scale mail chest piece into place on his body. He wasn’t sure how much good they’d do against a monster this powerful, but he couldn’t afford to keep anything in reserve if he wanted even the slightest chance of surviving the next minute.

I might be able to survive one or two direct hits, but after that it’s over. That’s probably not enough for my greaves to properly absorb enough kinetic energy to fight back, but if I can take a few glancing blows, I might have a chance at hurting the Wyrms enough that it gets scared off.

The Wyrms skidded to a stop before him, confusion flashing in its large eyes. This monster – unlike the lizards – was definitely intelligent. It might not have been as smart as a human, but there was thought behind the green disks.

Arwin could see it trying to figure out why he’d stopped running. Prey didn’t stand in place. Prey screamed and fled, and his deviation from the norm made him, at least for a flicker of an instant, a threat.

“Come on then!” Arwin roared, raising his sword overhead. And then, in what was possibly one of the greatest displays of stupidity in his life, he charged at the monster that was twice his tier and triple his height.

From the Wyrms’ perspective, he was probably something around the equivalent of an armored Pomeranian with an attitude, but this Pomeranian had a sharp stick in its hands. The Wyrms pulled back, letting out a confused hiss.

Arwin took advantage of its confusion to close the distance between them. He drew power from within himself and shoved it into [Scourge], empowering his arms with all the magic they could handle before bringing the sword down on the Wyrms arm with all his might.

A resounding clang rang out through the air, and more magical energy left Arwins body as the sword drew on him, trying to imbue the spot he'd struck the Wyrms with resonance. As he lowered his sword, a chill swept over Arwins spine.

The scales were completely undamaged aside from a small crack running along one of them. He'd hit the Wyrms with the strongest blow he could muster in his current state, and he'd probably barely even tickled it.

For an instant, Arwin and the Wyrms stood in silence. The Wyrms stared at him, as if baffled that something would be so stupid as to even *try* striking it. Then it roared. Hot, rancid breath washed over Arwin, buffeting his hair back.

The Wyrms raised a foot and brought it down for him, trying to squash Arwin like a bug. He dove to the side, hitting the ground in a roll and coming up just inches away from where the monster's foot landed.

It was fast for its size, but he already knew that. Arwin rolled to his feet and let out a cry of his own to keep the Wyrms attention on him. He had to buy more time for the others to escape – but that didn't look like it was going to be hard.

The Wyrms eyes were locked straight on Arwin, and it wasn't impressed by his displays anymore. It reared back, casting a shadow over the forest as it rose onto its haunches, and then leapt forward.

Arwin drew on [Scourge] and thrust power into his legs, bounding out of the way. The Wyrms tail whipped around as it landed, hurtling for Arwin's chest. He only had an instant to react, and he chose to use it to jump, bringing his chest out of the way and leaving his legs in the path of the tail.

An immense force slammed into Arwin's lower body, spinning him like a top. He flew back and slammed into a tree with a loud crash. The air was knocked from his lungs and he dropped to the ground amid a rain of leaves, landing on his feet with a pained grunt.

Energy hummed within his greaves and Arwin's body throbbed – if it hadn't been for the combination of their absorbent properties and [Indomitable Bulwark], he was pretty sure the Wyrms strike would have snapped him clean in half.

The Wyrms looked just as surprised as he felt, but Arwin didn't give it time to gather its thoughts. He charged forward again, dismissing his sword as he ran so his hands were free. He desperately wished he had a blunt force weapon that he could use to shatter the monster's scales, but all he had was his sword.

A huge, clawed hand swiped through the air and Arwin threw himself to the ground, rolling beneath it and jumping back to his feet, his sword reforming as he brought it down for the same spot he'd struck the Wyrms in before.

Once again, a resounding clang echoed through the forest. The Wyrms snarled and snapped at Arwin. He jumped back, just barely clearing its jaws. The monster's head slammed into him like a wrecking ball and sent him rolling across the ground. His sword flew from his grip, spinning across the ground and embedding itself by the base of a tree.

His greaves erupted with energy as [Awe] finally activated. Arwin's entire body buzzed he shot back to his feet. He extended his hand and the sword vanished from where it had fallen, reforming in his palm.

That's convenient. I wasn't sure what would happen if I lost a weapon. Now I know. The extra speed is going to take some getting used to, but I don't even know how long it'll last.

The Wyrms roared, watching Arwin warily. It wasn't about to charge him mindlessly again – he had yet to actually hurt it, but he'd survived two attacks now, and the monster wasn't dumb enough to dismiss that idly.

Well, the others should have had time to escape by now. All I have to do is find a way to get out of here myself... but I'm not so sure that's possible. Even with Scourge and the boost from Awe, this thing is going to outrun me and I've got no way to know if it'll stop at the edge of the forest.

Shit. I might be in trouble.

Advancing far more carefully this time, the Wyrms loomed over Arwin and reared back, preparing to lunge at him. It wasn't going to be particularly easy to dodge an attack when it was taking this much effort to line it up, but Arwin wasn't so certain that he'd be able to survive if the beast literally dropped itself on top of him. It must have weighed several tons.

Defense isn't an option. My only hope is to hit the bastard hard enough that he gets scared off. That might be a bit of a stretch, but it's the only way I can make it out of this.

Arwin tensed, preparing to move at just the right moment. If he hit the resonating area once more, there was a chance he'd actually hurt the Wyrms.

The problem was that he doubted the huge monster would be willing to let him get another blow off. It was paying far too much attention to him now. In his past life as the Hero, Arwin would have called for someone to draw the beast's attention with ranged attacks so that he could get closer, but there was nobody but him.

Even as his mind raced, he knew that there were no more options. He wasn't going to be able to outrun or dodge the Wyrm again, but he'd be damned if he went down running like a coward.

"What are you scared of?" Arwin roared, beating a fist against his chest. "Try me!"

The Wyrm obliged. It pounced, stretching its arms out to catch Arwin. He dashed to meet the strike instead of avoiding it, hoping to take a glancing blow and trade one in exchange. His feet slammed against the ground, and he nearly tripped over himself at the pace he was moving at due to [Awe].

Arwin likely would have fallen flat on his face had he not been used to empowering his legs with [Scourge]. Just barely managing to stay upright, he flashed past the monster's arm and brought his sword down on the Wyrm's leg with all his might.

Magic poured out of Arwin's sword and slammed into the Wyrm an instant before its massive body crashed to the ground. Arwin managed to twist out of the way, saving his upper body from getting crushed, but his right leg was considerably less fortunate.

Even with [Indomitable Bulwark], he felt the bones in his leg shatter. Pain ripped up Arwin's waist, winding into his spine and gripping him in icy claws. He snarled in pain even as the Wyrm let out a pained cry and leapt to its feet like it had been stung.

The scales on its leg were cracked, and blood trickled past its claws, dripping to the ground. Arwin drove his sword into the tree behind him and dragged himself upright, baring his teeth.

“I’ve got more where that came from,” Arwin promised, ripping his sword free and pointing it at the Wurm. He didn’t even try putting weight on his leg – he was pretty sure the bones in it weren’t just broken but completely pulverized.

At least my greaves are still active. They must be absorbing all the damage I’m taking, even while [Awe] is active. I can get one more nasty blow off before I go down.

The Wurm’s lips pulled back in a snarl, but it didn’t attack immediately. Arwin nearly laughed. As massive and powerful as the beast was – it was afraid. A Journeyman level monster feared a mere smith.

“Come on!” Arwin screamed, pounding a fist into the tree. The wood shattered beneath his [Scourge] empowered blow and it pitched back, crashing to the ground behind him.

The Wurm took a step forward. A rock whistled through the air. It was no larger than a palm, but it flew with surprising accuracy and struck the Wurm straight in the center of its eye. The monster let out an annoyed roar and snapped its head around to look over Arwin’s shoulder.

Rodrick stepped out of the forest, tossing another rock up and down in his hand. “Over here, you big oaf!” Rodrick yelled. “I’ve been thinking I wanted some fancy new armor, and I think you’re wearing my scales!”

You bleeding idiot. Why are you here?

The Wurm roared, turning away from Arwin and taking a step toward Rodrick. Its foot hit the forest floor with such weight that it trembled, making Arwin stumble as pain arced up his injured leg. The Wurm might not have understood Rodrick's words, but it definitely didn't like having things flung at its eyes.

And, as soon as the monster's attention was averted, Arwin felt a hand fall on his shoulder. A wave of warmth rush over his body. The demolished bones in his leg knitted themselves back together and his torn flesh healed until the pain had completely vanished.

Anna stepped out beside him, a weary expression on her face. "I won't be able to do a powerful spell like that again. Help Rodrick."

He didn't have any time to ask Anna and Rodrick what they were doing here. For better or for worse, they'd remained. Arwin rolled his shoulders and took a step forward, pounding a fist against his chest to draw the Wurm's attention back to him.

"I'm still here," Arwin snarled, pointing his sword up at the monster's head and locking eyes with it. "Didn't anyone ever tell you to finish what you started?"

Chapter 32

Another rock flew through the air and – with unsettling accuracy – struck the Wurm straight in the eye for the second time that day. It let out an annoyed screech. As it turned back toward Rodrick, Arwin lunged, swinging his sword for the small crack on its leg.

The Wurm noticed his attack and flicked its claws at him, trying to carve Arwin apart before his blow could connect. Using a blast of energy from [Scourge], Arwin leapt over the monster's leg and slammed his sword home once more.

More magical power raced out of him and into the wound, sending a dull thrum up into the air. The Wyrn roared and lunged at Arwin, forcing him to use even more of his power to throw himself to safety.

Arwin could feel his magical reserves starting to run out. He'd been using [Scourge] at max for the entire fight, and his sword drained power at a massive rate. He probably only had one or two more moves left in him before he was completely dry.

The Wyrn, on the other hand, had been barely injured. The damage to its leg wasn't much more than a bad scratch, but the fact he'd managed to do anything at all to the enormous beast was a feat in itself.

"Get out of here!" Arwin yelled. "We can't win this!"

"We aren't leaving you behind," Rodrick yelled back. "You can't win this either!"

Arwin didn't have a response to that. He grit his teeth and held the Wyrn's gaze as it contemplated its next move.

At least Reya got out. Now only three of us will get killed.

"Hey, asshole!" A woman's voice rang out from the trees, and Arwin nearly slapped himself in the forehead. "Give me back my dagger!"

A rock whistled out from the darkness, striking the Wyrn in the forehead and bouncing off harmlessly. Reya stepped out of the shadows and flung another rock, this time missing the monster entirely.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Arwin demanded. "Did nobody listen to a single thing I said?"

“It has the dagger you made for me,” Reya spat. “I’m not leaving without it.”

“I can make you another damn dagger!”

“Not if you die,” Reya countered. She threw another rock at the Wym, which now looked more baffled than anything else. Arwin nearly laughed in spite of their situation. In comparison with everything else in this forest, the Wym was the absolute peak. Nothing should have so much dared to look in its direction, but now a group of fleshy monkeys were flinging rocks at its head.

“How exactly do you think you’re going to get the dagger back?” Arwin asked. “Were you planning on crawling into its mouth and asking politely?”

“Do you think that would work?”

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Arwin snapped. The Wym bared its lips in a warning growl, but Arwin hardly even cared. It wasn’t like the monster could do anything else to them, and every second that passed gave him a little more magical energy back. If it was going to sit around in befuddlement, then it only helped him. “You’re meant to listen to my orders.”

“Well, don’t give stupid orders.”

“Surviving isn’t stupid. You know what’s stupid? Coming back to fight a high-level Journeyman monster when you don’t even have a damn class yet.”

“You’re the one that told me I was going to get a class today!” Reya snapped. “I’m doing that!”

“Getting yourself killed is not getting yourself a class!”

The Wyrn looked from Reya to Arwin, the disbelief in its eyes turning to hunger as it reared back and let out a roar. They both looked back to the huge monster.

“What do we do?” Reya asked.

“We can’t beat this thing. Our best bet is to hurt it enough that it decides we aren’t worth eating. Don’t get close, your armor isn’t going to save you from any of its attacks. Just… fling rocks and don’t close.”

Arwin beat his hand against his chest again to draw the Wyrn’s attention back to him. The maneuver worked a bit better than he’d been hoping for and the monster finally lurched back into motion, flinging itself at him like a crazed flying squirrel.

He swore and activated [Scourge] even as [Awe] empowered his legs even further, throwing himself out of the way. Arwin hit the ground in a run and skidded to a stop, spinning back to face the monster even as it rose back to its feet.

A rock dinked off the back of its head, but the Wyrn didn’t so much as glance back. It was fed up with the game and determined to finish off Arwin once and for all. Ripples of resonance still washed out from where Arwin had struck it several times before.

If I can reactivate the magic one more time, I might be able to actually do some decent damage to this thing. But there’s no way it’ll let me at it again. I need –

Reya, devoid of a proper weapon and possibly her sanity, charged the Wyrn with a cry. It took Arwin by such surprise that it took him a moment to realize what she was doing.

The Wyrn was equally as surprised, but it recovered quickly and spun toward her, its maw snapping open. The scales covering its body rippled as the muscles beneath them tensed, preparing to pounce.

Arwin burst into motion. He didn't have any other choice. His armor would keep the claws of a normal lizard from ripping Reya to shreds – it wasn't a magical wall that would stop the weight of the Wyrn.

The Wyrn saw Arwin's approach out of the corner of its eye. Its tail shot out and Arwin jumped – but the Wyrn wasn't trying to knock him out of the way. The massive appendage wrapped around his chest. He barely managed to lift his arms into the air before the tail tightened, starting to squeeze.

Arwin's armor cracked and groaned, desperately trying to hold the monster off and failing spectacularly. He wasn't far from its leg, but his sword arm was pointed entirely in the wrong direction.

The Wyrn lunged, aiming to swallow Reya whole. She tried to throw herself out of the way in the same way that Arwin had, but she didn't have [Scourge] to help her. Rodrick ran toward Reya, but he wasn't going to make it in time.

Arwin drew on every last ounce of magic he had, letting [Scourge] erupt through his entire body. He let out a snarl, shoving the Wyrn's tail back just enough to slip free of its grip even as it started to clear the ground. Arwin launched himself forward, moving with the Wyrn's momentum to launch himself up the side of the body.

He was too close to the monster to rear back and swing his sword without hitting something else by accident. With only instants to act, Arwin brought the blade up – but not toward the monster.

His teeth slammed down on the blade, shattering the metal. Energy poured into Arwin's mouth and spread throughout his body. He ripped power from the sword, draining the rest of the weapon until it was ash in the wind within just milliseconds.

Then, with a defiant roar, he drove his fist into the cracked scales. The power that the sword had once held was temporarily infused within him, and Arwin spent every last drop of power he had pushing it out through his fist, activating his greaves at the same time.

The ripples of resonating energy detonated with a brilliant crack. The Wyrms screamed in pain, twisting at the last moment. There was a loud screech and Reya went flying, but Arwin hit the ground before he could see the extent of the damage.

A brilliant flash of light lit up the air and the Wyrms roared in surprise, buying them precious seconds.

Arwin rolled across the ground, crashing into a tree with enough force to knock it back. His enhanced defenses were the only thing that kept him from passing out. Bright stars flashed before Arwin's eyes and he drew in a hissing gasp.

Pain rocked through his back as he forced himself upright, squinting through darkness dancing at the edges of his vision. The Wyrms had landed several dozen feet from him, its momentum having carried it deeper into the forest and through a dozen trees.

The scales on its right foreleg were badly damaged, and blood poured down it like a small river. Letting out a wail, the enormous monster tried to put weight on its leg before yanking the foot back into the air.

Its eyes swiveled to stare at Arwin. Hunger and hatred mixed with fear within them as he staggered upright, baring his teeth and breathing heavily. He had absolutely nothing left – but the Wyrms didn't know that.

“Come on,” Arwin rasped.

The Wyrms didn't move.

“Come on!” Arwin screamed, pounding a hand against his cracked chest piece. The world swam around him, and trees danced when they should have been still.

The Wyrms turned. It slunk back into the forest, limping to avoid putting weight on its injured leg. Deep, echoing thuds echoed through the darkness and faded into the distance. All that remained of it was a drying puddle of blood on the ground and a single, cracked scale.

Arwin turned toward the others, leaning heavily against the tree. Reya laid on the ground several feet away from him, sprawled out beside Anna. Arwin staggered toward them, barely able to keep himself upright.

“Reya! Are you—”

Reya pushed herself over. The front of her chest piece, running from her shoulders down to just above her waist, had been ripped to shreds. Several furrows ran through her skin, but they were no deeper than half an inch. The armor had prevented the damage from being fatal.

“Look at that,” Reya said with a weak smile. “It held up after all.”

A laugh slipped out of Arwin's mouth, rocking his body with such intensity that he had to grab onto a tree to keep from falling over. And, in his laughter, he just barely noticed a flicker of golden light dancing through the air.

Achievement: [Shieldbreaker] has been earned.

[Shieldbreaker] – *Awarded for shattering the armor of an enemy more than 1 Tier stronger than you.* Effects: You may choose to add the [Shieldbreaker] trait to 1 item you forge. *This achievement will be consumed upon use.*

Arwin had absolutely no idea what Shieldbreaker did, but he could venture a guess – and it sounded like it would be perfect for his hammer when he got around to making it.

“Arwin?” Reya whispered, pulling him from his thoughts. She spoke so silently that he barely overheard her over the rush of blood in his ears.

Arwin turned toward her. “Yes?”

“I got a class.”

Chapter 33

The group hightailed it out of the forest as quickly as they could, only pausing so Arwin could grab the scale he'd broken off the Wurm. Anna had used just about all the healing magic she had to repair Arwin's leg as quickly as she had, so she had to sling Reya's arm over her shoulder and help her stumble through the trees.

Rodrnick offered similar help to Arwin, but he refused it. He was dazed and completely drained of energy, but not to the point where he couldn't walk on his own. And, even if he'd needed help, he was too curious about what class Reya had been offered to consider it.

They continued until they'd left the forest and put about ten minutes of travel between it and themselves. Reya and Anna finally flopped to the grass, lying flat on their backs. Rodrick and Arwin sat down beside them.

"I can't believe we're alive," Rodrick said, laughing into the palms of his hands. "The gods damned Wyrms. Can you believe that?"

"What in the Nine Underlands was it doing outside?" Anna demanded, sounding considerably less happy. "Wyrms don't go above ground! Everyone knows that!"

Arwin would have loved to correct her, but Anna was right. Everything he knew about Wyrms agreed with her claim. They were wingless, basically large dragon-lizards that relied on idiots stumbling into their nests rather than proper hunting.

"You're right," Arwin said. "I don't know why it was so aggressive, but there's nothing wrong with celebrating life."

"You know what I want to know?" Rodrick looked over to Arwin. "How in the world did you take a bite out of a bloody sword?"

"With my teeth."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Rodrick said. "I didn't see that wrong, did I, Anna?"

“No, he definitely ate his sword,” Anna said with a disbelieving laugh. “I figured we were kind of just going to ignore it. I’ve seen stranger things in life.”

“Have you?” Rodrick asked.

“No,” Anna admitted. “I was trying to be polite. Maybe it’s just a hobby.”

“Who eats swords as a hobby in the middle of a fight with a Wyrn?” Rodrick asked, aghast.

“I’m right here, you know,” Arwin said dryly.

“Don’t eat my sword, please. I like it,” Rodrick said.

“No promises.” The corners of Arwin’s lips quirked up in a smile and Rodrick hurriedly put his hand over the hilt of his sword, much to Anna’s amusement.

“Odd hobbies or not, we won’t tell anyone,” Anna promised. “It just took us by surprise.”

“It’s appreciated,” Arwin said, meaning it. It probably wouldn’t be a big deal if people figured out he could eat metal – a lot of classes could do some pretty strange things – but it would give away that he had either a Unique class or ability.

“Reya, how are you doing?”

Reya poked at her damaged armor. “Alive. It stings really bad, though.”

“Good,” Arwin said. “You damn near got yourself killed. You’re incredibly lucky to be alive, Reya. Don’t get me wrong – I deeply appreciate your help and you gave me the opening I needed, but you need to be careful. Your life is worth more than using it as a sacrifice to draw a monster’s attention for a brief second.”

Reya swallowed and nodded. “Yeah. I just didn’t know what else to do. It looked like you were about to lose and the only idea I had was... well, that.”

“As long as the lesson was learned, then that’s all that matters. Just don’t do it again. What’s done is done, so there’s no need to dwell on it any further. There are much more interesting things to speak on.”

“My class,” Reya finished. She touched her bleeding stomach again and winced slightly. “What do I choose?”

“You haven’t told us what you got yet,” Rodrick said.

Reya sent a glance toward Arwin, and he shrugged in response. Anna and Rodrick had returned to save his life when they hadn’t had to. If Reya wanted to trust them, it was her decision, not his.

“I’m sorry I don’t have any more healing left right now,” Anna said apologetically. “We could cover our ears if you’d prefer?”

“It’s fine,” Reya said after a few moments. “You won’t tell anyone, right?”

“Not a soul,” Rodrick promised, pressing a hand to his chest. “But I will be telling the story of how a girl without a class charged a fucking Wyrms like she was the Hero himself. I don’t think I’m ever going to forget that sight.”

Reya’s cheeks reddened. “Arwin needed a distraction to hit the Wyrms again, and it wasn’t going to do anything if we kept throwing rocks at it. I figured drastic measures were in order.”

“What, did you plan on getting stuck in its teeth while it chewed you?” Anna asked with a mixture of humor and admonishment. “You need to live through the fights you win, you know. Arwin was right.”

“I lived!”

“Barely,” Anna muttered. She rubbed her arm, then shook her head. “Whatever. I’m not your mom. But, if you’re going to say what classes you can choose from, do it quickly. I’m going to die from anticipation.”

“I got three options,” Reya said. “The first one is Warrior.”

“Good class,” Rodrick said.

“You’re biased,” Anna replied without missing a beat. “Warrior can be a good choice if you’re interested in being at the front of a fight, but that didn’t sound like what you were hoping for. What about the other options?”

“The second one was the Berserker,” Reya continued. “It’s Unique.”

“Holy shit,” Rodrick said. “I’ve heard of that one. The normal version of it, at least. Real strong warriors, very difficult to stop once they get going. That’s a really good class. I can see why you got it, considering you charged a Wurm with no way to fight it.”

“What about the last one?” Arwin asked. Berserker still wasn’t what Reya had been looking for, and he’d known his share of berserkers. The class was definitely powerful, and a Unique variant of it would be even stronger, but it didn’t fit Reya’s personality at all.

“Warden,” Reya said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Unique as well.”

Rodrick let out a whistle. “I’ve never heard of that. Anna?”

“Same, but let me remind you that Unique doesn’t always mean good. It’s just been differentiated by the standard for some reason or another. A lot of Unique things can be pretty damn bad, so don’t go choosing anything just because it’s different,” Anna warned with a shake of her head. “Do you know what it is, Arwin?”

To Arwin’s surprise, he hadn’t heard of it either. It wasn’t like he knew of every class in existence, of course, but he’d expected to at least recognize the name if not understand it perfectly.

“I’ve got no idea. Never heard of it,” Arwin said. “What does the information about it say?”

“It’s a class meant to control and restrain opponents rather than outright killing them by pitting our willpower against each other. It isn’t very descriptive.” Reya bit her lower lip in thought. “None of them are what I thought I’d get.”

It sounds like she might have actually gotten Warden because she chose to spare the other lizard. I wonder if the Wurm fight had anything to do with it. Interesting. I don’t want to influence her choice, but a class that I’ve never heard of is pretty interesting. Then again, if the berserker has some form of draconic or Wurm influence on it, that could be pretty nasty.

“What are you thinking, then?” Rodrick asked. “You’ve got some really good selections there. I could see all of those being very powerful in the future.”

“I didn’t think I’d get the chance to choose at all,” Reya admitted. She touched one of the wounds on her stomach and winced slightly, pulling her hand back and rubbing her fingers together, smearing the blood across them. “There’s only one of these that I think I could see myself doing, though.”

She reached out, touching something invisible in the air. Faint golden sparkles swirled around her, sinking into Reya's skin and flaring behind her eyes. She stiffened, then drew in a slow breath as her eyes unfocused, likely reading information about her new class.

"What did you go with?" Rodrick asked.

"Warden," Reya replied, tearing her gaze away from the invisible presence of the Mesh before her. "I don't want to be a warrior and running around with my top off didn't seem very appealing."

Anna let out a snort. "Can't say I blame you. Berserkers all have a death wish anyway. It's a good class, but I think you probably made the right choice. You might have a little difficulty finding anyone to train you, but I suspect it'll be worth it in the long run."

"I hope so," Reya said. She touched the wound on her chest again, and Anna smacked her hand away.

"Stop doing that. You're going to get dirt in it, and it'll be harder to heal. Infections are much more difficult to repair than normal injuries."

"There's a difference in healing wounds?" Reya asked.

"Yeah. The worse the damage is, the harder it is to heal. Pretty straight forward. It gets more complex when viruses and diseases get involved, though. You can get little living things running around in your body wreaking havoc, and healing magic can't kill stuff. It's not pretty."

Reya swallowed and pointedly stuck her hands beneath her backside to keep herself from touching the wound again. "Okay. Can you heal it soon?"

“In a few minutes. I don’t have enough energy yet, and I want to get it all at once rather than sealing the wound over and leaving something behind that’ll scar too badly.” Anna glanced over her shoulder at the forest, then shook her head. “My legs are still shaking. I don’t understand why that Wyrms was there.”

“Monsters don’t change their routines unless something makes them change,” Arwin said with a thoughtful frown. “And for the Wyrms to change how it typically acts means that it’s likely we aren’t seeing the cause but rather the effect. Something happened in the forest.”

“The Wyrms is the strongest monster in there,” Rodrick pointed out. “What’s going to be enough of a threat to it that it would have to start being more aggressive?”

“I don’t know,” Arwin admitted. “I’ll be honest – I’m just happy to be alive and that Reya got her class. I’m sorry we didn’t actually get to do any proper hunting, though.”

“Are you kidding? I think I just witnessed a legend in the making,” Rodrick said with a burst of laughter. “I wouldn’t trade that for anything. Also, I’m begging you at this point. Introduce me to the smith that made Reya’s armor. That thing held up against a bleedin *Wyrms*.”

“Technically, it broke.”

“Are you kidding? That armor was made out of Forest Lizard scales, wasn’t it? Those things have no right standing up to a Wyrms in the slightest, but it managed to stop a blow and didn’t even have any magic infused into it.”

“I’m not sure I’d say it stopped the blow,” Arwin said, sending a critical glance at Reya’s armor. “She got injured.”

“She should be dead,” Anna said. “Rodrick is right. Forest Lizard scales couldn’t have done that on their own. The smith made them harder whilst forging the armor. That’s a really impressive piece of gear. We’d understand if the smith isn’t interested in new clients right now, though.”

Anna sent Rodrick a pointed glance when she said the last sentence, making sure he wouldn’t push any more. Arwin kept a laugh from passing through his lips as Rodrick sheepishly nodded his agreement.

For a few seconds, he considered the two adventurers. He didn’t truly know them that well, but if he wanted to start a guild, he needed people. These two had more than proven themselves, and they weren’t aligned with the Adventurer’s Guild.

They came back to help me when they had no reward from it. If I can’t trust them, then I don’t know if I can trust anyone ever again.

“Are you in a guild right now?” Arwin asked.

Rodrick and Anna exchanged a surprised look before shaking their heads.

“No,” Rodrick said. “We’ve stayed away from them after our experience in the Adventurer’s Guild. I know there are smaller ones, but they’ve all got recruitment requirements that I haven’t met. They’d take Anna in a heartbeat, though.”

“Except I’m not joining them without you. They’d just use me as a mobile health station anyway. I don’t want to lose my autonomy.” Anna crossed her arms and shook her head. “Why do you ask? Are you part of one?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Technically, no,” Reya said, glancing at Arwin out of the corners of her eyes.

Arwin cleared his throat. “Okay, technically no. But in spirit, yes.”

“What’s that meant to mean?” Rodrick asked.

“I started a guild myself. It’s just a few people in it right now,” Arwin said carefully. “We aren’t official or anything, but there aren’t any of the restrictions that other guilds have. It’s pretty much just us right now.”

“The blacksmith is part of your guild?” Rodrick tilted his head to the side. “Damn. How’d you pay him to join? Are you secretly rich?”

Arwin burst into laughter. “Money is the one thing I don’t have.”

Not yet, at least.

“I take it this is an invitation to join, then?” Anna asked.

Arwin nodded. “Yes. I don’t plan to grow fast, but you’ve both more than proven yourselves. I honestly don’t know how much we can offer you, but I can promise that we won’t screw you over.”

“We’d be able to hire the smith if we joined?” Anna asked.

“I’d say so.”

“What about term limits?” Rodrick asked. “Is there a set amount of time we’d have to stay?”

Arwin hadn’t put much thought into that. He hadn’t actually been planning on recruiting new members quite yet, but the words had left his mouth before he’d properly thought through

them. “No limits. Leave if you want, but I’d ask that you keep anything you find to yourselves. It’s not like I can enforce that, but I’d ask it nonetheless.”

Rodrick leaned in closer to Anna and whispered something into her ear. She thought for a second, then looked back to Arwin and gave him a small nod.

“If there aren’t restrictions on it, then I think we can tentatively accept. You’re the first one that hasn’t tried to cheat or otherwise get an upper hand out of partnering with a healer.”

“Is that common?” Arwin blinked in surprise.

“You’ve got no idea,” Rodrick said. “Half the people we join up with try to convince Anna to leave me and join their party. Bunch of assholes.”

“It’s a pain,” Anna agreed. “But you know what you’re doing. So, for the time being, we’ll join. It’s not an official guild yet from the sounds of things, so it’s really not that much of a commitment. I promise we won’t share anything you don’t want us to, though.”

Anna held her hand out and Arwin took it, shaking once. He’d never had trouble getting healers as the Hero, but every day he spent in his new life reminded him of just how different things really were.

“So, about that smith...” Rodrick hedged. “When can we meet him? I probably can’t afford anything he makes yet, but I’d love to have a look and start daydreaming.”

Arwin grinned. “The only people in my guild are Reya and I.”

“Wait, what?” Rodrick’s face creased with a frown. “But you said...”

“That you could meet the smith,” Arwin finished with a nod. Rodrick’s eyes went as wide as saucers as Arwin held his hand out. “Pleasure to meet you. I’m the smith.”

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“Wait,” Rodrick stammered, taking a step back. “That’s not possible. You can’t be the smith. You were fighting!”

“So I was.”

“You’re better at fighting than I am!”

“Probably.”

“Stronger, too!”

“Most definitely.”

“How?” Rodrick demanded. “A crafter shouldn’t be able to do that!”

Arwin shrugged in response. “Not every class is built the same, and not every person is content with their lot in life.”

“I’ll be damned,” Anna said, shaking her head and letting a smile slip across her lips.

“You’ve got a Unique class?”

“I do,” Arwin confirmed. “One that lets me ride the line between crafter and warrior. I made the armor that we’re wearing.”

Rodrick looked down to his scale mail greaves, then back up to Arwin, shaking his head in disbelief. “You know what? I’m jealous. Screw you.”

They all burst into laughter. Anna made her way over to Reya and pressed her hands to the wounds on her chest, sending soft light into the bloodied furrows and sealing them back over. Once she was finished, she helped Reya to her feet.

“So... do we get a discount or something?” Rodrick asked with a sly grin. “We’re friends, right?”

“Friends get the right to buy gear from me in the first place,” Arwin replied without missing a beat. “No discounts.”

“Damn it,” Rodrick said. Anna glared at him and he rubbed the back of his head, giving them a sheepish grin. “It was worth a shot. How much would it run me to get a full set of armor like the stuff you’ve got on your legs?”

Arwin considered his greaves. They’d definitely saved his life more than once during the fight with the Wurm, and they were still in good shape. His scale mail shirt was in worse condition, and he was pretty sure his entire body was bruised, but he’d avoided any further injury.

“The greaves were quite effective. I haven’t figured out how to make them into a chest piece, helmet, gauntlets, or boots yet,” Arwin admitted. “I’ll give you a more accurate quote for how much it’ll cost you once I have. For the greaves alone, I’d probably ask for around one hundred gold.”

Rodrick let out a whistle. “Makes sense. It gives me something to save up for, then. Does that include cost of materials?”

“Yes. If you bring me all the scales I need, I can probably knock it down to eighty.”

Though, if you stick around the guild and prove to be trustworthy, I'll probably make something free of cost. Definitely not saying that out loud. I'm not trying to bribe people to stay. That gets the wrong kind of attention.

“Perfect,” Rodrick said with a grin. He rubbed his hands together, then froze when he spotted Anna glaring at him.

“Stop doing business. We’re supposed to be celebrating,” Anna admonished. “Reya just got her class!”

“It doesn’t feel real,” Reya muttered, looking down at her hands before lifting her gaze back up to them. “I’m not dreaming, right?”

“If you were dreaming, I’d hope you could think up better company.” Rodrick let out a cackle and slapped Reya on her back. “Welcome to the life of an adventurer, lass. May it lead us to riches and – well, more riches, hopefully.”

“Perhaps we should head back to town,” Anna suggested. “I think I’ve had more excitement than I’d planned on today. Do you have a guildhall?”

Arwin cleared his throat. “Er... no. Not really.”

“We have a crumbling smithy,” Reya supplied.

“That’s not all,” Arwin protested. “We also have two beds.”

Anna and Rodrick stared at them.

“It’s a work in progress,” Arwin dismissed his armor with [Arsenal] and scratched at his back. “We’ll get there.”

“You know what?” Anna asked. “I believe you. That doesn’t change the fact that I’d be willing to stab someone for a good meal and bed right about now. I’m exhausted. Nearly watching people get killed will do that to you.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Arwin said absently, not thinking much of his words until he noticed the looks on Rodrick and Anna’s faces. “What?”

“You’ve been through some shit, haven’t you?” Rodrick asked, the usual cheer gone from his voice.

Arwin grunted and shook his head. The last thing he needed was their pity. “No matter. Anna was right. We should be celebrating Reya’s new class, and I’ve got some work to do. Let’s head back.”

The group returned to town without any further incidents. Rodrick and Anna broke off when they passed by the Gleaming Swordfish – they still had a few days paid for in the tavern, and there was no point wasting them.

Arwin and Reya slipped into Milten’s alleyways, traveling through the darkness until they found themselves back on their street. Before Arwin could make for the smithy, Reya caught his wrist. He turned to her in surprise.

“What is it?”

Reya’s cheeks reddened and she shifted her feet. “Could we go to the tavern? I… kind of want to tell Lillia that I got my class. I’m gonna wait for the right time, though. We can wait until she starts bringing out the food, and then I’ll tell her. The look on her face will be great!”

Arwin paused. He didn't have a good excuse to avoid the Demon Queen. It didn't look like either of them were going to blow the other's cover, but it was still stressful. Still, she hadn't done anything to justify his reluctance.

Beyond that, there were some things he needed to ask someone who understood Monsters – and Lillia probably understood them better than anyone else. Arwin sighed and nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Yes!” Reya cheered, pumping a hand in the air. “Let's go!”

She darted down the street and over to the tavern. Arwin shook his head and followed after her at a much more leisurely pace, arriving several seconds after Reya had already entered the building.

The heavy darkness that followed the Demon Queen remained exactly as it had been before, cloaking the tavern before Arwin had even gotten a chance to step through the door. He squinted as he ducked through the doorway, but to his surprise, there was actually some light within it.

Several faint spots of orange flickered on the walls, cast by candles within old lanterns. Their glow barely made it a few feet out, but it was just enough to see by – at least, if one was close enough to the light.

Lillia had also managed to procure several new mismatched chairs by her counter. One was far too short for its purpose, but chairs were still chairs. Reya had already taken one for herself.

Walking up beside her, Arwin tested one of the other chairs before lowering his weight into it. The piles of dust and rubble that had covered the floor of the tavern had been removed as well – Lillia had been hard at work. It still didn't look anything like a proper tavern, but it was several steps in the right direction.

A shadow stretched out in the dim light as Lillia stepped out from the kitchen, a pan in her hands. She smiled as she saw Reya, then paused as she spotted Arwin behind her. Her eyes flicked down to the pan and her cheeks reddened.

“One moment,” Lillia said, darting back into the kitchen.

“Oooh,” Reya whispered, leaning closer to Arwin. “She likes it. She took your advice about the monster theme as well! She’s trying to make the tavern look like a dungeon.”

“I – yeah. I suppose so,” Arwin said, looking around again. Lillia really *did* look like she'd liked the pan. She must have, if she was using it.

Arwin still had a small frown on his lips when Lillia came back out from the kitchen, wiping her hands off on her apron. “What can I get for you two?”

“I got my class!” Reya exclaimed, unable to control herself any longer.

“I thought you were going to wait until the food came,” Arwin said.

“I got impatient.”

“You got your class?” Lillia repeated, her eyes lighting up. “That’s incredible! Congratulations! What class did you get?”

Ah, wait. Maybe we shouldn't be telling the Demon Queen–

“A unique one called Warden,” Reya said without a second of hesitation. Arwin repressed a grimace, watching Lillia’s expression closely to study how she reacted.

To his surprise, the only thing he found in it was shared joy. Lillia was genuinely happy for Reya. It didn’t look like she had any ulterior motives in the slightest.

Perhaps I’m more caught up in the past than she is. We already called a truce, but some part of me never thought that the Demon Queen would be able to just... start a normal life. Care about people like she cares about monsters.

Could I do that if I were in her shoes? I’m not sure.

“I’ve never heard of Warden,” Lillia said. “That’s incredible. Great job, Reya. You have to be really proud of yourself.”

“I had a lot of help,” Reya said with a grin, looking back to Arwin. “Also, my armor got completely destroyed.”

“So I see,” Lillia said with a wince. “You look like you got healed, though. What hit you?”

“A Wurm.”

Lillia’s eyes bulged out of her head. “A Wurm? You survived a Wurm at your Tier?”

“Yeah. If it wasn’t for Arwin, I wouldn’t have. It was terrifying,” Reya admitted. “But we lived. That’s what matters, right?”

“I – yeah. It is,” Lillia said. “Well, what can I get for you? It’s on the house in celebration of your new class.”

“Oh, really? Could I have cake?”

Lillia cleared her throat. “I should amend my offer. I only have ingredients to make a steak right now.”

“I’ll take a steak, then.”

“Coming right up,” Lillia said, flashing Reya a grin before darting back into the kitchen. It didn’t take long before the sizzle of cooking meat filled the air. Arwin glanced around the tavern while they waited.

Lillia really had put a lot of effort into improving it. It was clear just how much she wanted everything to work out, and Arwin felt a pang of sympathy at the lack of people in the tavern.

I’m sure they’ll start coming soon enough once word gets out.

Minutes slipped by, and Lillia finally emerged from the back with a steak on a plate of metal. It didn’t have anything accompanying it, but as far as steaks went, it actually looked pretty good.

She set it down before Reya, then turned to Arwin. “What about you? Want something?”

“I already ate today,” Arwin said, a small smile flickering across his face before falling away. “But, if you don’t mind, I’d like to talk. Privately.”

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Lillia didn't respond for several seconds. Arwin held her gaze while Reya looked from one of them to the other, then pulled her steak closer and very pointedly avoided looking up from it.

"Fine," Lillia said curtly. She turned on her heel and strode into the kitchen. Arwin followed after her, assuming that she was giving him an unspoken invitation to follow. A part of him wanted to summon his armor and sword, but he'd already eaten the sword and summoning his armor would only make it look like he was planning on fighting.

Arwin stepped past the dim light of the lantern and entered the kitchen. It was more of a long hallway with some cooking utensils and an old cooktop on one side. Lillia stood at the far end of the hall, leaning against the wall in a patch of shadow with her arms crossed.

He could tell that her guard was up. Her eyes traced his movements and, despite her casual pose, the muscles in her body were tensed. She was ready to spring into motion the instant he did anything aggressive.

For a moment, it felt like it had so many times before. Arwin had lost count of the number of times they'd stood before each other just like this before launching into a fight. A fight that inevitably always ended the same way.

The back of Arwin's neck tingled as his mind screamed at him to be wary of the shadows. He was within the Demon Queen's domain – unarmed and unable to properly fight back if she tried to attack.

"Well?" Lillia asked, her lips thin. Her words were curt, but there was fear in them. Not fear of him; Arwin was certain of that much. They'd never been scared of each other. He was pretty sure he knew exactly what the fear was.

It was fear of losing what she'd been building. Her tavern – and his smithy – both sat suspended on a thin cord. The moment either he or Lillia pulled just a little too hard, it would snap.

And yet, ignoring the problem could only solve things for so long. There were too many questions. He had enemies, and he didn't even know who they were. At one point, the Demon Queen had been one of them.

Now – Arwin wasn't so sure.

“What do you want?” Lillia asked. “Stop staring at me. If you're going to try to run me through, I dare you to give it a try. See what happens.”

“Who are you?” Arwin finally asked, finding the words he was looking for.

The Demon Queen stared at Arwin. “What? Did you hit your head on something? You know damn well who I am, and I know who you are.”

“No, you don't.” Arwin shook his head. “You knew who I was. I'm not that man any longer. He's dead. I didn't ask who you used to be. I'm asking who you are. Right now. Who are you?”

A second passed. Then two. The Demon Queen ran her tongue along her lips, considering Arwin quietly. Finally, a smirk flickered across her lips.

“What does it look like? I'm living in a run-down tavern with nothing but a cobbled together kitchen. I'm an innkeeper. That's it. That's all I want to be.”

“Then I am just the smith that lives down the road. That's all I want to be.”

“That’s not what it sounded like to me. Reya’s been talking about how you want to start up a guild. That’s not something a blacksmith does.”

“A blacksmith makes armor. I’m just taking my armor a bit farther,” Arwin said, a wry smile flickering across his lips. “Doesn’t an innkeeper want more than just an inn? You want a community.”

Lillia let her head incline, the confusion and tension slowly leaving her form. She stepped to the side, then flicked a hand. Some of the darkness swirling around her abated, revealing a doorway that Arwin had previously missed.

Within it was a matted pile of straw in the shape of a bed. It looked horribly uncomfortable, though Arwin suspected it was probably far better than the floor. After sending one last glance at Arwin, Lillia stepped into the room and sat down on the far end of the bed.

It was a silent invitation, an acceptance of the continued truce Arwin had offered. Every single thing Arwin knew about the Demon Queen screamed at him not to accept it. She was a devious opponent with immense power that grew stronger still the closer he got to her sanctum – and if anywhere in her tavern was a sanctum, then it would be her room.

I’m not speaking with the Demon Queen, though. The person before me is nothing more than Lillia the innkeeper.

Arwin stepped inside. He sat down on the far side of the straw mattress, leaving his side completely exposed. If Lillia had wanted to, she probably could have run him through before he even realized she was moving.

Granted, he suspected he could have summoned his armor before she did any lasting damage, but Lillia made no moves. Neither of them spoke for a few more seconds. Finally, Arwin broke the silence.

“I didn’t realize you could reduce the darkness around you.”

“It’s not easy. Normally, I have to completely drain myself of my energy.” Lilla spoke softly, and Arwin could tell by how her voice was muted that she wasn’t looking at him either. “I’ve been working on trying to control it more, though. Nobody wants to eat at an inn where you can’t see the food.”

“There’s an appeal to it if you sell it the right way,” Arwin said with a small smile. “Especially if the food doesn’t look good.”

“Say that again and Lillia the Innkeeper is going to stab you with her tail.”

Arwin snorted. “I never said it didn’t look good. I just said it would help if it didn’t.”

“My point still stands.”

“Should an innkeeper even have a tail? I’d think you’d be trying to hide it.”

Something moved in the corner of Arwin’s vision and he glanced over as Lillia brought her barbed tail to flick in the air before her, a pensive expression on her face. “I was going to, until someone suggested that a monster themed inn might actually work.”

“You’re really going with it, then?”

“It wasn’t a half bad idea.”

Arwin grunted. “I’d say so. I just didn’t think you’d agree. Isn’t it... concerning? What if someone catches on?”

“Who would?” Lillia snorted. “Let’s be real. What would either of us ever be doing here? It’s so ludicrous that it’s impossible to comprehend. The worst that could happen would be some idiot would think I’m a lower ranked demon, but I don’t think I’m anywhere near popular enough to draw attention that could make that a problem.”

“That’s true enough,” Arwin allowed.

“Did you really come here just to have small talk?” Her voice was guarded – she was waiting for him to try something. Arwin didn’t blame her, since he half expected Lillia to do the same.

“Do you really get to talk to that many people?” Arwin raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I thought you just needed some company.”

To his surprised, Lillia winced. “You aren’t wrong. It’s... a nice change of pace. I’ve started to get a little too used to the voice in my own head.”

“Hopefully only one.”

Lillia glared at him. “I’m not insane. There’s only one. Usually. An inn isn’t meant to be quiet, you know.”

Arwin started to nod, then paused. “Wait. I thought you mostly wanted to cook for people. Did you want to actually run an inn?”

“Inn, tavern. Both. One day, at least.” Lillia sighed, then looked up at the ceiling, letting a small smile flit across her features. “I can picture it. Maybe I’m delusional, but I can’t shake the

thought of a full room. It would be so noisy. I'd have to yell over people so they'd be able to hear what I'm saying."

Arwin was surprised to find that he did understand what she meant. He wasn't so sure he wanted his smithy to be so popular he couldn't hear himself think, but the idea of lines stretching out the door just to buy his work did strike a hungry spark deep within him.

Even though he was well aware that selling magical items to the general populace was a bad idea at the moment, it was nothing more than an idle daydream where logic had no place.

"I don't think it's delusional," Arwin said. "It's better than what we were doing."

The smile fell away from Lillia's lips. "Yeah. It is."

"Why were you doing it in the first place?" Arwin asked, turning to look at her front on for the first time since they'd sat down. "I don't understand. You aren't the person I thought you were."

"The fact that you're referring to me as a person rather than a demon seems a bit off as well," Lillia said with a snort, shifting and crossing her legs beneath her so she could match Arwin's gaze. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

"Ask me what? Why I was defending my people?"

"Defending?" Lillia scoffed. "More like hunting."

Arwin's brow furrowed in confusion. "Hunting? All I ever did was keep your army from advancing. The only time I struck first was when your forces were pushed so deeply into human territory that I had to attack before you could torch villages. I just don't see how the person that's

so eager to have a joyous tavern was slaughtering entire families without leaving a single survivor.”

Lillia nearly choked on her indignation as she thrust a finger into Arwin’s chest. “The absolute gall to claim that when you’re the one that murdered countless innocents and torched their villages to the ground. Your hands are stained with more blood than you can ever wash off.”

“Murder?” Arwin’s eyes narrowed. “The only things I killed were the ones trying to rip my throat out.”

“Children were trying to kill you?” Lillia crossed her arms. “Bullshit.”

“Children?” Arwin blinked. “I never killed any children.”

“Just because you don’t see monsters as rational beings doesn’t mean—”

“Did they look like actual children?”

“What?” Lillia blinked. “What kind of question is that?”

“Was it obvious they were children? They resembled human children?”

“With monster traits, but yes. Many of them did.”

Arwin stared at Lillia, but he couldn’t find any deception in her face. She seemed to be telling the truth, but that made absolutely no sense. Arwin didn’t remember the face of everyone he’d killed, but he’d never killed a child.

“I never did that,” Arwin said. “I didn’t kill any children. I’d remember that. I know I would. You’re the one who—”

Lillia was shaking her head before Arwin could finish speaking. “I’d never kill a kid. I’ve killed more humans than I can ever remember, and some of them were younger than me, but no kids. Not unless you were sending kids against me in your armies.”

“Of course we didn’t,” Arwin snapped. His mind whirred, trying to make sense of Lillia’s words, but the answer was staring him right in the face, no matter how badly he wanted to ignore it. “You’re telling the truth.”

“You’re telling me that you thought I was going around slaughtering villages of people for no reason?” Lillia demanded. “What, did you think that I was just some monster that loved killing? I was defending my land!”

“I think we both were.” A sinking pit formed in Arwin’s stomach. “We got played.”

Chapter 36

“Played?” Lillia asked, anger and confusion mixing in her tone. “What are you talking about? Are you saying that everything that you did to my people was just a game to you?”

“What? No. It wasn’t a game. *We* were the game. The pieces, at least,” Arwin said, speaking faster as pieces started to slot together. He wasn’t sure if they were the right ones, but they began to form a picture he couldn’t remove. “Forget me for a moment. Did your guild – or whoever it was that aided with your army and management – did they ever do anything... off?”

Lillia blinked; the vexation taken from her features as she was forced to think for a moment. “Off? What are you talking about?”

There was a sinking understanding in her words that told Arwin he was on the right track. He just wasn't sure if that was something to be happy about or not.

“Actions that didn't line up with what they claimed. The guild told me they wanted me to be the strongest adventurer so I could fight off the monster horde, and yet they didn't tell me how important getting Achievements early on was,” Arwin said. “Anything like that?”

Lillia swallowed, her eyes drifting as she sifted through memories. Her features went flat. “Yes. They did the same thing. I was Count Tier before I realized that the true power in classes came from Achievements rather than pure Tiers.”

“What about your army? Did they let you vet it?”

“No. They always said I had—”

“Other things that were far more important, such as training to defeat the Hero of Lian?”

Lillia swallowed again, realization starting to set in. “Yes.”

“They told me the same shit,” Arwin said. “Except my line was to defeat the Demon Queen. Everything else was the same. Did they let you use any of the armor or weapons you ever picked up?”

“No. I had to use the stuff they made in the guild. What about your orders? Did you ever speak to anyone outside of the guild for them?”

“No. Everything came from the guild leader or one of his subordinates. I didn't get any outside information aside from when I was out on missions, and the guild always herded my group straight to the battles without letting me spend too much time in the cities. They were always watching us to make sure we wouldn't learn too much, weren't they?”

They stared at each other. There wasn't a single word that could properly encapsulate the emotions Arwin was feeling, but Lillia gave her best shot at it.

"Fuck." Lillia leaned closer to squint at his features. "You didn't kill kids?"

"No more than you did."

"The villages?"

"Not me."

Lillia rocked back, her eyes wide with disbelief. "You're telling the truth – but I saw your men torching villages with my own eyes. I literally watched innocents get cut down in front of me. That was your army!"

"Just like I saw your army doing the same," Arwin said. "I don't think either of us are wrong. Your army *did* destroy human cities, and I suspect mine did the same to monster cities. A portion of the army, at least. I can't imagine they were all in on it. It was always raids, and we always got the information too late to properly interfere. A few times, that could have been a coincidence. But with the amount it happened? The more I think about it, the more impossible it feels. The only way we could have kept missing the attacks and showing up late is if the other army knew exactly where we were."

"I never saw you at the attacks, but I heard claims you'd retreated. We only fought when our full armies were clashing, and I never saw you retreat once. The Monster Coalition always sent people to pull me out, claiming they'd shown up just in time to save me. I never thought about it, but it looked like your soldiers reinforced you at the same time. I thought that was just them making sure we didn't overrun you, but did they tell you—"

“The same thing,” Arwin confirmed. “They’d arrive just as I was running low on energy and pull me out. It seemed like they were trying to keep me safe, but I think the truth was they wanted to make sure neither of us died yet.”

Dread dread covered Lillia’s features. “Why? Why would anyone do that? And who? You’re telling me the whole war was completely artificial?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it at all,” Arwin said, running his hands through his hair and shaking his head. It felt like the floor had collapsed out from under him. Even though he’d already decided that Lillia wasn’t his enemy anymore, this was something more.

She’d never been his enemy in the first place. She’d been fighting for the exact same thing he had.

“I can’t believe this,” Lillia muttered into the palms of her hands. “So many people died. What about your closest group? The ones that were always with you? Were they—”

“Never left my side for long enough to destroy a town.”

Lillia looked like she wanted to throw up. “I killed so many of them. They were just trying to defend their homes?”

Arwin’s stomach sank even further.

“Fuck. Your lieutenants were the same?”

“Always with me. I chose them myself. The only members of my army I was allowed to choose,” Lillia muttered, her eyes boring into the ground.

Were we only allowed to choose our circles because they knew we’d kill each other anyway?

Arwin's throat constricted and his hands tightened at his sides. He'd always been convinced that his blade had been wielded for justice, but it was completely soaked through with the blood of innocents.

"I'm so sorry," Arwin said. "I didn't know. I thought—"

"We both did, didn't we?" Lillia asked bitterly. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I believe you. Things line up too well to pull wool over my eyes and even try to believe anything else."

They sat on either corner of the bed wordlessly for nearly a minute. Arwin stared at the dark wall until it swam before his eyes, but it wasn't changing anything. His friends were dead, and so were Lillia's.

Someone had used both of them like puppets and thrown them to the side. Arwin had absolutely no idea why they'd been left alive, but he'd have been willing to bet everything he had that neither he nor Lillia had been meant to survive the explosion.

He glanced over at the former Demon Queen. Her shoulders were hunched, and her face was buried deep into her hands. Arwin had already suspected some degree of betrayal, so as hard as the news had hit him, his subconscious had already been prepared for it to some degree.

To Lillia, it was completely out of the blue, and he didn't envy her. Having to handle the full revelation at once would have shattered everything he knew. Arwin was far from the best at comforting anyone, though.

He raised a hand, staring at it as if it were a foreign instrument, before slowly reaching out and uncomfortably setting it on Lillia's shoulder. She stiffened but made no move to remove it.

“Do you have any idea who would have done this?” Lillia asked, her voice muffled.

“What was the point?”

“I have a theory,” Arwin said. “Two of them, actually.”

Lillia's head snapped up and she locked eyes with him. Specks of molten fury danced within them. “Tell me. Now.”

“Do you recall the gem that was in my armor?” Arwin asked. “The black one.”

“Yes. It was a backup strategy to kill me, wasn't it?”

“No. I have no damn idea what it was,” Arwin said with a shake of his head. “But I think it could have been a failsafe. I didn't put it there, and I oversaw my armor. The Adventurer's Guild would have been the only ones that could have modified it, but it doesn't make sense why they didn't tell me about it. If I knew I had a bomb that could kill you, I'd have worked around that. I already planned to die for the victory, so it just doesn't line up.”

“You're telling me you think it was the entire Guild? Not just one or two people?”

“I don't know, but I know the guild leader was in on it, because he inspected my armor. I just don't understand why we survived – or what they even stand to gain from this in the first place.” Arwin pressed his lips together. “Which leads me to the other option. I don't know why we survived the explosion, but I suspect it was due to an achievement I got right before the explosion. There's a possibility that the achievement, the bomb, or both were put there by

someone working *against* the guild to get us out. The end result is the same either way, though. The guild betrayed us. But what about you? Was there really nobody you knew that might have stood to gain anything from the war?"

"I can't see what anyone gains from keeping the war going. The Monster Coalition were the ones that outfitted me and handled recruitment and management for the army. They hate humans."

"And the Guild hates monsters. Their whole purpose is to destroy them," Arwin said. "Nothing makes sense, and the more I learn, the more confusing it gets. I think I should make it clear that I don't hold the deaths of my friends against you, though. We were nothing but swords in someone else's hands."

Lillia wiped her face with the back of a hand and raised her head, giving Arwin a small nod. "I – the same. It makes me wonder how much of what I believed was a lie, though. What if everything was fake from the start?"

A chilling thought struck Arwin. "You weren't kidnapped from Earth as well, were you?"

"Earth? Why would I be from dirt?"

He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed to hear that. Arwin let out a breath and shook his head. "Never mind."

"Hold on, you can't just do that. We're the only ones that know the truth about what's going on," Lillia said, her eyes narrowing. "If you have any information, you need to share it."

"I don't think it's particularly relevant."

“Let me decide that. Don’t deny me this,” Lillia begged. “I need to know. I can’t let things as they are, and every single piece of the puzzle could be vital.”

It was hard to argue with that.

“Fine. I’m telling you that it isn’t going to be useful, though. If anything, I think it’s just going to confuse you even more. I’m not from this world. I’m from a planet called Earth, and I got magically kidnapped and brought here as a child, specifically to fight you.”

Lillia stared at Arwin. “Is that meant to be a joke?”

“I told you,” Arwin said with a sigh. He took his hand off Lillia’s shoulder and made to rise, but she caught him by his wrist before he could stand.

“I’m sorry. Sit back down. Please.”

Arwin glanced back at her, then slowly lowered himself back to the hay.

“There are other worlds?” Lillia asked.

“You believe me?”

“I don’t know what in the Nine Underlands to believe anymore, so I might as well start with you,” Lillia said dryly. Her eyes narrowed and she poked him in the chest. “But if you’re screwing with me, I swear I’ll make you pay.”

“I’m not. There’s not much to say, unfortunately. There’s at least one other world. Maybe it’s a different universe. I don’t know. There wasn’t magic, and I really don’t remember much of it. I was taken away when I was a child. I assume you’re native to this planet?”

“As far as I’m aware, yes.” Lillia scrunched her nose. “Well, shit. You were right. All that did was give me more questions and absolutely nothing useful in terms of what I actually wanted to find out. How long have you suspected that something was awry with the war?”

“I thought I’d just been betrayed, not that the entire thing was a sham,” Arwin said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “I only figured it out just now, together with you.”

“So why did you come here to talk with me?” Lillia asked. “You must have thought I was a bloodthirsty monster.”

“I assumed you’d finally changed your ways, and I was hoping I could ask you about the mating habits of monsters.”

Lillia stared at Arwin, her cheeks tinging slightly red. “Why in the world do you want to know about that?”

Arwin opened his mouth, but he’d butchered his wording so badly that he couldn’t muster up an answer before a snicker slipped out of his lips. Lillia couldn’t keep herself from matching it and they both doubled over in fits of poorly-suppressed, hysterical laughter.

It took Arwin nearly five minutes to fully gather himself. Every time he started to stop laughing, he caught Lillia’s eye and started to laugh again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed this hard.

It wasn’t like anything had been that funny, but he suspected his body had reached a breaking point and smashed right through it. There was only so much it could handle before emotions started to mix together and break down.

“Seriously, why do you want to know that, though? I assume you meant something by it,” Lillia said, her voice wavering as she tried to compose herself.

Arwin wiped away tears of mirth, forcing himself back under control. “It’s about the Wyrms in the forest. From what I know, Wyrms are ground dwellers that rarely emerge from their tunnel systems, but this one came out and tried to kill us. It was much more aggressive than I think it should have been. The rest of the forest seemed to be in mating season, and I was wondering...”

“If Wyrms get worked up enough to chase people away when they’re in the mood?” Lillia asked, raising an eyebrow. “It’s possible, but I can’t say I’m an expert on it. That’s like me asking you how horny old humans usually get.”

“Very, but I get the point,” Arwin said. He heaved a sigh. “Damn.”

“To be honest, I still can’t believe you managed to survive a Wyrms at your Tier. That should have been impossible. How’d you do it? Did you lie about your class getting changed?”

“No. I’m a smith. I just have some ways to defend myself. And I wasn’t alone. If I was, I’d have died.”

“Well, damn.” Lillia studied the palms of her hands. “They had to be quite some people if they helped you fend off a Wyrms. High Tier?”

“Nope. Apprentice, just like me.”

“And you fought off a Wyrms?”

“I cracked its knee enough to mildly inconvenience it,” Arwin corrected.

“That’s impressive. I’m not sure if it’s appropriate to look on them fondly, but it reminds me a bit of when I still had a party,” Lillia said, a small smile crossing her face as she reminisced.

I guess she’s just been sitting in this inn all day, waiting for people to show up. Sure, she’s gotten a few customers, but I’d already be insane if I were in her shoes. This sounds miserable for someone who was even more excited to be around others than I was.

“You know, if the Wyrms was mating, we might have a problem,” Lillia said.

Arwin tilted his head to the side, pulled from his thoughts. “What? Why?”

“Well, Wyrmlings are pretty damn destructive,” Lillia said. “And they usually have huge litters. There could be dozens of them, and they’re going to seek out the nearest food source. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy a miniature horde of Wyrms at my door.”

“Oh, shit,” Arwin muttered. “I did not know that bit. I thought you said you didn’t know much about them.”

“Everyone knows that you don’t want to be near a Wyrms when it mates.”

“Not everyone.”

“Evidently,” Lillia said with a snort. “That’s going to be bad. What do you think the chances are that the guild here does something about it?”

“I don’t know if I trust the guild,” Arwin said slowly. “I don’t know if I want any attention on this city at all. Not until we’ve learned more about what we’re up against.”

“It’s we, then?”

“Didn’t we just agree on that?” Arwin asked. “We were both used for something, and I’m damn well going to find out what. I’ll do it with or without you, but I imagine it’s going to be really hard to figure anything out on my own. Only by putting together what we know are we going to be able to figure out where the cracks in this shit was.”

Lillia’s jaw set and she nodded. “You’re right. I’m in.”

“Welcome to the guild,” Arwin said, rising to his feet and holding his hand out to Lillia.

“Slow down there.” She raised an eyebrow. “The guild? I didn’t say anything about that. An inn is one thing, but a whole guild? And one I’m not the leader of? Are you really inviting the Demon Queen to a human guild?”

“No. I’m inviting an innkeeper,” Arwin replied. “And it’s my damn guild. I invite who I please.”

Lillia snorted. “A change of topic, then. I’ve got a question.” She averted her gaze as Arwin looked to her.

“Yeah?”

“Do you hate my cooking?”

“What? No. It’s fantastic.”

“Then why do you never eat it? You’ve only come by a few times in recent times.” Lillia crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “I’d rather you just tell me the truth. If there’s something wrong with my cooking, I want to improve it.”

Arwin grimaced. “That’s kind of a long story.”

“Sounds like you just don’t like my cooking.”

“Oh, fine.” Arwin threw his hands up in defeat. “I eat magical items.”

“You *what?*”

Chapter 37

“I take it this means that the explosion didn’t... change you somehow?” Arwin asked, ignoring the incredulous expression on Lillia’s face.

“Change me? It damn well changed me, but it didn’t let me start snacking on the Mesh itself!” Lillia exclaimed. “You’re not messing with me, right? You can actually eat magic?”

“It’s not all sunshine and rainbows. It’s not just that I *can* eat magic,” Arwin corrected, his features darkening. “It’s that I *have* to eat magic. If I don’t, I’ll die.”

The surprise on Lillia’s face turned to a confused frown. “I’ve never heard of something like that before. So you can’t eat normal food?”

“No, I can. It just doesn’t sustain me in the way that magic does. I’ll also ask you not to mention that – you’re the only one I’ve told, and I’ve only told you because I’m hoping you might have some insight as to what happened to us.”

Lilla pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them and chewing her lower lip in thought. “I definitely got changed by the explosion. It took my class away and gave me a new one called Hearthkeeper.”

“Unique?”

“Yeah. I got it from an Achievement – probably the same one that you did. Does the word Sunset mean anything to you?”

“It does. That was the one I got as well,” Arwin rubbed the bridge of his nose with a frown. “I’m not sure if that gives us more answers or questions.”

“It could lend credence to the idea that someone planted the bomb to save us.”

Arwin wasn’t sure he was optimistic enough to fully commit to the hope. The Achievement hadn’t been *granted* by the explosion. The conditions to fulfill it had been met. That was a subtle difference, but it was still a difference. He’d felt the power from the explosion. It had been meant to kill, not aid. There was no way to argue that someone knew that the explosion would cause an Achievement to trigger either – nobody other than the Mesh itself knew what could make it assign Achievements or Titles.

And, even if they’d had a strong suspicion it would have worked, many Achievements or Titles would only appear for certain people, even if two people did the same thing. The fact that both Arwin and Lillia had gotten the Achievement meant something else was going on.

“No way to know one way or the other for now, so we’ll just have to assume we don’t. How different is your class from anything else you’ve seen? There’s obviously a sliding scale for anything Unique that could make it either good, bad, or worthless, but my own class is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Does your class have anything odd about it that makes it more than just a normal one? I’m a smith, but some of the abilities I’ve been offered look far more offensive than they should be for a crafting class. It almost feels like I got a hybrid.”

“I’ve noticed some similarities to what you’re describing. I don’t have anything nearly as problematic as having to consume magic to live, but I do gain benefits based on the people staying in my inn or eating at my tavern – and drawbacks if it’s empty.”

“Like it is now?” Arwin raised an eyebrow and Lillia grimaced.

“Yes.”

“Significant benefits?”

“Very. Especially for the inn.” Lillia swallowed heavily. “Luckily, the drawbacks haven’t activated yet, but it won’t be long. That’s why I’ve been so desperate to get more people, but nothing I do works. Nobody wants to come to this shitty old alleyway.”

“What happens when they activate?” Arwin asked. “And how long do you have?”

“Two days. The tavern drawbacks make it so that all my abilities are weakened. The inn debuff... it’ll start by cutting my abilities off entirely. If I can’t get anyone to stay after a month, I’ll die.”

“You need to get this shithole good enough to convince someone to stay in it within a month?” Arwin asked, his eyes going wide. “Oh, shit. That’s bad.”

“You think?” Lillia asked dryly. “I’m focusing on the tavern right now. Nobody is going to bother staying if they don’t come in the first place. That’s why I was desperate enough to try out your monster inn suggestion – and honestly, it seems like it might work. I just don’t know if I’ll pick up enough speed to convince anyone to stay here in time.”

“Can’t you just make it free for a night or something?”

Lillia shook her head. “I already thought of that. It doesn’t work. The buffs only come into play if I’ve properly earned them, so inviting a ton of people in for free or paying them to stay doesn’t do anything. They have to come in of their own volition and eat or sleep whilst paying for it.”

“Ah,” Arwin said with a grimace. Lillia’s abilities were clearly more limited than his were – but the Mesh was fair. That meant her potential buffs were probably enormous as well, but getting to the point where she could use them would be incredibly difficult.

“Ah,” Lillia agreed bitterly. “It’s still nice to live peacefully for a bit, though. I’d trade a lifetime of living through war for a month of peace in a heartbeat. Besides, I’m sure I’ll start getting customers soon.”

Arwin could hear the doubt in her voice. She wasn’t optimistic about her chances, and if he was honest, he wasn’t either. Lillia’s cooking was pretty damn good, but her location was horrible. Nobody lived on the street, and nobody would come this far into the slums of the city if they were in their right mind.

It would take a lot of time to build up a proper reputation, and by the time Lillia managed to do that, she’d probably get killed by her own magic.

That’s bad. I just got another ally and she’s probably going to end up dying in just – wait. Am I an idiot?

Arwin burst into laughter. Lillia blinked, taken aback, then narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t realize you took that much joy in my upcoming death.”

“No. It’s not that,” Arwin said, trying to get his laughter under control. “I just realized how stupid we both are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You just need a few people to avoid dying?”

“To stay in the inn? Yeah. That wouldn’t stop the debuffs, but it would be enough to keep me alive. Anything more than zero is going to be impossible at this rate, so it hardly matters. You can’t strongarm them into doing it either. That goes against how it works.”

“I don’t need to,” Arwin said. “As I said, we’re both stupid. You already have two people that can stay in your inn. Me and Reya.”

Lillia opened her mouth, then paused. She blinked, her brow furrowing. Slowly, she let her mouth close again. “I – oh, shit. You’re right. I didn’t even think about that because you were... well, you know.”

“I’m well aware, yes. But that would work, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t,” Lillia said, excitement starting to enter her tone. “You’d still have to pay me for the rooms, though. It couldn’t be free or it won’t count.”

“I think we can handle that as long as your prices aren’t ridiculously high. It’s not a big price to pay, at least until you can get enough people here to keep yourself alive. We might even be able to go farther. The other two members that joined my guild may be in need of an inn fairly soon. They might be able to move in as well.”

Lillia’s eyes lit up and she took a step forward. “You’re serious? Two more people?”

“Yeah. You’d have to have actual rooms for them, though. Does this crappy place have anything like that?”

Lillia cleared her throat. “It... well, not yet. I’ve got two rooms upstairs that I trust the floor in. The rest of it is liable to collapse – but still! I can make do with that, and the money could go toward renovations and making more rooms and a better tavern! Having you and Reya here would also remove enough of the debuff on my abilities for me to get some helpers in the tavern.”

“I’ve got twenty-seven gold and nine silver right now,” Arwin said, looking through his pouch. “Would that be enough?”

“Twenty-seven? Are you kidding me? Yeah, that’s more than enough. I only have to charge a silver a day!”

It was a bit odd, seeing excitement on the face that had belonged to his mortal enemy for so many years. He’d never seen her direct anything toward him other than disgust, anger, or apathy.

I suppose I was no different. That smile definitely suits her well, though.

“What?” Lillia asked. Arwin realized that he’d zoned off and shook his head to clear it.

“I just got lost in thought. How strong are those buffs you get if we properly fill your tavern and inn?”

“Pretty damn powerful. I don’t even know the full extent of what they do. A lot of it is gated behind how many people are staying or eating here.”

Arwin nodded. “We’ll have to make it a priority to get more attention here, then. If your power is anything like mine, then I suspect you’re going to have some form of scaling factor that means you need to get more and more people to stick around to keep yourself from dying.”

Some of the excitement in Lillia’s expression slipped away. “Shit. That could be bad.”

“We’ll handle it,” Arwin said. “After all, we’re going to have a whole guild to back you up soon enough.”

“Optimistic, are you?”

Arwin chuckled. “Perhaps. Either way, I get the feeling Reya is going to be ecstatic about this. She already eats your food constantly, so being closer to it will probably make her blow steam out her nose. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the guild shortly – assuming they stick around.”

Lillia started to nod, then paused and looked down at herself, gesturing vaguely. “Wait. What if they... well, you know.”

“For now, I’d suggest keeping up your disguise. They’re decent people, but I don’t know how they’ll react to the truth.”

“Even if we’re part of the same guild and they’re staying here constantly? They’re going to have to suspect something.”

“Then you’d best make sure you *really* seem to be into your role,” Arwin said dryly. “Hopefully you’ll have the place in a bit more order by the time they come around. Speaking of which, is there anything else you need made?”

“I – oh, yeah. Definitely. I still need more utensils, and some more cookware would be incredible. I don’t know if I can afford anything extra right now, though.”

“I could pay you with supplies. That wouldn’t count against your class, would it?”

Lillia tilted her head to the side in thought for a few seconds, then grinned. “I think that would work.”

“Perfect,” Arwin said. “In that case, let’s go tell Reya. We’ll need to move the beds out of the smithy and into your inn.”

“I can help,” Lillia said. “Seems only right. Can’t say I ever thought I’d be in this position. It kind of feels like I had some nasty mushrooms in my food and I’m passed out somewhere in a field. I mean... imagine that. The Demon Queen and the Hero of Man–”

“Both still out there, fighting somewhere,” Arwin said. “The original ones are dead and rotting. The only people in this room are Arwin and Lillia.”

Lillia smiled and nodded. “Right. Thank you, Arwin. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Likewise,” Arwin said. “I think we’ve both got a lot we can learn from each other.”

Chapter 38

“We’re staying here?” Reya asked, her eyes nearly doubling in size as she looked from Arwin to Lillia. “Seriously? That’s awesome! What happened back there? I thought you guys hated each other!”

“Wait, really?” Arwin blinked in surprise.

“I mean, yeah. Anyone would have seen the way you looked at each other.”

“Why did you keep trying to have me come along with you if you thought that?” Arwin demanded. “I thought you were oblivious!”

“So you *did* hate each other!”

“There was a misunderstanding,” Arwin said with a grimace. A misunderstanding might have been the biggest understatement of the century, but it wasn’t the right time to give Reya their full backstory. She had enough on her plate to deal with already.

Reya arched an eyebrow and peered over their shoulders. “Interesting. Now I really want to know what you did back there.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Arwin said. “What matters is that Lillia is going to be joining our guild, and we’ll be moving into her inn – at least for our night lodgings.”

“The ones you barely use because you’re always working?”

“Do you want to move in or not?”

“I definitely want to move in,” Reya said hurriedly. “Especially if that means we get three meals a day instead of just one. I’d be dining like a king.”

“Good,” Arwin said. He jerked his chin toward the door. “Come help me gather up the beds and bring them over here, then. After that, I’ve got some work to do.”

“Can I help?” Reya asked as the trio headed out of the dark room and emerged into the sunlight outside.

“It’ll be smithing, so probably not. If you need something to do, maybe try to help Lillia do some reorganization. Figure out what it is we’ll need for the tavern to function better. It’s part of the guild now, so we’ll need to do some reworking to make sure it lives up to our name.”

“What name?” Reya asked. “We aren’t even an official guild.”

“The first step of becoming is believing and acting as if you are.”

“That sounds more like bullshitting,” Reya said. Arwin glared at her and she snickered, raising her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Understood, Guild Leader Sir.”

“Do not start calling me that. My name is Arwin.”

Reya just snickered harder, and a small grin passed over Lillia’s face. Arwin suppressed a sigh and shook his head, wisely choosing to abandon the topic. The more he insisted that Reya do something, the less he suspected she would actually do it.

At least she’s being herself. That’s a far cry from the desperate woman that showed me the smithy just a few weeks ago.

It took a little under an hour to move both beds over to Lillia’s building. Getting them up the stairs was the hardest part, but between the three of them, they eventually managed it without destroying anything too important.

As soon as they’d finished, Arwin bid Lillia and Reya farewell before returning to his smithy. He took Reya’s damaged armor with him and set about repairing it as soon as he got back.

The repairs weren't too difficult, as all he had to do was remove the damaged scales and add in a new layer of fresh ones. Fortunately, the item hadn't been damaged badly enough to impact its magic, so It only took about an hour before he'd finished and moved on.

There was a variety of gear he still wanted to make, foremost amongst everything being a hammer for himself. Arwin was tempted to start immediately, but he resisted the urge. He wanted to use the Achievement he'd gotten from scaring the Wyrms off on his hammer, but wasting it on a weapon made from poor materials would be pointless.

I need to get my hands on something really nice. That probably means hunting a real nasty monster, so I should hold off on that. I'll start with making some cutlery for Lillia. Then I'll look into going hunting again once Anna and Rodrick come join us. We're going to have to discuss the potential upcoming disaster with the Wyrms and what we're going to do about it. If we fight them, I get the feeling they'd be perfect for this.

For now, I might also spend some time shopping to fix up the smithy a little more. I still need a bloody door.

With his plans in mind, Arwin got to work.

Time slipped away. Making utensils was far from a challenging task, and Arwin soon made a drawer's worth of forks, knives, and spoons. None of them were magical – he had no idea what infusing a spoon with magic would do and he had no desire to find out. Someone would probably just steal it.

The utensils were a bit rough, but they'd serve their purpose. A quick glance out the cracks in the walls told Arwin that it was still early in the evening, so he took a trip into town.

It didn't take much time for him to find a carpenter that had a door for sale. Arwin had never considered it, but apparently most doorways were the same size and shape. That made it considerably easier for him to purchase a door as well as some hinges and nails to secure it for just five gold.

Arwin took it back to the smithy and hammered the nails into tight preexisting cracks in the stone. Once he'd finished, Arwin took a step back and studied his handiwork.

The door wasn't anything special, but it was a door. He had the key in his pocket, an item he wasted no time in applying to the lock, just to open and close the door a few times. It struck him that he probably looked insane opening and closing a door for no reason, but Arwin didn't care.

It was a step closer to his goals. Soon he'd have a proper smithy, and his guild was starting to come together. Sure, there might have been a potential horde of Wyrms just a few hours from town that could draw the attention of the Adventurer's Guild and bring everything crashing down on their heads, but that was a problem for later.

For the time being, Arwin just wanted to test out the new location of his bed. He headed inside and grabbed the utensils he'd made for Lillia, then stepped back into the street and locked the door behind him. Nodding to himself, Arwin set off down the dilapidated street and toward his new lodgings for the foreseeable future.

He made his way into the back and up a set of rickety stairs, taking each one carefully. Lillia had assured them that the stairs were safe when they were bringing the beds up, but that didn't make him any less suspicious of them.

Never thought I'd be sleeping in the Demon – no. In Lillia's house. Certainly a bit odd, no matter what I say.

Reya had moved her bed into the room that Lillia had been using, so Arwin had a room entirely to himself. There weren't any doors on the upper floor, but it was still more privacy than he'd had in the smithy.

The bed took up nearly a quarter of the room, but he had a dirt-smudged window that someone had done their best to wipe down from the inside. It gave him a dim view of the city streets outside, but there weren't too many cracks in the walls and only a little wind managed to slip through.

Not half bad.

Arwin covered a yawn and slipped into bed, setting the utensils on the floor at the foot of the bed. It sounded like Lillia and Reya had already gone to bed, and he didn't want to wake them.

I'll give her the utensils tomorrow.

It felt a little odd falling asleep without the proximity of the forge, but it was only a few minutes before he drifted off and darkness swallowed his vision.

The next morning came before it was welcome and Arwin blinked awake as dull sunlight filtered through the window. Not much of it actually managed to make it through, but there was just enough to pull him from his rest.

Arwin yawned and rolled out of bed, grimacing as he sniffed at his arms.

I need to ask Lillia if her tavern has a bath yet. If it doesn't, I'm going to invest in one.

He scooped the utensils he'd made the previous day off the floor and headed out. He could hear loud snores coming from the room across the hall to him, and he poked his head into it to see that Reya was still fast asleep, her head buried under a pillow to avoid the sunlight.

Repressing a laugh, Arwin headed downstairs. The sound of clinking metal led him into the kitchen, where Lillia was busy trying to mix a bowl of batter with a metal rod. She glanced up as he entered, then nodded slightly in greeting, her attention returning to her work before doing a double take.

“Are those forks?”

“Knives and spoons as well.” Arwin held the bundle out and she took it carefully from him, her eyes lighting up with delight.

“This is fantastic. Thank you. Now I'll actually have something people can eat with normally. All I have to do is actually get a few more customers,” Lillia said with a grin. She pulled the rod out of her bowl and claimed a spoon, sticking it into the batter and giving it a spin. “That's so much better. How much are these worth?”

“Probably about five silver,” Arwin said after a moment. “They were pretty easy to make and aren't all that fancy. Maybe six?”

“Six seems correct. That's three days of stay for both you and Reya.”

“Good. Is there anything else urgent?”

“There's nothing that I need right now, but I always need more cookware.”

“I’ll look into that in a few days, then,” Arwin promised. “I’m going to look into starting to make some gear. We should be meeting the other members of my guild soon, and they’re going to want some equipment. I’ll be in the forge if you need me.”

“Sounds good,” Lillia said. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Arwin said, raising a hand in farewell. “Feel free to ask Reya for whatever help she can offer. She’s bored out of her mind.”

With that, he strode out of the tavern. He could already feel the call of the scales waiting for him in the smithy. There was a lot he needed to work on, and every item he crafted made the next one turn out just a bit nicer.

I can’t wait to make my hammer – but one thing at a time. For now, I need to work on some equipment. The stuff that turns out poorly can go into a pile to be sold. It’s about time I started getting ready to make some real money.

Chapter 39

Three days passed in a blur. Arwin spent all his time in the smithy, burning through the rest of his scales. He focused on making gear that he already knew how to do – namely, chest pieces and greaves.

By the dawn of the fourth day, Arwin’s efforts had been rewarded with five normal sets of armor and one set of magically enhanced armor. Everything else had been detrimental and had promptly gotten consumed so as to avoid letting it damage anything.

The one decent magical set he created was far from the strongest magical item he'd made, with both the chest piece and the greaves possessing heat resistance and increased durability, but it didn't have any negative drawbacks either.

It's not Unique, so that's probably for the best. The enchantment on this is pretty weak, so it shouldn't be completely unrealistic for Rodrick to have this. It'll serve him well until we can get him some more powerful armor that he can conceal the properties of.

His work had netted him some magical energy and progress toward his next Tier advancement, but no movements in Titles or Achievements. That wasn't much of a surprise to him, though.

Arwin peeled his attention away from the hearth and turned to head out of the smithy. But, as he walked toward the door, something gave him pause. He couldn't place what it was at first, but the smithy felt different. It took him a few moments to realize what it was. The floor had been swept.

All the debris that had been scattered about was gone, and his piles of material had been organized slightly. Arwin's brow furrowed.

When did that happen?

He stepped outside, locking the door behind him before making his way across the street to the tavern. To Arwin's surprise, he heard voices coming from within it – voices that didn't belong to Reya or Lillia.

He ducked through the dark doorway. Sitting at the counter, illuminated faintly by the light of the lantern beside them, were Rodrick and Anna. Arwin nearly choked as an imp strutted

out of the kitchen and hopped up onto the counter, setting down a handful of berries on each of their plates.

The hideous misshapen creature, fangs jutting out of its mouth and a permanent snarl on its face, was wearing a dirty black dress with lacy white frills. It was in a maid's outfit. As Arwin watched, the imp gave them a sharp salute and hopped back to the ground, heading into the kitchen.

"That's great," Rodrick said through a laugh, slapping the counter and shaking his head. "Have you ever seen anything like that before? Best damn costume I've ever seen."

Arwin tried to study the imp, but the Mesh rolled off it as if it wasn't even there.

How is she hiding their information from Rodrick and Anna? Actually, that might be a dumb question. I'm sure she's chosen a few skills by now, and as a demon in a human city, I bet one of them was a form of concealment skill for herself and her demons.

"I wonder how long it takes them to do that," Anna mused. "It must cost a fortune. I wonder why they chose such an odd place to set up shop."

"It adds to the ambiance," Rodrick said. "I love it. Do you think they'll have an orc at some point? That would be hilarious."

Arwin fought to keep the disbelief from his features as he walked up to join the two adventurers. They were completely convinced that the imp was fake. Sure, he'd told Lillia to lean into things as hard as she could, but he hadn't meant *this* hard.

Then again, nobody in their right mind would ever assume a real imp would be strolling around in a maid costume. Where did they get that?

“Oh, Arwin is here!” Rodrick said, catching a glimpse of him out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face Arwin and raised a hand in greeting. “Pleasure seeing you again, mate. We came looking for you like we said we would. Reya found us a few streets over and brought us here. You should have said how damn good the food here is. Cheap, too.”

“She recently joined the guild,” Arwin said. “What do you think of the tavern?”

“The theme is hilarious. Never seen anything like it. I feel like this would be a hit if more people knew about it,” Rodrick replied, pausing to pop some berries into his mouth. “Wait, did you say the innkeeper was part of the guild?”

“Yeah. As of a few days ago.”

“You work fast,” Anna said with a soft smile. “Rodrick is right. This is quite the spot. I didn’t think I’d like it much, but I’ve been pleasantly surprised. How have the last few days been treating you?”

“Quite well. I’ve been mostly focused on work,” Arwin admitted, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “Where’s Reya, by the way?”

“Out in town looking for something. She said she’d be back soon,” Rodrick said. He let some of the amusement fade out of his tone as his expression grew serious. “Anna and I tried to look into what might have happened with the Wyrms, but we didn’t have much luck.”

“I think I may have figured it out,” Arwin said. “Or rather, Lillia did. She knows even more about monsters than I do, considering her... well, appreciation of them.”

Rodrick snorted and looked around the tavern. “Appreciation is an understatement, but I love it. Nothing better than someone that’s really invested in their passion. I hope she doesn’t object to hunting, though.”

You know, I never considered that. I should probably ask her. It’s not like we can stop hunting monsters to get stronger unless there’s an alternative I don’t know of, but it would probably be right to at least chat with her about it.

“What’s that about hunting?” Lillia asked, stepping out of the kitchen and wiping her hands off on her apron.

“We were talking about if you’d be okay with it, considering how much you like monsters,” Anna said.

“Oh, I don’t care,” Lillia said with a shrug. “The monsters you’re talking about hunting aren’t the same as the ones I care about. There are a lot of different species, and monsters is honestly a bit of a misnomer.”

“Is that so?” Rodrick asked, tilting his head to the side. “What do you mean? Is it just that you find some cuter than others or something?”

Lillia snorted and shook her head. “No. Well, yes, but that’s not why. The difference is sapience. People generally refer to everything that isn’t a *normal* animal or human as a monster, but there are actually two categories beyond that. There are monsters that don’t have any intelligence beyond a desire to grow stronger by killing, and there are monsters that are just as intelligent as a human.”

“You’re kidding me,” Rodrick said. “You’re not exaggerating?”

“Identical,” Lillia confirmed. “I’ve seen some of them myself in my... uh, studies.”

“You’re a monster researcher, then? Just like Arwin?”

“Something like that,” Lillia said, sending a glance at Arwin.

“How do we know if we’re fighting a smart one?” Anna asked, chewing her lower lip with a frown. “I don’t want to mistakenly attack something that doesn’t deserve it.”

“You’ll know,” Lillia said. “It would be like attacking a random human. It would be really obvious.”

“Oh.” Anna let out a relieved sigh. “Good. So you don’t mind us talking about hunting in here, then?”

“Not at all. Feel free.”

“Great. Back to the Wyrms, then,” Rodrick said. “What was it the two of you figured out?”

“Oh, right.” Arwin shook his head, having temporarily lost his train of thought, before continuing. “It might be about to have a litter. You recall how the forest seemed like it was... ah, in the mood, right?”

Anna and Rodrick nodded.

“Well, it’s possible the Wyrms are no different. And, if that’s the case, there could be a bunch of Wyrmlings running around everywhere really soon. And, if I recall correctly, Wyrmlings are typically born around high Apprentice tier.”

Rodrick and Anna both paled.

“That could be bad,” Rodrick said, tapping a finger on the counter absentmindedly. “I doubt the city itself would have that much trouble – the guards here could probably handle a few Wyrmlings, but the forest would become way too dangerous for us to hunt in, and it’s one of the best hunting grounds in the area.”

“Not to mention the Adventurer’s Guild might send people,” Anna added, biting her inner cheek and furrowing her brow. “The town would be insufferable for weeks. That also implies there’s a second Wyrms somewhere in the forest.”

“Having the Adventurer’s Guild show up would be... less than opportune,” Arwin agreed. “Which is why I think we should try to act *before* anyone figures out what’s going on.”

“You want us to try and take out two Wyrms when we barely managed to escape one?” Rodrick asked doubtfully. “That kind of seems like a suicide mission.”

“It would be, if we were actually trying to kill both of them,” Arwin said. “There’s no way we’d be able to take them out. Not on our own, at least. But, if we could somehow get them to fight or otherwise distract them, maybe we could either get the upper hand or make them run away.”

“That seems a bit optimistic,” Rodrick said. “I’d be willing to hear you out if you had a plan, though.”

“Well, I think we’re going to need to get stronger before we even think about trying anything,” Arwin amended. “As it stands, we’d be slaughtered no matter what we went for. Luckily, we’ve got time. Wyrmlings don’t just pop out in a day. It should be about two months before they’re born.”

“Two months isn’t much time,” Rodrick hedged. “Especially if we don’t have a good place to hunt anymore. The forest is too dangerous as it is right now.”

“We do have a spot, though,” Arwin said, a grin pulling across his lips.

“We do?” Anna asked. “Where? Do you know of another location that’s close to town?”

“I do. It’s not the safest area, but we’re the only ones with access to it. Consider it a perk of being in the guild.”

“Stop dangling it over me and say what it is already!” Rodrick exclaimed.

“Are you sure? I was thinking about showing you the armor I made first,” Arwin said, grinning at the hungry look that flashed across Rodrick’s face.

“Wait, you made me armor? I can’t afford anything yet!”

“It’s an investment. Don’t expect anything too great.”

“Are you kidding? Anything would be – wait. You distracted me. This is bullying,” Rodrick complained. “Just tell us what you’ve got already!”

Arwin laughed and held his hands up in surrender as both Lillia and Anna nodded in agreement, joining Rodrick in glaring at him.

“We’ve got access to a Journeyman dungeon,” Arwin said. “One with only one key. It’s going to be a tough one for our current abilities, but if we’re all doing it together, I think we can handle it. The monsters probably won’t be at the level of the Wyrn, so I think we could slowly make our way through it. They’ll still be Journeyman level, but as long as we don’t get too deep, I strongly believe we should be able to handle it.”

“Holy shit,” Anna breathed, jumping to her feet. “We have an exclusive dungeon? How is that possible? The guild isn’t even official. Who are you?”

“Technically, I think we stole an exclusive dungeon,” Arwin amended. “There might be a thieves’ guild that’s still pretty miffed about that – but who cares? It’s the best option I can think of. What do you say?”

“I say you give me that armor and we get to it,” Rodrick replied, rubbing his hands together. “This is either going to end in glory or a really, really pathetic death.”

“Way to spoil the mood,” Anna said, flicking Rodrick in the shoulder.

“Bah. At least I’m going to leave a beautiful corpse. Let me see that armor you made,” Rodrick said eagerly. “This is going to be glorious.”

Chapter 40

Everyone followed Arwin back to his smithy, where he very proudly unlocked his door, pausing to make sure everyone saw him push it open.

“Why’s he doing that?” Rodrick whispered as Arwin walked inside.

“He got a door,” Lillia explained.

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“No, it makes sense.” Lillia looked back at the door and nodded. “It’s a nice door.”

Rodrick didn't respond. He'd spotted the pile of armor lying on the ground beside the anvil. Sitting on top of the anvil were a pair of scale greaves and a chest piece, both faintly shimmering with the Mesh's power.

He stood in mute disbelief, staring at the items as if they were a pile of glittering gold. Rodrick swallowed heavily and looked over to Arwin, raising a finger toward the armor.

"That... me? It's for me?"

Arwin chuckled and nodded. Rodrick looked like someone had just told him he had a long-lost son. Edging toward the magical pieces of equipment, Rodrick drew up to the anvil and let his hands brush over the scale plate.

"This is incredible," Rodrick muttered. "I never thought – I can't afford this. No way."

"I told you it was an investment," Arwin said with a shrug. "The only rule is you can only keep this as long as you stay in the guild, and you can't sell it to someone else."

"Sell it?" Rodrick exclaimed as if the very idea offended him. "I would never. This is incredible. A work of art. Nobody would be able to buy it off me for any amount of money. And damn – talk about a way to get your hooks in. I don't think I could leave if I wanted to anymore."

"Try it on, then," Arwin said, gesturing toward the armor. "Make sure it fits. I made it with you in mind, but sometimes it can be hard to tell."

Rodrick didn't need to be told twice. He hurried to start pulling everything on, and Arwin sent Anna an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make anything for you. I didn’t think a healer would benefit much from metal armor. You probably aren’t particularly strong.”

“No offense taken. You’d be correct. I’d probably suffer in just chain mail, much less anything like that,” Anna said with a laugh. “It’s more than enough to see Rodrick this happy. Besides, he’s the one that takes the hits for me, so any armor for him is functionally armor for me.”

Arwin noticed Lillia’s eyes were firmly fixed on the armor. He hadn’t made her anything yet, but she was definitely far stronger than any normal innkeeper.

I should try to make her something. I’ve seen her wear some pretty heavy armor in the past, so as long as I don’t go too crazy with the weight of the material, some armor would do her a lot of use. Then again, I don’t know all the passives or abilities she kept. She might not be able to use heavy armor easily anymore.

“It fits me perfectly!” Rodrick exclaimed in delight, twisting to test out his new range of motion. In some ways, he’d reacted the exact same way that Reya had. Arwin chuckled at his expression.

“I’m glad to hear that. No problems, then?”

“None that I can feel. It’s way lighter than I thought it would be too,” Rodrick said, rapping his chest with his knuckles. “Definitely the best set of armor I’ve ever worn. You’re not going to get me into eternal debt by making me pay for repairs if this gets damaged, are you? I mean, I’d probably take you up on it, but I’m just checking.”

Arwin rolled his eyes. “No, I’m not. Just do your job and keep any monsters off our backline and you’ll have earned it. You might want to find something to cover yourself with, though. I don’t see a lot of people walking around with magic items.”

“Gee, I wonder why. Not everyone just pops them out,” Rodrick said, still looking down at himself in disbelief. “Seriously, how did you get the materials to make this? Do you have a deal with a powerful demon or something? Enchantments are so expensive.”

They are?

“Don’t worry about it. Just try to let me know if you find anything off. I haven’t gotten around to making boots, gloves, or helmets yet – so make sure you don’t get hit there. I’ll try to get to it soon enough.

“Are you seriously apologizing for not making enough magical equipment?” Rodrick asked. “I’d be willing to run out and fight monsters naked wearing nothing but a thong if it was magical.”

Arwin grimaced, banishing that mental image from his mind before it could permanently scar him. “Then let’s all thank God that I made armor and not a thong. I’m rather eager to get things started, so if nobody needs anything else, we should look into finding Reya and getting to work. No reason to waste time.”

Anna pulled her cloak off and tossed it to Rodrick. He wrapped it around himself, leaving the hood down. As soon as it covered his armor, the faint tingle of the Mesh faded away.

“Thanks,” Rodrick said. Anna nodded in response.

“What are you doing with the other sets of armor?” Lillia asked, nodding to the pile in the corner.

“Selling them, probably. They’re nothing special. You’re welcome to try some on if you want, but I don’t think it’ll fit you,” Arwin warned. “I made them all pretty generic for broad-shouldered male builds.”

“Oh. No problem,” Lillia said, waving a hand dismissively. “Let’s get on with it, then. I haven’t gone hunting in a long time. Maybe we can pick up some fresh ingredients for me to work with while we’re out.”

“You know, I just realized how efficient of a pair you two make,” Anna observed, hiding a smile behind her hand. “Arwin takes all the inedible parts of the monsters to make armor and weapons with, and you can use the rest for food.”

“Waste not, want not,” Arwin said. “Come on. Let’s go find Reya.”

Fortunately, finding Reya was a fairly simple task. By the time they left the smithy and headed toward the tavern, she was on her way out of it in search of them.

“Did I miss something?” Reya asked. “Also, hi Arwin. Haven’t seen you much recently. Did you like what I did with the smithy?”

“Wait, that was you? You swept everything up?”

“Yep! It looks way better, doesn’t it?”

“Much better,” Arwin agreed. “Thank you very much. It’s looking more and more professional with every day. I still have no idea how you managed that while I was working, though.”

“No offense, but you’re basically as dense as a brick while you’re smithing,” Reya said through a snicker. “I was singing to myself the whole time while I cleaned, and you didn’t notice me once.”

Arwin grunted. That was mildly concerning – he’d have to remember to lock the door while he was working in the future so nobody strolled in and robbed him blind.

“Noted.”

“So, what’s everyone up to? You all look excited, and it’s making me feel left out.”

“We decided it’s just about time to use that key of yours,” Arwin said, bringing Reya up to speed on everything that they’d just discussed.

“Are we really going to be able to handle a Journeyman level dungeon, though?” Anna asked once Arwin had finished, biting her inner cheek. “I mean, we barely managed to handle a high Tier Apprentice Lizard.”

“That was some time ago, and there are more of us now,” Arwin said. “Dungeon monsters, especially ones at the start, should be easier to handle. I’ll admit that it’s far from ideal, but the forest is too dangerous with the Wyrms roaming around it. This might be our best shot at a safe training space.”

“Do you think the thieves’ guild will let us in? I bet they’re still guarding it.” Reya warned.

“It’s hard to say. If they want to pick a fight, I think we’re pretty well equipped to handle it,” Arwin said. “They won’t have their whole guild there, and I think we more than made our point the last time we had a disagreement.”

“You had a disagreement with a whole guild? Were they a small one or something?” Anna asked.

Arwin cleared his throat. “Maybe we’ll tell you the story on the road. It’s a bit of a long one, and all that matters in the end is that we’ve got a chance to do something big here. If we can handle the dungeon and get strong enough to fight off the Wyrmlings – not only will we get stronger, but I’ll have a slew of powerful new materials to work with.”

“I’d have new ingredients to cook with as well,” Lillia said, licking her lips. “It’s dangerous, but we’re not getting anywhere by hiding like cowards. I’m in.”

“I was in the moment you gave me this,” Rodrick said, tapping his armor. “If you need a whole guild destroyed, just point me in their direction. I’ll take ‘em out.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Anna said with a laugh. “I’m in, obviously. Journeyman Tier monsters aren’t going to be easy, but I’ve seen almost everyone here fight. We can handle it as long as we can get past that guild, it’s a chance. If we pull this off, we might actually have enough capital to look into becoming a proper guild.”

“I’m obviously in as well.” Reya gave Arwin a confident grin. “I’m not letting you just take my key and waltz off with it. Besides, I’ve got a new class to test out. I want revenge on that stupid Wurm for eating my dagger. Let’s do this.”

“We’re all in agreement, then.” Arwin scooped his blacksmithing hammer off the ground and tested its weight. Even though it was meant for the forge, the thing was one hefty bastard. It would be perfect for bashing in the heads of anything that got in his way – at least until he got the chance to forge his new weapon. “Reya, care to take the lead? We’ve got a dungeon to start clearing, and the only thing that might be standing in our way is a tiny little guild.”

“So they were small after all?” Anna asked. “What, do they have five members or something?”

“No, it was more like thirty,” Arwin replied absently. He ignored the horrified looks that Anna and Rodrick sent him. “Don’t worry about that. We probably won’t even have to fight them again. The last time I confronted their guild I sent a pretty strong message.”

“You confronted them? Alone?” Anna asked.

“Nah, I had a bit of help. It worked out in the end.”

“You can’t leave it at that,” Rodrick protested. “What happened? How’d you handle a whole guild?”

“I told you, it’s a long story. Reya, care to take the lead? I want to get this underway.”

Reya grinned and nodded. “With pleasure. Let’s go.”

Chapter 41

The trip out of the city didn’t take long and went easily. The only stressful part of their exit was the fear that someone might notice Rodrick’s armor, but he kept the cloak Anna had given him wrapped tightly around himself.

Even though nobody had any way to tell what he had, none of them breathed easily until they'd stepped out of the city gates and were well on their way toward the dungeon.

"I need to get strong enough to conceal my equipment," Rodrick grumbled, glancing over his shoulder at the city walls as they followed Reya. "That was horrible. I felt like every single person we passed was staring me down."

"Well, we're already working on that, so all you have to do is keep at it," Anna pointed out. "I felt the same way, though."

Makes me even happier I have [Arsenal]. Even if my equipment doesn't have the property that lets it appear mundane, I can still banish and summon it at will as long as I bind to it. Speaking of which, I only have two pieces of equipment bound right now since my sword got chomped. I wonder...

Arwin activated [Arsenal] and bound the hammer in his hands. It wasn't magical, but it still counted as a piece of equipment as far as he was concerned. A moment later, the black weapon vanished.

"Whoa," Reya said. "That's so strange to watch."

The hammer reformed in Arwin's hands. "It's quite convenient, though."

"You can't do that for my stuff, can you?" Rodrick asked hopefully.

"Unfortunately not. It's a personal equipment thing only. You'll just have to conceal things the old fashioned way," Arwin said apologetically. "Reya, how far are we from the dungeon? I want to make sure we're all ready when we get closer. Your old friends might be hanging around."

“About an hour away, I think,” Reya said after a moment of thought. “I thought you said they wouldn’t put up much fight, though. Didn’t we come to an agreement?”

“That kind of thing can fall through sometimes,” Arwin said with a shrug. He scanned their surroundings, but there didn’t seem to be anything other than grass. “Never hurts to be prepared, just in case something goes awry.”

Their trek continued on in silence. Minutes slipped by and, soon enough, they’d been walking for nearly an hour. The slope of the hills intensified the deeper they went, making it harder to tell exactly where they were.

Reya seemed to have a pretty good grasp of their direction, though. She kept glancing up at the sky, then slightly rerouting and continuing on with almost no hesitation. Just when Arwin was about to ask how she knew where they were, Reya held a hand to her lips and pointed down the hill.

From what he could tell, the only thing there was the bottom of a small, grassy hill and a small pile of large stones. It took Arwin a moment to notice what she was pointing at. Nestled behind the rocks was a thin rectangular outline in the ground.

He would have missed it completely if Reya hadn’t pointed it out to him. Arwin glanced around to see if there was anyone else in the area, but as far as he could tell, it was completely empty.

“That... almost seems too easy,” Rodrick muttered. “I thought you said there was a guild guarding this?”

“Maybe they gave up since we took the key,” Reya said.

That did seem a bit optimistic, but Arwin couldn't find any traces of other people in the area. It really did look like the thieves' guild had given up on the dungeon. He'd definitely made a pretty strong impression on their guild leader, so it was possible that they'd decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

"Well, sitting around here isn't going to make things any better for us. We've come this far, so let's keep pushing forward." Arwin said.

They crept down the side of the hill and approached the outline. After glancing around one last time to make sure they weren't being watched, Reya pulled the necklace over her head and set it down on the grass, pressing it down.

The back of Arwin's neck tingled. The feeling passed over the rest of his body, crawling down his spine and along his limbs as the Mesh's presence around them intensified. There was a sharp pop, followed by a wet squelch.

Shimmers of energy lit up along the outline of the rectangle at their feet. The tingling grew stronger, and lines of magical power stretched out through the grass, forming into intricate patterns.

With one final buzz, the Mesh faded away and the grass sank down, forming into a stairwell that wound deep into the earth. Faint flickers of light appeared within it as glowing motes of orange light appeared to guide their path.

"Whoa," Reya breathed, peering down the stairwell with undisguised awe. "That's incredible."

“Just remember the exit is only going to open back up for us as long as you’ve got that key,” Arwin said. He let his armor manifest on his body, not wanting to risk a surprise attack hitting something important, and stepped into the darkness.

The rest of the group followed behind him, Reya taking up their tail. As soon as she had passed several stairs and was out of the way of the entrance, the ground shut behind them, leaving only flat stone.

“That’s creepy,” Reya said, throwing glances back over her shoulder as they continued by the light of the faint glowing orbs. Arwin considered batting at one of them as he passed, but he pushed the intrusive thought away.

Most dungeons were pretty much inanimate – the only living things inside them were the actual monsters. There were a few that had did have a degree of sapience, though – and those took rather poorly to anyone fiddling with them.

No point finding out the hard way. Right now, all we want to do is figure out if we can handle this dungeon. I don’t want to mistakenly make anything harder for us.

They continued down the stairs for several minutes until they came to a stop at an archway that led into a large, square room made of old cobblestone. Vines crawled across the walls, half-dried out from lack of water.

The faint smell of moss and stale water drifted into Arwin’s nose as he squinted through the dim light, trying to see if there was anything in the room. There was no door that he could initially see, but there was a shallow pool of water in the center of the room.

“Emptyer than I expected,” Reya said, peering over his shoulder. “I thought there would be monsters.”

“There will be,” Arwin said absently, scanning the corners where the shadows were the darkest. No two dungeons were exactly the same, but there were usually similarities – and monsters weren’t stupid.

They congregated to dungeons because of the condensed magical power within them, and the dungeons used the monsters to fuel themselves – either through the blood they spilled from inquisitive adventurers or through their own blood.

Something might be in the water, or it could be hiding on the ceiling where we can’t see it. I doubt the dungeon would just have an open room that does absolutely nothing this early on, especially since I don’t see a door anywhere.

The weakest monsters always hang around the upper levels of a dungeon because they aren’t strong enough to make it deeper and closer to the more intense magical energy. The ones far out from the ground usually aren’t the smartest of the lot, but ambush predators are common.

“Keep your guard up,” Arwin advised as he crept into the room, letting his hammer materialize in his hands and adjusting his grip on the rough metal handle. “Watch out for little buggers lurking in the shadows or underwater.”

“You think they’re small?” Lillia asked.

“Figure of speech,” Arwin replied. “I have no idea how big anything here is. Reya, Anna, both of you stay back. Let me and Rodrick draw their attention. Lillia – I’m not sure how your combat skills are now, but I imagine you can handle yourself without instruction.”

Lillia nodded. “I’ll hang back so I don’t draw anything’s attention too early. I’m not in the best spot to fight anything right now.”

Arwin crept further into the room. He could still remember countless other dungeons he’d plowed through, but the difference in strategy was so stark that it almost hurt. He could recall wading straight into dungeons, power rolling off his body as he sent waves of molten light into the dark, ripping through everything that stood in his way – often before they even realized they were under attack.

His party had been full of trained warriors that had done the dungeons dozens of times over already, and they knew every single thing about what they were facing. The dungeons almost never held surprises, and they’d certainly never held challenges.

Now, it was different. Arwin had no clue what was waiting for him in the darkness, and there was a very real chance that whatever it was had the strength to kill him and everyone behind him if they weren’t properly prepared to fight it.

I can’t believe I’m thinking this, but in a morbid sense, it’s actually more interesting. Sure, we might all end up dead, but it feels like we’re actually doing something, not just going through the motions that we have to go through to get stronger.

“Sneaky little cretins in this room, aren’t they?” Rodrick asked, spinning his sword in his hand and baring his teeth in a grin. “What do you think the chances are we’re up against some slimy creature that lives in the pool?”

“Considering we haven’t been jumped yet? Pretty damn high,” Arwin said. He tried to squint into the murky water, but it was too dark to make anything out. “Only one way to find out.”

His foot shifted across the ground until it found a loose stone. Arwin kicked it, sending the rock sailing through the air and into the very center of the puddle, where it struck the water with a *splooosh*, sending ripples running out and vanishing beneath the surface.

Almost instantly, the water erupted. A slippery grey form burst out, tentacles whipping through the air as a screech split the air. Arwin swung his hammer, batting one of the tentacles out of the air as it shot out for him.

The weapon hit the soft, fleshy appendage and ripped straight through it, spraying blue blood across the ground and drawing out another screech. The monster heaved itself fully out of the water, revealing a bulbous head and dozens of beady black eyes scattered across a blobby body.

[Landsquid – Apprentice 9]

“Gods, that thing is hideous,” Anna exclaimed from behind them. “Get it away from me, please!”

“That looks delicious,” Lillia said, running her tongue along her lips. “Arwin, don’t squish its body too much, please. I want it un-mushed.”

“I say we kill the damn thing and figure out what to do with it afterward,” Rordrick suggested, taking a step back as the monster whipped a tentacle at his head. “Any info on this ugly bastard, Arwin?”

“It’s a variant of a Landsquid,” Arwin replied. “They’re not very dangerous, but don’t let it grab you.”

“How do we kill it?” Rordrick asked.

“Stab it.”

“Lovely,” Rodrick said dryly, raising his sword and narrowing his eyes. The Landsquid let out another screech, its tentacles slamming into the ground around it like the beat of a dozen furious drummers. “One plate of chopped wiggler, coming right up.”

Chapter 42

Lillia had specifically requested that Arwin avoid crushing the Landsquid too badly, but he didn't see how he was meant to fight the monster without crushing it. It wasn't like he had a particularly large variety of pointy weapons to work with – all he had that was usable at the moment was his hammer.

I can't imagine she'll complain if I cave the monster's head in. I'll just leave the rest of the tentacles as untouched as I can.

“Focus on cutting the tentacles off,” Arwin ordered, ducking out of the way as the Landsquid sent two tentacles snapping out to try and grab Arwin while he was off guard. The monster was fast, but its attacks were fairly predictable.

Rodrick didn't even waste breath on a reply. As the next tentacles shot out, he brought his blade down and carved one of them apart right at the half-way mark. Blue blood splattered across the warrior's chest and he ducked back to avoid getting hit by the monster's follow-up attack.

The beast still had ten tentacles left, and Arwin didn't know how deep the pool of water beneath the Land Squid was. With its gelatinous body, he suspected it could probably fit itself

into small spaces, but he wasn't about to bet that the watery pit didn't connect to a much larger area beneath.

If it did, the fastest way to get killed would be to let the Landsquid grab him and drag him into the dark waters below. For the time being, the best thing he could do was to keep the monster's attention and let Rodrick work.

Arwin dismissed his armor and hammer to let himself move faster. He ducked and dodged away from attacks, letting each one pass by him harmlessly. Compared to much of the training he'd gone through in his past life, this creature was nothing. It was a monster that fought by ambushing its prey and using the element of surprise, not through long, extended combat.

Another tentacle squelched to the ground, thrashing about even though it was no longer connected to its controlling body, and the Landsquid screamed in pain. It lurched forward in a last ditch effort to try and grab Rodrick – and that was when Arwin struck.

His hammer materialized in his hands as he took advantage of the monster's temporary distraction and he brought the weapon down clean on the side of the Landsquid's head, using [Scourge] to empower the blow.

The Landsquid's squishy body gave way, and there was a loud crunch as the hammer hit something solid deep within it. It was lifted into the air and sent splattering across the ground until it hit the wall.

Not defeated, the squid lurched forward and twisted across the ground, making to retreat back into the pool that it had come from. Rodrick ran to cut the monster's path off, but Reya was faster.

She took a step forward and thrust her hand out. Faint blue light erupted at her palm, swirling through the air and forming a dull pillar above the Landsquid. The monster slowed, struggling against an invisible force.

It only lasted for an instant, but that instant was enough for Rodrick to close the space between himself and the squid and drive his sword forward, plunging it straight into the wounded monster's carapace.

The Landsquid lurched once, then the tension vanished from its body and it collapsed in a wet pile at Rodrick's feet. He ripped his sword free, flicking purplish-blue goo from the blade, and sheathed it at his side.

Arwin didn't get any energy from killing the monster, but that was hardly a surprise. He didn't get stronger from killing things – he got stronger from forging them. And, unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do with the gelatinous monster's corpse other than hope that Lillia fed it to people she didn't like.

“That was awesome!” Reya exclaimed, running up to the monster's body. “Did you see that? I helped!”

“That was actually pretty damn useful,” Rodrick said with an approving smile. “What did you do? It felt like you slowed it.”

“Yeah. The first ability I chose was [Imprison]. It lets me reduce the physical attributes of any monster by a small percentage. It's stronger the closer in Tier I am to my target, so I can't do too much with it yet, but I think it still helped. I got some energy for aiding in the kill.”

“It was definitely useful,” Arwin said. “I’m really curious to see what else your class will be capable of. Any debuff abilities are really valuable, so I think we can safely say you definitely went with the right choice.”

Rodrick nodded in agreement and let out a whistle. “Yeah. You’re going to be in real high demand, kid.”

“I am?” Reya asked. “Why?”

“Debuffs are one of the best ways to fight strong monsters,” Anna explained, walking up to stand beside Reya. “There’s only so hard you can hit things, especially ones with really powerful defenses. But, if you can chip away at those defenses, you can make really nasty fights much easier. Not many classes provide access to strong debuffs.”

“I never thought about it that way. I just thought it sounded useful,” Reya said with a sheepish grin, rubbing the back of her neck. “I guess I made the right choice.”

“And you all left the squid mostly intact as well,” Lillia said, kneeling beside the dead monster and prodding it with a finger. “Thanks. I bet I could do a bunch of stuff with this thing, but it’s just struck me it’s probably going to go bad pretty quickly, isn’t it?”

“Most likely,” Arwin said. “You should invest in an icebox when you can.”

Lillia pursed her lips and groaned. “Just one of the many things I need to get my hands on. I’m pretty sure the list gets longer with every day.”

She picked up one of the severed tentacles and held it out before herself, ignoring the sickening squishing noises the limb made. It looked like an odd cross between flesh and Jell-o, and from the strong fishy smell filling the room, Arwin suspected it tasted like brine.

Please don't try to turn that into sushi.

“Does anyone want to carry this?” Lillia asked hopefully.

Everyone suddenly found the walls fascinating. Lillia snorted and rolled the tentacle up as best she could before tucking it under an arm, completely staining her clothes. “Fine. I’ll carry it myself. True genius requires experimentation.”

“Does true genius also smell like fish?” Reya asked. “Because you’re going to.”

They all chuckled, and Arwin summoned his armor back as he walked a lap around the room, checking to see if there were any other monsters lurking in wait. He kept his distance from the pool of water, not wanting to find out the hard way that there was another squid.

“For our first fight of the dungeon, that wasn’t half bad,” Rodrick said.

“I’ll say,” Anna agreed. “We didn’t even get hit.”

“It was only an Apprentice Tier. I thought this was a Journeyman dungeon,” Reya said with a frown. “How come it was so weak?”

“Trust me, that wouldn’t have been weak if we hadn’t outnumbered it five to one,” Arwin said, still scanning the walls. “And Journeyman dungeon means it’s appropriate for Journeyman tier adventurers, not that everything within it is a Journeyman. The weakest monsters are always toward the entrance of the dungeon, and it’ll only get harder the deeper we go.”

“Oh, so that’s why we can’t clear out the whole thing yet?” Reya guessed.

“Exactly,” Arwin said. “We’ll probably be able to go a few rooms deep at the most, but that should be more than enough for our purposes. I want you to make sure you don’t land any killing blows on any monsters yet, by the way.”

Reya blinked in confusion. “Really? Why? Wouldn’t that get me energy faster so I could get stronger?”

“It would, but that would cripple you in the future,” Arwin said. He paused as some lines in the wall caught his eye. “Power lies in Titles and Achievements, not through jumping through the Tiers as quickly as you can. Trust me on this.”

“Okay,” Reya said with a mock salute. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“Arwin.”

“Right.” Reya didn’t sound particularly mollified, but Arwin didn’t press the issue.

He let his hand run along a crack in the stone, searching for a loose brick. It didn’t take long before he found it. There was a soft click and a portion of the wall ground back, swinging out to reveal another room.

“That was fast,” Anna said, her eyebrows crawling up her forehead. “How’d you know there was a secret door? I would have suspected something in the pool.”

“There might very well be something there,” Arwin allowed. “But I didn’t feel like going for a swim, and once you’ve seen a few dungeons, you start to keep an eye out for crap like this. Most of them were originally forts or other structures that got warped by the Mesh. Who doesn’t like a secret passage?”

“I only like secret passages when I find the stupid things,” Rodrick said as he walked over to stand beside Arwin. “We going in there?”

Arwin turned back to the pool and stuck his hammer out, extending until it was several feet beneath the water. He grimaced, then pulled it free and backed away from the water once more.

“Yeah. We’ve got a deep pool over here, but nothing popped out when I tested it. I don’t think the monsters should be that clever this far out, so we should be good to go deeper. Make sure to take things slowly, though.”

“Will do,” Rodrick promised. The two of them stepped into the next room. As soon as their feet fell beyond the doorway, dozens of little orange motes of energy identical to the ones that had lit up the stairs erupted all around the room, bathing it in soft light.

This room was even mossier than the first had been, and the vine growth was thick enough that it almost resembled roots running along the floor. Water dripped from the ceiling, pattering to the floor gently.

Sitting in the center of the room, still unaware of their presence, was a hunched green humanoid creature. It was hunched over the body of a dead Landsquid, ripping large portions of the fleshy body away and shoveling them into its fanged mouth.

[Swamp Orc – Journeyman 1]

A rusty cleaver hung at the monster’s side, still covered with goop from the Landsquid and dried blood from other victims. Rodrick gagged as the orc shoved a whole tentacle down its throat, barely even pausing to swallow. It wiped its mouth with the back of a clawed hand, then ripped another piece of the dead monster away.

“That’s one ugly bugger,” Rodrick muttered, just loud enough for Arwin to hear.

“Orcs are good fighters, but they’re not particularly clever. They’re more of a threat when they’re in groups,” Arwin said, tightening his grip on his hammer. The orc hadn’t noticed them yet, but it would soon – and, unfortunately, they didn’t have any ranged attacks that could take advantage of its distraction. “Just remember they’re a lot stronger than humans are on average, and it’s also got the tier advantage. Try to dodge attacks more than block them.”

“Right with you. Do you want to take the lead, considering...” Rodrick gestured vaguely to the armor covering Arwin’s body.

“Yeah. Wait until it’s distracted by me, then see if you can cripple it. Don’t go for a killing blow too early. It’ll make you over-extend and you could end up getting hit. It’s safer to just take this nice and steady. Reya, can you [Imprison] it when it looks like Rodrick is about to strike?”

“Yeah. I’ll do my best,” Reya whispered.

Arwin crept forward and the others followed him. It had been a long time since Arwin had fought an orc, but he got the feeling this one wouldn’t go down nearly as easily as their previous opponent had.

Chapter 43

No sooner than Arwin had inched a few feet into the room did the orc jerk upright from its meal, its dull eyes flashing as it spun toward him. The gelatinous body of the Landsquid splattered across the ground as the orc threw it to the side.

It drew its cleaver and threw its head back, letting out a furious roar that sent spittle flying all across the floor. Even at the distance Arwin was at, he could smell the monster's rancid breath.

Arwin moved carefully, not wanting to get his feet caught on the thick vines on the ground. One misstep would be more than enough to give the orc an advantage that he had absolutely no desire to hand over.

He bared his own teeth in challenge and beat a fist against the armor on his chest, drawing the orc's attention to him. From what he remembered, orcs were incredibly competent in physical combat, but they weren't hard to trick.

As long as I can keep its attention on me, we should be able to handle this without too much trouble. I just have to make sure I don't take a blow to the head and die before Anna can patch up any damage I take.

The orc, fed up with waiting for an attack, charged. Its powerful muscles propelled the humanoid beast forward, closing the distance between it and Arwin in just a few steps. It reared back, bringing the cleaver down for the nape of Arwin's neck for what would have been a killing blow.

Arwin spun his hammer, knocking the cleaver to the side with a grunt. He'd planned to convert the momentum of the deflection into a counterattack, but the orc was *strong*. All the force he'd put into the attack was absorbed, leaving nothing to press forward with.

The orc, having a considerably nimbler weapon than Arwin, recovered first. It brought the cleaver back toward his neck with brutal speed. He leaned back, letting the blow whistle by harmlessly, and then drove his knee into the orc.

It was like striking a brick wall. Arwin cursed, and his greaves tingled as a small portion of kinetic energy was stored within them. His attack had done so little that it had actually counted as an attack against Arwin.

Or is that just physics? If I hit something really hard, isn't that the same as it hitting me just as hard? The force has to go somewhere. Interesting thought.

If the orc could have read Arwin's thoughts, perhaps it would have been impressed with his budding career as a physicist. Unfortunately for him, it was entirely incapable of both mathematical calculations and mind reading, so it was forced to settle for a scream and a lunge.

Arwin's foot caught on one of the many vines littered across the ground and he twisted as he fell, bringing his hammer around to keep the orc from instantly pouncing on him. He hit the ground with a grunt and rolled to the side without waiting.

A loud screech rang out as the monster's cleaver scraped against his armor, leaving a furrow through the scales. Heat swirled in Arwin's chest and a lash of molten flame arced out from the armor, striking the orc across the face before it could react.

It screamed in pain and stumbled back, dropping the cleaver. Rodrick took that moment to act. He burst into motion from where he'd been standing at the sidelines, thrusting his sword forward without a sound.

Even still, the orc managed to notice him coming. It twisted at the last second, bringing its heart out of Rodrick's path. The sword bit deep into the monster's side and sent blood splattering across the damp floor.

Rodrick nearly tripped over his own feet at the lack of resistance his blade met. He'd been planning to run the monster through, not leave a nasty cut on its side. Even as he recovered, the orc lunged for his neck, reaching out with rancid, jagged claws.

A flash of blue light enveloped the monster. It slowed, and Rodrick ducked out of the way. Arwin surged forward, bringing his hammer for the orc's side just as the blue energy wore off.

In an impressive display of acrobatics, the orc vaulted backward. It grabbed onto a vine hanging from the ceiling and swung itself even further, landing on the other side of the room. It pressed a hand to the bloody furrow in its side, then bared its teeth and let out a roar.

Dull red energy ignited behind its eyes and the orc's posture shifted. It flexed its claws, hissing as it swayed from foot to foot. Arwin grimaced in distaste.

“Shit.”

“What the hell is it doing?” Rodrick asked. “Nobody told me the damn things could glow!”

“Orcs often have a berserker state that gets triggered when they're in a really intense fight or when their shaman triggers it intentionally,” Arwin said. “Be careful. Back up and let me handle this.”

“What? But I thought—”

“Have you ever fought a rampaging orc?”

“No.”

“Then back up,” Arwin said, advancing to make sure he kept the monster’s attention. Not every orc had the bloodline that let them rampage without the aid of a shaman, and he’d been hoping to get lucky.

Evidently, that had been a poor idea. In concept, a rampaging orc shouldn’t have actually been that much more dangerous than a normal one. They didn’t get stronger or faster – in fact, they didn’t change their physical abilities at all.

Instead, they completely lost their ability to feel pain. Their bodies basically forgot that they were living, breathing creatures and transformed into weapons hellbent on killing their target.

“Don’t do anything dumb,” Lillia warned. “You know what–”

“I know,” Arwin said briskly. Lillia did likely know more than he did, but she’d been hiding her powers from Anna and Rodrick. He didn’t blame her, but it meant she couldn’t do anything in the fight. If he wanted to make it out from this fight with his armor in one piece, he was going to need his full concentration.

The orc roared and sprinted toward Arwin, its arms extended to rip him to shreds. Arwin empowered his legs and bounded to the side, swinging his hammer at the monster as he passed. It didn’t even bother trying to dodge, and a loud crunch rang out as the weapon impacted the orc’s shoulder.

It lurched toward Arwin, slashing with its claws and nearly catching him while he backed up and readied his hammer again. Arwin swung the weapon once more, this time empowering it with [Scourge].

A keening wail filled the air as the hammer hurtled through the air and slammed straight into the center of the orc's chest, sending a spray of blood and bone up into the air with a sickening crunch.

The force of Arwin's blow sent it tumbling across the ground. It bounced twice, then slammed into the wall. Blood pouring from the massive crater in the orc's chest, it clambered to its feet and swayed toward him, apparently unaware that it should have been dead twice over.

Annoying bastards.

The orc burst into motion, and Arwin matched the attack with his hammer. As the weapon neared the orc's head, it twitched to the side and just barely managed to avoid it. In the same motion, it lunged to bite at Arwin's neck.

He used [Scourge] to empower his leg as he brought his leg up, driving his knee straight into the orc's chin. It snapped back with enough force to shatter the teeth in its mouth. Not finished, Arwin brought his bare fist down on the monster's head, pouring in all the power [Scourge] would let him.

In a scene vaguely reminiscent of a very gorey whack-a-mole, the orc's head crumpled. Blood and gore seeped out of its face as it careened, still managing to rake its jagged claws across Arwin's chest as it collapsed.

His armor absorbed the blow, keeping it from penetrating, but Arwin earned four thick new furrows in his armor for his troubles. Even when the orc's body hit the ground, Arwin didn't hesitate.

He brought his hammer down once more, driving it straight into the monster's back. Its body flailed, then fell still. Arwin took a step back, breathing heavily as blood dripped from the end of his hammer.

"There," Arwin said, pausing to swallow and catch his breath. "I got it."

"Holy shit," Reya said. "I knew you could fight, but I didn't know you could *fight*."

"What's that meant to mean?" Arwin asked. "I fought the Wyrn."

"We ran from the Wyrn," Rodrick corrected, regarding Arwin in a new light. "That was brutal. Have you fought orcs before? You ripped that thing apart."

"On occasion," Arwin said. He saw the look in Lillia's eye and grimaced. He knew what she was thinking, even if she wasn't saying it.

She's seen me do that to a whole lot more than just an orc.

"So the room is safe, now?" Reya asked. "Can we look around and see if there's anything good?"

"There almost certainly is," Arwin replied, kneeling to pick up the fallen cleaver. It had two rough initials carved into it, a *V* and an *A* overlaid on top of each other. They probably belonged to the original owner of the cleaver, before it had landed in the grasp of the mindless creature laying at Arwin's feet. "Don't get too excited yet, though. Take things slow. This room is pretty hard to see in, so there could be doors leading to other parts of the dungeon."

"Do monsters actually travel between the rooms? I always thought they kind of just... sat there," Reya said.

Arwin looked at Reya, blinking in surprise. “Why would they do that? They want to get deeper and closer to the source of Mesh that lured them here in the first place, so they rarely come back out of the dungeon into the worse rooms – but rarely doesn’t mean they won’t.”

“That was a good save, by the way,” Rodrick said. “If Reya hadn’t slowed that orc down, I’d have taken a nasty hit. I didn’t think the darn thing would be so aware when it was actively fighting you.”

“That’s why I told you to go for crippling blows, not finishing ones,” Arwin said. “Harder to correct when you’re throwing your whole weight behind an attack. Now, lets–”

“Hush!” Lillia hissed, slipping forward and clapping a hand over Arwin’s mouth. His eyes widened and he had to stop himself from throwing her arm away instinctively. The expression on her face was serious enough to kill any questions that Arwin had.

They all went silent; eyes darting around the room to try and find what Lillia had spotted. It took Arwin a few more seconds than he would have liked, but he finally managed to locate what had drawn Lillia’s attention.

The vines near the far left wall were... off. Their tone was just slightly different to the other vines covering the ground, and they were more tightly knit than they were in other areas. They weren’t just vines – it was the coiled body of a large snake. The Mesh didn’t appear to identify the monster, so it had to have some form of stealth or concealment skill.

The snake must have been at least three feet wide and eighteen feet long. It hadn’t attacked yet, but it was ever-so-slowly making its way toward them.

No sooner than Arwin had spotted the monster did he hear a grunt from down a hall at the room behind it – a grunt that sounded suspiciously like an orc.

“More orcs coming,” Arwin whispered, tightening his grip on his hammer. “I knew it. They’re rarely alone. The others must have gone deeper into the dungeon. Get ready to fight. Rodrick, do you see the snake?”

“Barely.”

“That’s your job. Keep it off the backline. I’ll hold the orcs off until you can back me up. Don’t let the snake get behind me, or I’m dead.”

Dull red eyes appeared in the darkness of the doorway and Arwin suppressed a curse. The orc was already in a rampaging state – but it wasn’t running around like an idiot, which meant only one thing.

There was an orc shaman.

This might get ugly.

Chapter 44

Arwin charged the door. In general, charging an orc was the act of either a madman or someone so strong that the orc posed absolutely no threat to them. But, in this instance, he was neither.

I need to make sure they don’t make it out of the doorway. There are going to be at least two orcs coming out, and I can’t fend them off if they gang up on me. Routing them at the door is my only option.

Arwin reached the doorway an instant before the orcs could emerge and thrust his hammer forward like a spear. The orc before him snarled and dodged out of the way, pressing its body to the wall to keep from getting struck. As soon as he got a good look at the monster, the Mesh identified it.

[Swamp Orc – Journeyman 1]

In the darkness behind the orc, Arwin could make out a pair of glowing green eyes and the rough form of another orc.

That's the shaman. It'll stay out of the fight and try to whittle me down with magic while buffing up its warrior. I can't let this drag on for long. I'm not going to win a battle of attrition.

Almost as if on cue, the Mesh shimmered forth once more.

[Swamp Orc Shaman – Journeyman 2]

Behind him, Arwin heard Rodrick let out a battle cry. There was a loud thump, presumably the snake as it entered the fight with him, but Arwin didn't have the liberty to turn and see how their fight was unfolding.

The orc before him lunged, thrusting its rusty sword for his chest. Arwin batted the blow away with the hilt of his hammer and drove his foot into the orc's stomach, using [Scourge] to give himself enough strength to throw it back several feet.

His magical energy reserves weren't as high as he would have liked, but it wasn't like the orcs were going to sit around and wait for him to recover. The light in the orc's eyes turned even brighter and it let out a furious roar, charging Arwin like a mad bull.

He drove his hammer forward, but this time, the monster didn't even bother dodging it. It thrust its sword forward, taking the hammer blow to the shoulder and striking Arwin in the chest with its own weapon.

If it hadn't been for his armor, the blow would have gone straight through his heart. Instead, it rang off the scales and caught on the furrows already present in Arwin's armor, only leaving a superficial cut on his chest.

In turn, Arwin's blow demolished the monster's left shoulder. Bone and blood splattered across the floor, but the orc didn't even notice. It thrust its blade again and again, having gotten close enough to Arwin that his hammer was nowhere near as effective.

He grit his teeth as the sword carved into his armor. He tried to shove the orc back, but it managed to dodge out of the way. Its sword rang off his greaves, giving them some kinetic energy, but Arwin wasn't going to be able to get much use out of it if –

The orc's sword slammed into his armor again. Heat swirled in Arwin's chest, and a whip of fire lashed out, striking the monster in the eyes. It screamed, more in fury than pain, and Arwin took the brief reprieve to use a [Scourge] empowered kick to throw the orc back.

His chest stung something furious and blood dripped down his front, but none of the cuts he'd taken were fatal. His armor had held up against most of the monster's attacks, but it wasn't going to last forever.

A loud hiss rang out behind Arwin, followed by the clash of metal on scale and a slew of curses. In the brief instant that Arwin was distracted, the shaman sent a bolt of green light into the back of the orc he was fighting.

The wound on its shoulder stopped bleeding. It hadn't been healed, but it wouldn't be dying from blood loss anytime soon. Roaring, the orc charged Arwin again. The light in its eyes burned even brighter than it had before.

I can't keep trading blows like this. The shaman is going to keep picking this bastard back up until it's using the corpse like a puppet. I need to blow through and kill the real threat.

Instead of trying to fend the orc's blows off, Arwin threw caution to the wind. He drove his shoulder into the monster, slamming it into the wall. He caught a sword to the side in the process, but it rang off his armor and failed to find purchase in his skin.

Arwin charged forward, and he was rewarded with a flash of surprise and fear in the orc shaman's eyes a moment before he grabbed it by the neck. Letting [Scourge] empower his body, Arwin slammed the shaman's head into the stone.

There was a sickening crunch and a splatter, much like a watermelon being dropped. The shaman's body went limp in his hand and Arwin spun just in time for the other orc's sword to slam into his shoulder with enough force to drive him to one knee.

He snarled, lunging forward and tackling the monster to the ground. The sword flew from the orc's hands and it reached up to claw at his face. Arwin drew on [Scourge] once more, slamming the orc's hands to the ground.

It roared up at him – but the roar was quickly turned to a garbled scream as Arwin drove his forehead into the beast's face, shattering its nose. One of its fangs caught his chin. If it hadn't been for [Indomitable Bulwark], the fang likely would have completely ripped his face open. But, even with his empowered defenses, it still ripped across his flesh and left a deep cut.

Arwin didn't give himself time to register the wound. It was taking literally all of his power to keep the struggling orc pinned down, and it wouldn't be long before the monster managed to escape him again.

With a roar, Arwin activated [Scourge] once more, draining the majority of the magical energy he still had left to work with, and drove his head down once more. The orc's skull caved in beneath him.

Blood splattered across his face, but Arwin didn't care. He leaned back, releasing the monster's hands and driving one more blow into its sternum to make sure it was well and truly dead before staggering back to his feet, breathing heavily.

Achievement: [Use Your Head] has been earned.

[Use Your Head] – *Awarded for using your head in a way in which you probably should not have used it.* Effects: The next piece of headgear you forge will be magical. *This achievement will be consumed upon creation of your next piece of headgear.*

Arwin dismissed the Mesh. He grabbed his hammer from where it had fallen on the floor and strode back into the other room, readying himself for another fight. But, when Arwin emerged from the hallway, he nearly ran straight into Rodrick.

The man let out a scream and jumped nearly a foot into the air, bringing his sword to bear.

“Good gods!” Rodrick exclaimed, his eyes wide. “You look like a monster!”

“Are you okay?” Reya asked, her face pale. Lillia looked like she wanted to say something as well, but she remained quiet. Anna hurried over to him and started to draw on her magic.

Arwin looked down at his torn up armor, then wiped the blood from his face with the back of an arm. “I killed the orcs. Where’s the snake?”

“Dead,” Rodrick said, stepping back so Arwin could see the corpse of the monster behind him. It was largely in one piece, having been run through the eye. Arwin gave Rodrick an approving nod, letting himself relax slightly.

Anna’s magic washed over his body, stitching shut the wounds he’d picked up.

“Thank you, and good job. We should pause here for a moment. That was... a little harder than I expected.”

“You killed three of those things on your own?” Rodrick asked, looking over Arwin’s shoulder and shaking his head in disbelief. “Some smith you are.”

“It’s not about the tools you have. It’s about how you use them.”

“Do you even have any tools other than that armor?” Rodrick asked with a laugh. “With the amount of blood on you, it looks more like you used your head to beat the life out of them.”

“Your whole body is a tool,” Arwin said. He touched the damage to his armor, then frowned. It had taken quite the beating from the fight. It didn’t feel like the magic within it was about to falter, but if he went through another fight that was as brutal as this one had been, there was a good chance it would be too ripped up to be repairable.

At least I got a pretty nice achievement out of this. I've got more than enough scales to repair the damage I took back at home. If I can just gather some new material to work with, then I can consider this a huge success.

Lillia dug through her pockets and pulled out a black napkin, tossing it down to Arwin. He caught it with a hand and wiped the blood off his face, giving her an appreciative nod.

“Thanks. This is probably going to stain, though.”

“That’s fine. I always use it to clean up blood. Butchering animals is messy.”

Arwin looked at the napkin, then shrugged. It wasn’t going to be any less dirty than he already was, so he wiped the rest of his face off. He gave himself another few seconds to recover before standing back up. He handed the napkin back to Lillia, who took it between two fingers.

“Should we go deeper?” Reya asked. “If the next room is even harder than this one...”

“It could be difficult. My armor is pretty cut up,” Arwin said. He walked over to the snake and knelt beside it, examining the monster’s body. He pulled at one of the scales, bending it until it snapped.

Not nearly as strong as the Forest Lizard scales. This thing must have been much more reliant on its stealth abilities. Not particularly useful for my forging, but it’s a good thing Lillia spotted it.

Arwin pulled the monster’s head up, holding it by one of the fangs to study the inside of its mouth. The fangs were large, so he snapped them off and stuck them into a pocket. He wasn’t sure if he could use them, but it wouldn’t hurt to keep them around.

He then knelt by the dead orc and ruffled through its belongings. Aside from the cleaver, there really wasn't anything of real use on it. The first orc in the hallway was similarly useless, its sword far too rusted to be of use, but the shaman was different.

Arwin hadn't had a chance to see it during the fight, but the monster had been holding a wooden wand of some sort. There was a glittering purple gemstone tied to its top. Arwin wasn't sure what it did – if it did anything at all, as the Mesh didn't identify it. Either way, he ripped the gem free of the staff and tucked it into a pocket. At the very least, it would probably sell for a little.

He returned to the room with the others in it. “Nothing too useful yet.”

“I did get a good amount of energy from killing the snake,” Rodrick put in. Reya nodded. “I did too, even though I only helped a bit.”

“Any achievements?”

Both of them shook their heads.

“Then it's up to you lot,” Arwin said. “I'd be willing to push forward for one more room. We haven't really gotten much out of this yet. If I rest for a few more minutes, I should be able to handle another fight without much trouble. I'd like to try to get more out of the dungeon on our first run.”

“I'm not keen on cooking orc, and the snake is kind of stringy,” Lillia said. “I'd like to go further as well, but I'm not really doing much fighting right now, so it's up to you.”

“I haven't been hurt yet, so I'm good to go deeper,” Reya said.

“Same here,” Rodrick said, and Anna nodded in agreement.

“Then it’s settled,” Arwin said. “We go deeper.”

Chapter 45

After a few minutes of sitting around to recover their energy, the group crept down the hall. It had been long enough since their last fight that it didn’t seem likely anything else had overheard it, but there was no point taking chances.

They crept down the dark hall, following its curves deeper into the earth. The scent of mildew grew stronger with every step, and a faint mist greeted them, prickling against their skin. It was mostly concentrated around their feet, sending wisps of swirling white up with every step they took.

The Mesh prickled at Arwin’s skin, telling him that there was faint power stored within the mist – or, more likely, whatever had created it.

After a few more minutes of walking, they reached the end of the hall. A stone door sat before them, its surface flush with the walls around it. It was plain, aside from a small green crystal jutting out from one side of it like a doorknob.

“That’s not suspicious at all,” Rodrick said, squinting at the door. “Something nasty past this, you think?”

“Probably,” Arwin said with a nod. “I’d say the mist is coming from beyond the door. It’s probably something a little stronger than what we’ve faced before.”

“What are the chances it’s waiting on the other end of the door to attack us?”

“Nonzero,” Arwin admitted. “But this mist could be a good sign. If we can take out whatever is waiting for us, I’d be willing to bet we’ll be able to get some good stuff from the victory.”

“I’d be willing to try. I’m topped up on magic right now, so as long as nobody gets hurt too seriously, I can keep everyone patched up for a while,” Anna supplied.

“Can we just poke our heads in there and see what we’re up against? Or will it chase us?” Rodrick asked.

“No clue. Depends on what’s there,” Arwin replied. He idly ran a finger along the damage to his armor. “Not every monster is the same. I think it’s worth a try, though. We can always use the door as a choke point if it’s a real threat. Most monsters won’t throw their lives away trying to kill you, so it’ll try to run if we injure it enough. We’re not that deep into the dungeon yet anyway, so I think we can handle it.”

“Let’s go, then,” Reya said. She paused, then cleared her throat. “You first though, please.”

Arwin snorted and stepped toward the door. He wrapped his hand around the crystal and pulled. The door didn’t budge, so he pushed instead. It swung open silently, gliding across the stone without a noise.

More mist poured out of the room, rolling past their feet and going up to their waist. The sound of rushing water accompanied it. A small waterfall poured from an outcropping of rocks at the far right of the room, its blueish-green water making a river that traveled across the ground and disappeared into a hole.

Glistening teal gemstones jutted out of the walls and disrupted the flow of the river, sending faint flickers of light dancing across the walls and ceiling. Compared to the rest of the dungeon, it was shockingly beautiful.

A pile of strangely shaped rocks and gemstones about seven feet tall caught Arwin's eye as the familiar tingle of the Mesh greeted him. He focused on it more intently and was rewarded by a swirl of golden letters.

[Crystal Golem – Journeyman 3]

“Over there,” Arwin whispered. The golem didn't seem to have noticed them yet – or perhaps it simply didn't care about their presence. Not every monster in a dungeon was always hostile, though they usually didn't appreciate getting bothered.

“That thing is huge,” Reya muttered. “Can we really fight it?”

“Smaller than the Wurm,” Rodrick whispered.

“We had to run from that,” Reya pointed out. “It's just... sitting there. What is it waiting for?”

“Us, probably,” Arwin replied. He adjusted his grip on his hammer. He'd fought golems before. They were a rather interesting kind of monster, as they weren't naturally born. Instead, they formed when the environment had so much magical energy sitting around that it got infused.

Most of the time, Golems tended to guard whatever it was that had formed them. They were occasionally aggressive, but most of the time they didn't care about anyone unless they got near whatever it was they happened to be protecting.

“There might be something good in this room,” Arwin said. “Golems are protectors, but I don’t know what it’s guarding. I have to say that I’m a little tempted to try and harvest some of these crystals.”

“What are the chances that it’s going to take offense to that?” Reya asked.

“Almost one hundred percent,” Arwin admitted. “Up to you all.”

“If you think we can handle it, I’m willing to give it a shot,” Rodrick said. “Never fought a giant pile of rocks before, but I’m always willing to try new experiences.”

“The strategy for this should be pretty straight forward, then. Golems tend to embody the traits of whatever it is they’re made of. Crystal and stone, in this case, so it’ll probably be heavy and strong. Don’t get hit. Focus on chipping away at it until we reveal its core. Once that gets shattered, it’ll die,” Arwin said.

“Understood,” Rodrick said. “I guess we just smack at it and Reya waits to use her power until one of us are about to get hit or we see it’s core?”

“Exactly,” Arwin said with a nod. “And Anna will sit at the back and quickly heal anyone that does get hit. This should be a short fight, but it can go badly pretty fast if the golem lands a good strike on us and we can’t get away in time. Sound good to everyone?”

“I’ll sit here and provide moral support,” Lillia said with a grin. Arwin snorted, but he couldn’t exactly ask her to do anything else. Unless they had absolutely no choice, it was better to keep her powers concealed.

“I feel like it’s more of a curse than a support with that tentacle you’re carrying around,” Rodrick grumbled. “I keep seeing it out of the corner of my eye and shuddering.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Lillia said defensively. “It’s going to taste great.”

“I’ll believe it when I see someone else try it.”

“Let’s just kill this thing already, shall we?” Anna asked. “The mist is tingly. I don’t like it. I know it’s not doing anything, but it kind of feels like I’ve got ants trying to crawl up my pants.”

Arwin grimaced at that thought, then hoisted his hammer and started toward the golem, Rodrick at his side. The monster didn’t respond to their approach, and Arwin kept his guard up to make sure nothing else was lurking in the shadows.

Golems were pretty non-confrontational so long as they weren’t annoyed, so it was very possible for another monster to be in the room. But, at least as far as he could tell, there wasn’t anything else in the area. He wasn’t even sure where the door to the next room was – though he would have bet a fair sum of gold it was probably behind the waterfall.

Dungeons always liked sticking things behind waterfalls.

As they grew closer to the golem, a dull grinding noise echoed through the room. The golem’s head shifted up, dim green lighting in the sockets that made up its eyes. It hadn’t attacked yet, but it was watching them.

“I think it sees us,” Rodrick said.

“I don’t know if sees is the right word,” Arwin said. “It doesn’t actually have eyes. It’s just magic manifest. Golems don’t process information or thought like we do, as far as I’m aware.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I don’t have to feel bad about this,” Arwin replied, rearing back and swinging his hammer, empowering the blow with [Scourge]. The hammer slammed into the side of the golem’s head with a resounding crash, sending a spray of stone fragments flying everywhere.

The monster staggered, catching itself on the ground with an arm. It shoved itself upright, stone screeching against crystal as it stood upright. Rock flew from the ground, filling the crater Arwin had made in it.

“I think you pissed it off,” Rodrick said, taking a step back as a dull hum filled the air. The translucent green crystals covering the monster started to pulsate, their light reflecting in the mist around them.

“So I did,” Arwin agreed. “The core isn’t on the left side of its head, in case you were wondering.”

The golem lurched forward, bringing a large, rocky hand the size of Arwin’s upper body down toward him. He dove to the side and the ground shook behind him from the force of the golem’s blow.

Rodrick darted at the monster and slammed the butt of his sword down into the top of its arm, cracking the stone slightly. His eyes went wide and he skipped back, avoiding the golem’s other hand as it swept at him.

“Nine Underlands, that thing is really hard to crack. How’d you damage it so easily?”

“I’ve got a bloody hammer,” Arwin replied.

And an ability that lets me grow a hundred times more powerful than I normally am. Just a small buff, really. Definitely not a big deal.

The golem rumbled toward them, raising a hand. Crystals shifted across its body, gathering in its palm and forming into a large, jagged sword. It swept the blade and Arwin dropped to the ground, just barely ducking under the powerful blow in time.

The rush of wind from its passing buffeted his hair, and Rodrick let out a slew of curses from behind him. There hadn't been a loud crunch, so the warrior must have avoided the attack as well.

As the golem went to pull the sword back for another swing, Arwin attacked once more. He brought his hammer hurtling toward the other side of its head like a meteor, slamming it into the stone with all the force his body could muster.

Another loud crash echoed through the room. The force of his blow, empowered by [Scourge], sent the golem staggering several feet to the side. Rubble rained down from the huge crater, but there was still no core to be seen.

The wound quickly started to patch over. Arwin went to attack again, but he was forced to abandon the attempt as the golem nearly impaled him with its enormous crystal sword. He twisted at the last second, letting the weapon scrape across his armor with a loud screech.

“You okay?” Rodrick yelled.

“Fine,” Arwin replied with a grimace. The golem was a bit faster than he'd expected – or perhaps he was just slower than he'd once been. It was probably a mixture of the two. “The golem's core isn't in its head. Let's go for the body, around the heart area.”

“I’ll distract it,” Rodrick said, running up and smacking the golem on the arm before Arwin could respond. It turned toward him, bringing the crystal sword whistling for Rodrick’s head.

A blue glow enveloped the golem, slowing its movements for just an instant. Rodrick leapt back and the sword whiffed him. Arwin’s hammer shot out and caught the golem in the shoulder with another spray of stone. A resounding chime rang out as he struck some of the crystal, and a tremor raced down his arms with such intensity that Arwin was forced to drop his hammer.

He hopped back, cursing and shaking his arms off. Whatever the crystals were made out of, it was *really* strong. Arwin used [Arsenal] to summon his hammer back into his hands. The golem reached out for him, and Rodrick unleashed several rapid – but largely ineffective – attacks into its back.

This time, the golem completely ignored him. It had clearly registered that Rodrick didn’t have a good way to injure it, and Arwin was the greater threat.

“Over here, you overgrown lump!” Rodrick called, racing past the golem to stand where it had risen. “You’re protecting something, right? Sure would be a shame if I—”

Rodrick didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. The golem spun with such speed that its hand caught Arwin by surprise, striking him in the shoulder and sending him tumbling across the ground.

He slammed into a wall and the world flashed around him as the air was knocked from his lungs. The golem lunged for Rodrick. A flash of blue light enveloped it, but it wasn’t enough to stop the monster.

Its weapon came crashing down, on a collision course for Rodrick – and the warrior wasn't anywhere near fast enough to dodge it in time.

Chapter 46

Lillia snapped her fingers and a shadow shot out from the darkness, wrapping around Rodrick's leg and yanking him to the side with a surprised yelp a moment before his head could get turned into a fine bloody mist by the swinging sword.

Arwin stumbled to his feet, his head still ringing. Even the glancing blow had been enough to completely knock him out of sorts. Anna raced up to him, slapping her palm against his shoulder.

Healing energy rushed into him, pushing the dizziness back. Arwin sprinted back into the fight, not even spending the time to give Anna a grateful nod. The golem was already rearing back to swing at Lillia and Rodrick again.

He swung his hammer with a roar, bringing it crashing into the golem's side whilst using the full force of [Scourge]. A powerful shockwave ran up his arms as his hammer struck home, crashing through the golem's body.

For a brief instant, a flicker of green caught Arwin's eye. A gemstone, roughly the size of his fist, rested directly in the center of the monster's chest.

"The core is in the middle of its body!" Arwin roared, jumping back to avoid getting crumpled like a tin can by the golem's sword. "One of you need to finish it off! If I kill it, you'll barely get any rewards!"

"I'll be honest, I'm a little more concerned with not dying," Rodrick yelled back.

“You’ll not die more often if you get stronger.”

The golem’s limbs ground against each other as it stomped toward Arwin. Tremors ran through the ground with every step it took, and Arwin was forced to use [Scourge] to empower his feet and jump out of the way of a devastating sword swing.

Stone had already started rolling up the monster’s body, gathering and concealing the core once more. Arwin gritted his teeth. The golem wasn’t exactly a sapient monster, but it could adapt. It wasn’t going to sit around and let him wail on it.

“I’m going to reveal the core again,” Arwin said. “Reya, slow it down as soon as I land the hit. Rodrick, finish it off.”

He didn’t wait for any confirmations. Arwin activated [Arsenal] and dismissed his armor and hammer before bursting into motion. Without the heavy equipment, Arwin dove under the golem’s next blow and rolled to his feet. He summoned his hammer back to his hands as he rose and brought it up into the golem’s chest.

Stone shattered and rained against the wall behind the golem, revealing the shimmering core in the center of its chest. The golem brought a fist hurtling toward Arwin, but a flash of blue enveloped it once more.

Rodrick ran forward with a cry. His sword ignited with burning light as he swung it at the core. Another wave of blue energy bound the golem. The monster slammed to a halt just as Rodrick’s sword struck the green gemstone with a high-pitched clink. Cracks shot through the gemstone and it shattered, letting out a flash of faint light.

The golem's fist crumbled to dust, stones and crystal falling down all around Arwin. The entire golem crumbled, stumbling forward and collapsing into a large pile of debris. The Mesh swirled before Arwin.

Achievement: [Topple the Strong] has been earned.

[Topple the Strong] – *Awarded for defeating an opponent one full Tier above you.*

Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

A huge grin split Arwin's face. Even if they got absolutely nothing else from the dungeon, this single achievement made everything worth it. The value of upgrading upcoming skills had already been proven time and time again to be immense.

"Whoa," Rodrick breathed, staring into the air before him in mute awe.

"What?" Anna asked. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I got an Achievement," Rodrick said. "For killing a Golem with one strike."

"Congratulations. What's it do?" Arwin asked.

"It lets me upgrade one of my skills," Rodrick replied absent-mindedly, his gaze still fixed on the air before him. "And I got a pretty damn good upgrade out of it. My Empowered Strike now carries on into my next two attacks. That'll be pretty useful, since using it once draws pretty much all my magical energy."

"I didn't get anything this time around, but I barely did anything to help in the fight so it's not much of a surprise," Anna said. "What about you, Reya?"

Reya nodded mutely. She swallowed, then licked her lips. "I – yeah. I got something."

“An achievement?” Rodrick asked.

“No. A Title.”

All of them froze. Rodrick drew in a sharp breath, letting it out in a whistle. Getting Achievements was incredibly important, but they were always consumed at some point. Titles, on the other hand, were arguably the most powerful boons that anyone could get.

Barring the most extreme circumstances, Titles were permanent. Their benefits could range from borderline useless to incredibly powerful, but they never left. Every single title was immensely valuable. To get one this early was huge for Reya.

“What does it do?” Anna asked, her eyes wide with shock. “Is it a good one? I can’t believe you got a Title at Apprentice 1. That’s incredible. That could set your entire future up for you.”

“Don’t forget she got it by helping kill something more than twice her Tier,” Rodrick pointed out. “She actually helped take it out, too. It wasn’t just fed to her. That’s not an easy feat to replicate.”

“Stop yapping and let me hear what the Title is,” Lillia said. She paused, then reddened. “Assuming you want to say, of course. You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to, Reya.”

“I think it’s fine,” Reya said with a hurried shake of her head. “I was just distracted reading it. It’s called Gaiac Heart.”

“What’s it do?” Arwin asked, a flash of concern passing through him. Not every Title was always beneficial. It was incredibly rare, but it wasn’t impossible to get a detrimental effect from them. Anything that had the chance to affect the heart was a little worrying.

Reya swallowed before speaking again. “It’s a passive that draws on my magical energy whenever I get injured, healing slowly depending on how bad the damage is.”

“Oh, shit,” Anna whispered. “That’s absolutely ridiculous. A healing passive?”

“A very slow one,” Reya said, but that did little to reduce the significance of the ability.

“That’s quite the Title,” Arwin said. “It’ll serve you well. I’ve seen a lot of them, and I can say without a doubt that defensive and restorative Titles are almost always the best ones you can get. Even if it’s just a small amount, that’s going to be useful for as long as you live.”

“Might make you live longer too,” Anna mused. “Aging is just destruction of the body. You might stay young for longer without even having to reach the higher Tiers and slow your aging by infusing yourself with magic.”

“Whoa. I didn’t even think of that,” Reya said, blinking in surprise. She touched her face, as if trying to see if she’d suddenly grown younger. “How come I got a Title when the rest of you got Achievements?”

“Questioning the Mesh is a pretty pointless task,” Arwin said. “It does what it wants. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say it’s because the difference in your abilities and those of the golem was really large, even compared to the rest of us. You basically just started fighting monsters, while everyone else here has been at it for at least a little while.”

“It’s too bad we can’t replicate the scenario by fighting some real big bad monster ourselves,” Rodrick mused, rubbing his chin. “I’d quite fancy a Title myself.”

“You could. Go try to beat up the Wyrn,” Anna said with a snort of laughter. “See how it goes for you.”

Rodrick grimaced and wasted no time in shaking his head. “No thanks. I choose life.”

“We’ll have more than enough time to get ourselves Titles and Achievements,” Arwin said, approaching the remains of the golem and kneeling beside them. He pushed through the rubble and pulled out one of the faintly glowing crystals. To his disappointment, it crumbled to dust in his hand. Evidently, it had been integrally tied to the golem.

Arwin tried picking up a few more crystals. They all ended in the same way. Cursing under his breath, he rose to his feet. He stepped over the monster’s remains and headed over to the waterfall, stepping through the rushing water.

The frown on his face vanished, replaced by a delighted grin. Resting in a small pile in a small cave were two dozen crystals, polished and waiting for an owner. They were all around an inch wide and two to three inches long.

He hadn’t been left empty handed by the mesh. The ground beneath the crystals was mushy, and he was able to pull each one out without too much difficulty.

Arwin scooped them into his arms and walked back through the waterfall. He turned one of them over in his hand, watching the light reflect off the walls. “And I got what I was looking for as well.”

“The crystals?” Anna asked.

“I think I can use them,” Arwin said with a nod.

If I had a pickaxe, I’d consider trying to take some of the crystal in the walls as well. That would have a pretty high chance of attracting more attention than we want, though. This is more than enough to work with for now. I couldn’t carry more if I wanted to.

“So, do we try to venture any deeper?” Anna asked while Arwin worked to collect the crystals.

“I don’t think it would be wise,” Lillia said, adjusting her grip on the tentacle tucked under her arm. “We’ve already gotten some pretty good rewards from going this deep, and the golem was already a pretty tough fight. Arwin’s armor is already pretty damaged, so pushing further could mean biting off more than we can chew.”

“I agree,” Reya said. “I don’t think we should rush things. We should reset, get used to our new benefits, and let Arwin fix up his armor.”

And make my hammer. If I can figure out how to use this crystal, I bet it could be quite effective. With how hard it was to damage them, they’d definitely pack a significant punch. I’ll probably need to use a different material for the handle of the hammer if I don’t want to vibrate myself to death every time I hit something.

“No need to push ourselves farther.” Arwin straightened back up, every pocket he had completely stuffed full of crystals. “We can all be pretty proud of our performance. Before we head out – Anna, how is it that your class gets strength?”

“Mostly through combat. It’s really hard to get energy as a healer,” Anna said with a frown. “I’ve got to participate in the fight, but I don’t have any good ways to damage monsters. My healing counts, but the severity of the wound has to be pretty nasty for it to give a huge boost. Since I don’t have the buffs or benefits that other combat classes have, I’m more liable to get chopped in half when I try to fight. It’s okay, though. I get a really small amount just from standing around and keeping everyone safe.”

Arwin shook his head. “That’s not going to be acceptable in the long run, and I’m not particularly partial to standing around and letting myself get nasty cuts so you can get levels.”

“I doubt that would work anyway,” Anna said. “The Mesh wouldn’t recognize healing self-inflicted wounds as dangerous in most circumstances.”

“Right. We can’t have you far weaker than the rest of us in the span of a few weeks, so we’ll have to do something about that,” Arwin said.

“A few weeks? Just how aggressively are you planning to push us?” Anna asked with a nervous laugh. “It’s not like I can do much about it anyway. The only way for me to safely participate in a fight would be to get close, and my magic doesn’t work on myself. I’m just a liability unless you guys get really cut up.”

“Not if we hold the monster down for you,” Arwin said.

“That’s an assisted kill, though,” Anna said. “You’d lose so much energy for doing it, and I’d barely get any because you basically fed it to me. The Mesh only awards challenge.”

“I’d say it’s a good bit of challenge to get close enough to a monster that can kill you in one blow,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “Besides, Reya got a good bit of energy from sitting in the back. We’ll be ensuring you get energy as well from here on out. We don’t need an under leveled healer.”

Anna bit the insides of her cheeks. “That’s a lot of energy you’d be wasting.”

“Not my energy. I don’t get shit for killing things,” Arwin said with a snort. “What about you, Rodrick? Complaints?”

“Are you kidding? No way in the Nine Underlands. I’d do it for Anna myself if I thought I could actually manage it safely,” Rodrick said with an eager grin. “She’s too damn polite to say yes, but I’ll do it for her. Thank you. We’ll gladly do as you ask.”

“Good,” Arwin said. “Let’s get going, then. I’ve got some armor to repair and some new toys to play with. I think I’m going to try to make myself a hammer.”

Chapter 47

Lillia had been pretty sure that someone would have been waiting for them the moment they left the dungeon, or *something* would have gone awry.

But, to her surprise, nothing did. The trip back from the dungeon went smoothly, though they did get some strange looks from the guards on the way back into the city. Fortunately, nobody asked too many questions and the group broke off once they’d gotten deep enough.

Rodrick and Anna returned to the Glowing Swordfish. Arwin headed back to the smithy to get to work, while Reya joined her in heading back to the tavern. The tentacle she’d taken from the Landsquid was getting a little difficult to hold with how slippery it was, but she’d carried it for this far, and she’d be damned if she dropped it now.

I’m starting to suspect that this isn’t going to taste anywhere near good enough to justify all the effort I’ve put into it. I’ve already basically ruined my clothes with goo, but I’m going to cook this piece of shit if it’s the last thing I do.

“Are you okay?” Reya asked as they ducked through the doorway and entered the dark tavern. “You’ve got a really concentrated expression on your face. You aren’t mad, are you?”

Lillia hurriedly got her features under control and cleared her throat. “I – no, no. I’m fine. Just... thinking.”

“About what?” Reya asked. “Also, can I have something to eat?”

“Well, I was going to try to cook this,” Lillia said, glancing down at the tentacle. Reya blanched.

“You know what? I did just have a workout, and it’s not a good idea to eat right after working,” Reya said hurriedly. “It’s bad for... uh, digestion.”

I’m pretty sure the rule was to not eat before exercise, not after it. Oh well. Can’t force anybody to eat something. It’s her loss.

“Suit yourself,” Lillia said with a shrug. She stepped into the kitchen and set the tentacle down on the counter, wiping her hands off on the sides of her shirt before poking her head back out. “You did a great job today, by the way. I’m looking forward to seeing what you can do after you’ve got some more experience and training.”

“Me too,” Reya said, her face turning serious. She ran a hand along her armor, then shook her head as a small smile appeared on her lips. “I never thought I’d get a class, much less a Unique one. It feels like Arwin never even considered that an option, though. He kind of just plowed through everything in his way and got what he wanted. I feel like I don’t even deserve the damn class.”

“From what I heard, you’re the one that charged the Wyrms. That wasn’t him.”

“He’s the one that set everything up for me, though. I wouldn’t have been able to do any of that on my own.”

“Don’t dismiss your own actions,” Lillia said. “Arwin put you in the situation where you could succeed, but you’re the one that did it. I certainly won’t argue about his determination, though. He’s a force of nature.”

A memory flickered through Lillia’s mind. The crunch of bone giving way under the blade of Arwin’s sword, glowing with immense holy might as he carved through the neck of her closest friends.

Her hands tightened at her sides and turned away from Reya, stepping back into the kitchen. It was difficult to associate the gruff but kind man that had just led them through the dungeon with the Hero of Man.

The Hero of Man had killed everyone she’d ever loved – and yet, he’d risked his life purely to get Reya a class for no reason other than the fact that she hadn’t had one. He’d refused to let a healer he barely knew fall behind, just because it was the wrong thing to do.

If I ever get my hands on the people that turned me and Arwin into murderers, I’m going to rip them to shreds and feed them their own innards.

“Lillia?” Reya asked worriedly. “Are you okay?”

Lillia blinked, unclenching her hands and coming back into the present. The darkness around her had intensified into a thick blanket, completely blocking out the light from the lanterns. She hurriedly dismissed the magic, pushing it as far back as she could and letting the faint glowing lights re-ignite.

“I’m fine,” Lillia said, coughing into her fist. “Just... worked up from the dungeon.”

“Oh, I get that,” Reya said. “It still feels like I’m going to get attacked by a monster at any moment, even though I know that obviously isn’t going to happen in the middle of town. There probably isn’t anywhere safer – from monsters, that is. I could definitely get jumped by someone from the thieves’ guild. Or just about anyone else, for that matter.”

Just how many enemies does Reya have?

Lillia couldn’t keep a laugh from slipping out of her mouth. It was hard to stay angsty when Reya’s wide eyes were peering into her.

“Maybe you should make sure that doesn’t happen. It would be a shame if you got injured after all the work you’re doing to get stronger.”

“That’s true,” Reya said with a thoughtful nod. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I think you just did but feel free to ask another.”

“Why do you think Arwin’s bothering with all this?” Reya asked. “He could be rich. He makes *magic* equipment. If he tried to sell his wares, he’d probably be rich in the span of days. And yet... he sits around with us. He gave me gear worth more than my life, and he didn’t even ask for anything in return.”

“I’m going to choose not to take offense to that,” Lillia said dryly. “And I don’t know why Arwin does anything he does. He’s an odd one. I think he just does what he thinks is right, regardless of if it’s the smart move or not.”

“Why, though?” Reya asked. “What does he get out of it? I mean, I appreciate it... but why?”

“That might be something you have to ask him yourself,” Lillia said with a shake of her head. The more she spent time with Arwin, the harder it was to associate him with the man she’d spent the majority of her life trying to kill. That was probably a good thing, but it certainly felt odd.

“I might be overstepping my bounds here, but did you really meet for the first time in the tavern? The way you both act seems like you’ve known each other for a lot longer.”

Lillia nearly choked. “I – what? No. No, we definitely just met. He just reminds me of someone I used to know.”

“Oh,” Reya said. “I guess that makes sense. I honestly thought you’d been courting each other for a few years and broke it off or something like that.”

This time, Lillia did choke. She doubled over, coughing into her hand in surprise. “What? Date? No. Definitely not. Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know. Just a thought.” Reya shrugged. “Well, I’m probably going to go find some food. Not that I’m hungry. It’s, uh, to look at.”

“Right,” Lillia said, grateful for the change of subject. “You do that.”

Reya headed out of the tavern and Lillia watched her leave, a small frown on her face. Thoughts whirred in her head, so jumbled that she couldn’t make out which ones were hers and which were just strays passing through.

After a minute, she shook her head and turned back to the tentacle on the counter. It looked remarkably unappetizing. Grimacing, Lillia rolled her sleeves back. She had work to do,

and she'd be damned if she'd done all the work lugging the stupid thing this far if it didn't taste good.

I'm going to eat you, and I'm going to like it. That isn't a threat. It's a promise.

Oh, who am I kidding. It's also a threat.

Arwin held a palm-sized crystal up to the light of his [Soul Flame], watching the light dance within its green depths. Before he started properly working the material, he needed to learn more about it.

There was a faint hum within it – the call of the crystal, asking to be turned into... well, something. Therein lay the problem. Arwin could feel the call within the crystal. It hungered to be more than what it was.

Unfortunately, unlike the other materials he'd worked with, he had absolutely no idea how to understand it. The desire was there, but it was like he was listening to someone speaking in a different language.

“But why, I wonder,” Arwin mused, turning the crystal over in his hand. “How come you can't speak to me? Is it because you're more complex than the other stuff I've worked with? Or am I just not listening properly?”

The crystal, unfortunately, wasn't much help. Even if it could have answered, Arwin wouldn't have understood it anyway. He shook his head and set the crystal into the hearth, watching the flames lick at its sides.

Unsurprisingly, it was resistant to fire. Arwin hadn't expected a bloody crystal to be particularly easy to melt. He worked the bellows, raising the intensity of the fire to see how it affected the green crystal.

Fire danced all around it, licking at its sides. Arwin would have sworn that the fire wasn't just outside – it was within the crystal as well. But still, the voice of the crystal eluded him entirely.

There was nothing to do but to continue working the bellows, and so that was what he did. And, as the minutes ticked by, the crystal started to change. It was gradual, but its edges started to darken and turn a translucent black.

Arwin stopped as soon as he noticed the change start to happen. He took the crystal from the fire, wondering if he'd somehow managed to burn it. However, the crystal's structural integrity seemed fine.

He tapped a finger on the side of the crystal. It wasn't burnt. If anything, it felt like it might have hardened slightly. The greenish-black material was oddly beautiful, and Arwin could just barely make out the faint flickers of flame within the crystal.

"You're certainly magical," Arwin murmured, running a finger along the crystal's smooth surface. "But how do I work with you? I don't want to waste crystals testing things out. They're too valuable."

He chewed his lower lip, still turning the crystal over in his hand. He went to hold it up to the daylight, only to find that the sun had already set. It was already dark outside. Arwin's nose scrunched in annoyance, and he tucked the crystal into his pocket, drawing the [Soul Flame] out of the hearth.

Maybe Lillia will know more about this thing. It can't hurt to ask.

Arwin moved some scrap metal to cover the pile of crystals as best he could, then thought better of it and collected all his winnings, stuffing his pockets full once more before waddling out of the smithy – making sure to lock the door behind him – and heading for Lillia's tavern.

Chapter 48

It was, as usual, dark when Arwin stepped through the entrance. Faint lanternlight illuminated the counter, where Arwin was surprised to find Lillia sitting in one of the stools, her head in her hands.

A plate of... something sat before her. It was a gelatinous pile of half-melted flesh, singed black in some parts and semi-raw in others. Evidently, the tentacle Lillia had lugged all the way back to the tavern hadn't met a fortunate fate.

"Is this a bad time?" Arwin asked.

Lillia turned, looking mildly surprised to find him standing there. "I didn't realize you got back. Sorry. I was... uh, distracted."

More like you were in mourning.

Arwin walked over to the stool beside her and tested it to make sure it would hold his weight before sitting down.

"Looks like you cooked the tentacle."

"Cooked might be the wrong word for it," Lillia grumbled. "The stupid thing fought me, even in death."

“It looks like you put up a valiant effort.”

“Yeah, right. I put up a valiant effort and lost.”

Arwin eyed the tentacle. He couldn't help but agree, but he wasn't dumb enough to voice that sentiment. “It doesn't look that bad. At least, parts of it don't.”

Lillia pierced him with a withering stare. “My feelings aren't that fragile. You don't have to lie. It might possibly be the most horrendous thing I've put on a plate.”

Arwin, against his better judgement, reached out and picked up one of the more burnt-looking pieces of squid. At least if it was burnt it wouldn't try to come back alive in his mouth.

Lillia stared in disbelief as he brought it to his mouth and bit down. Arwin chewed slowly – then chewed some more. It wasn't anything like what he'd expected it to taste like. The meat was somehow simultaneously slimy and unbelievably chewy.

It was, without a doubt, probably the worst textured food that Arwin had ever eaten. After chewing for about another minute, he gave up the battle and swallowed the piece. Despite its horrid mouthfeel, the taste wasn't *atrocious*.

“Wow,” Lillia said, blinking. “I'm impressed, honestly. I didn't think–”

Arwin took another piece. Lillia's mouth nearly dropped open as he ate. She squinted at him, then stood up to walk around him and see if he was somehow hiding the squid with slight of hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Eating,” Arwin replied through a mouthful of squid.

“Why?”

“Because it’s food. And, once you get past the texture, it’s not all that bad. The flavor is actually decent.”

“Bullshit,” Lillia said, crossing her arms. “It’s horrible. Objectively horrible.”

Arwin swallowed the second piece of squid and took a third. He arched an eyebrow, locking eyes with Lillia as he brought it to his mouth and popped it in. Arwin chewed deliberately, making sure she could see him eating it. “There are good sides to most things.”

Lillia’s belief changed to a different emotion. Arwin couldn’t quite tell which one it was – but it was an emotion he’d never seen on her face before. Before he could even try to properly read it, she brought her features under control once more.

“I suppose so. You won’t catch me eating it, though.”

“More for me.” Arwin took another piece of squid and ate it. With his other hand, he pulled out the blackened crystal and waggled it in the air.

“What’s this?” Lillia asked. “The crystals from the cave?”

“I was hoping you might know something about it,” Arwin replied through a mouthful of squid, doing his best to not spray food everywhere while he spoke. “It seems slightly magical.”

Lillia reached out and took the crystal from him, a small frown creasing her lips as she held it up to the light of the lantern. The flames from the forge still flickered within it like a layered mural, dancing in waves of green.

“It’s beautiful,” Lillia murmured. “Hard, too. It feels slightly magic resistant.”

“Resistant?” Arwin swallowed his food. “I was thinking the opposite.”

“No, it’s definitely resistant,” Lillia said. One of her nails, as black as the night, elongated into a thin point and she tapped it against the green material. “I don’t know that much about it, but magical resistant and absorptive materials are usually a circle. You start with something that absorbs magic, and it absorbs all the energy it can until there’s no room left. Then boom – resistant.”

“I see,” Arwin mused. “I never knew that, but I wasn’t exactly the most involved with the actual materials I used. I was more interested with seeing what could be made with them.”

“I had a friend who was really interested in gemstones,” Lillia said, lowering the crystal and handing it back to Arwin as her brow creased. “Particularly magical ones.”

Arwin didn’t ask what had happened to the friend – he was pretty sure he knew.

“Would it be possible for this resistance to cause them to be harder to work with?”

“If you’ve got some form of magical fire, sure. You’d probably have to work really fast if you’re making something magical,” Lillia mused, chewing her lower lip. “If you couldn’t finish by the time the crystal completely filled, it would probably become very hard to influence or change.”

And I’d be willing to bet it would be borderline impossible to understand as well. That’s it. I need to add the crystals last, not first. That doesn’t actually solve my issue understanding what they want, but if I introduce them to the project at the proper time, I’d be willing to bet I’ll be able to understand what they want far better.

“I think you might have just solved my issue,” Arwin said, sliding the crystal back into his pocket. “Thanks, Lillia. What do I owe you for the food?”

“I feel like I should be the one asking *you* that,” Lilla muttered, sending a glance over at the plate of squid. “Thank you, though.”

“Thanks? For what?” Arwin asked, blinking in confusion.

“Never mind.” Lillia shook her head and waved her hands dismissively. “I’ve got prep to do for tomorrow. Go to your room – or back to your smithy, depending on whichever you’re going to be doing tonight. Somehow, I think I’ve already guessed which one it will be.”

Arwin chuckled and nodded to her, turning to head out the door. “Probably. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Lillia replied, picking the plate of food up and heading toward the kitchen. Arwin stepped out of the tavern and made a beeline back for his smithy.

The excitement in his steps faltered slightly as he drew closer, recalling a slightly significant issue. He may have had crystals to work with, but he didn’t have any material to make the rest of the hammer with.

Sure, I could use the crappy scrap metal I’ve got, but that would be such a waste with the quality of these crystals. I need to use something nicer... but what? Maybe I should go shopping tomorrow. More importantly, I really need to start selling some of my normal pieces. I keep telling myself I’m going to do it and not getting around to it.

Arwin let his thoughts entertain him as he headed back down the street. He was so caught up in them that he almost didn’t notice the figure standing at the entrance of the smithy – almost.

Arwin skidded to a stop and narrowed his eyes, nearly dropping into a fighting stance before he realized that the figure was just Reya with a bag over her shoulder.

“God, Reya,” Arwin said, shaking his head. “What are you doing? I thought you’d be asleep by now.”

“I was busy,” Reya replied, holding the sack out to him. The movement caused it to clink and sway precariously. “Here!”

“What’s this?” Arwin asked, accepting the sack. It was considerably heavier than he’d been expecting and he almost dropped it in surprise.

“Well, you spent so much effort trying to help me get a class that I figured I’d try to do something back. I may have stumbled into a little gold, so I went shopping earlier today. Looked around for some good material for you,” Reya said, shifting her feet. “I don’t know if it’ll be useful, but I know you’ve been trying to get better metal.”

Arwin opened the top of the sack and peered inside. There were several glistening silver rods as well as a dozen bars of the same metal.

“Reya, this is incredible,” Arwin said, lowering the bag to look back to her. “How did you know I needed this? I was just thinking—”

“You’ve kind of been muttering it under your breath the whole time you work,” Reya said with a relieved grin. “It’s useful, then?”

“It’s definitely better than anything else I’ve got,” Arwin said with a huge grin. “This is exactly what I need. Do you know what kind of metal it is?”

Reya nodded. “It’s called Brightsteel. Not to be confused with Starsteel – that stuff is actually from the stars. This is more just... pretty metal, I guess. It’s pretty sturdy, but the smith that sold it to me said it was great for the internals of weapons. It’s apparently pretty decent at hitting things. I didn’t really understand more than that, but hopefully it will be useful.”

“It most certainly will be,” Arwin said. “Thank you, Reya. How much was this?”

“You don’t want to know,” Reya replied. “Don’t expect more of it anytime soon, though.”

“Noted,” Arwin said as he slung the bag over his shoulder and unlocked the door to the smithy. “I appreciate it. If things go like I hope, I’m going to be making something really important with this.”

“Magic?” Reya whispered, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

“We’ll see,” Arwin replied with a chuckle. “For now, it’s just a hope.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it, then. I’m going to go sleep now, so I’ll see you tomorrow – or whenever you finish smithing.”

“Probably the latter,” Arwin said. He bid Reya goodnight and headed into the smithy. As soon as he drew up to the forge, Arwin dumped the crystals out of his pockets and emptied the metal from the bag beside them.

He then drew a spark of [Soul Flame] from his chest and sent it into the hearth, filling the smithy with flickering light. Arwin picked up one of the pieces of metal and held it up before him, the flame illuminating the smile that stretched across his lips.

It was time to make a hammer.

Chapter 49

Arwin was delighted. Almost as if in spite of the crystal's stubbornness, the metal that Reya had brought him was perfect. Every blow of his hammer landed exactly the way he wanted it to, and the handle of his hammer was taking shape perfectly. Small flakes of metal fell away with every strike he made, falling around his anvil.

The Brightsteel didn't just speak to him. It sang, and all he had to do was listen. His hammer rang again and again against the metal, coaxing it into position with every blow. Arwin almost felt as if the metal were forging itself, and he was just the tool with which it used to become more.

Either way, he certainly wasn't going to complain. The hard part of this piece – both figuratively and literally – was going to be adding the crystals into the head of the hammer. But that would come when it came.

For now, the only thing Arwin was concerned with was listening to the Brightsteel. Time passed, and the night slowly started to fade as dawn approached outside. Faint slivers of light broke into the forge, but Arwin barely noticed them.

He'd finished forming the handle of the hammer and was now onto combining the ingots to form the head. Arwin hadn't exactly determined how large he wanted the head of the hammer to be.

A larger one would be better for crushing things with, but he wasn't going to be able to use it to forge if it was too big. He couldn't deny that the idea of having a weapon that he could both craft and fight with was quite tantalizing.

It seemed like the metal agreed. As Arwin rained down blows on the glowing portions of the Brightsteel, a shape started to take form. The head of a hammer, large on one end and focused on the other.

And yet, as it took form, Arwin could immediately tell that it was incomplete. The Brightsteel knew his thoughts just as well as he knew its, and the hammer was meant to be built around the glowing crystals, not just pure metal.

A flicker of concern gripped Arwin as he let his hammer lower and grabbed a handful of crystals. If he made a mistake here, something told him that he wasn't going to be able to recover. The hammer would be ruined, and he'd have to try to rip it apart and salvage what materials he could.

That degree of loss will delay for me days, if not more. It'll probably ruin the crystals as well.

This wasn't the time for concern, though. Concern meant he was leaving the possibility of failure on the table, and that wasn't how things worked. There could be no doubt. No room to even consider anything but his goals would be accomplished.

If he allowed such thoughts to creep into his head, then it would have been no different from insulting the materials he was working with. They held all the potential he needed to make the perfect weapon, so it was unfair to disparage them.

Arwin laid the hammer to the side, leaving its head buried deeply within the heat of his [Soul Flame] within the forge. He needed to pick out the right crystals to use, and they all had to be inserted in conjunction. If he did them one at a time, they'd lock up and stop absorbing magic before the item was complete.

It took Arwin about ten minutes to select all the crystals. He wasn't exactly sure which metric he judged them by beyond his gut, but he eventually found himself staring at a small pile of glistening green stone.

He still couldn't quite understand what they wanted, but there was desire within them. Just like the Brightsteel, the crystals desired to be used.

"You and I," Arwin informed the crystals, cupping them in his hands. "I may not be able to hear your voice in the same way as that of the metal, but perhaps it can translate for me, eh?"

Arwin pulled the hammer from the flames. Its head glowed red hot, barely still holding its shape from the heat that had been beating down on it. Wasting no time, Arwin picked up the first of the crystals and pressed it into the head, using [Scourge] to make himself strong enough to drive it through the metal.

It wasn't the most elegant forging method, but it worked. The crystal sank deep. And, to Arwin's delight, he felt a flicker of acknowledgement from within the weapon. It wasn't quite a song, much less a word or any form of guidance, but it something.

That was all he needed. Arwin grabbed the other crystals and got to work, driving them into the head of the hammer. He felt the Brightsteel shifting as he worked, trying to accommodate the new material entering it. Arwin hammered the material as he worked, working the crystals in as if he were folding dough together.

It was a strange way to look at it, but the Brightsteel was so easy to work with that he couldn't think of another analogy. More flakes of black rained down as he hammered away, pushing the metal together and hardening it.

Arwin worked as fast as he dared without risking a mistake, piling the crystals into the hammer before embedding one right below where the head connected with the shaft. As an afterthought, Arwin also added a crystal to the bottom of the shaft.

It's practical, but that doesn't mean it can't look pretty.

Arwin set the hammer down on the anvil, grabbing his old smithing hammer and setting back to work as parts of his new weapon called to him, asking for help. The ring of metal rang out through the dilapidated smithy once more.

The sun continued to rise outside, the rays of light squeezing through the cracks in the walls growing stronger as they lit up the smithy. They passed over the hammer, causing metal and crystal to glimmer in unison.

Arwin plunged the hammer back into his hearth, letting the flame scorch the crystal and meld it together with the Brightsteel.

He pulled it free and strode outside, heading over to his pool – mentally reminding himself once again that he still had to replace it – and plunged the weapon's head into the water. He had to rotate it around to get every single part of the haft, but eventually managed to quench the entire piece. As he always did, Arwin got to cleaning it up. It was a lengthy process that took longer than he'd expected, but he eventually got the last of the weapon freed from the confines of blackened metal.

The Mesh tingled at his fingertips, racing down his arm and into his heart. Power gathered around the newly forged weapon. The prickling turned into a pulse, and Arwin's hair stood on end as the air became charged.

Ozone filled the air as a pop rang out and a delighted laugh escaped Arwin's lips. Golden writing erupted before him and the Mesh finally acknowledged his creation in true. He felt a faint question tickle at the back of his mind as the achievement he'd earned for scaring off the Wyrms felt an opportunity to take hold.

Arwin sent a thought of approval without a second of hesitation.

[Verdant Blaze: Unique Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

[Shieldbreaker] has been consumed.

Title: [Stonesinger] has been earned.

[Stonesinger] – You crafted an Awoken item with a magical component that was beyond your comprehension, and your efforts have attuned you to the whispers of the world. If you listen close enough, you can speak with magical materials – though they may not wish to reply.

“I’ll be damned,” Arwin breathed, not even daring to look away from the Mesh’s words in case it decided to take his title away from him. It was vague, but everything he knew about crafting had already come from just barely being able to pick up on the desires of the material he worked with.

I always assumed that it was just the Mesh guiding me, or that the materials kind of had some vague sense of desire. I didn’t realize that magical components could literally speak with me. They could tell me exactly what I need to do to make the perfect item with them! This is incredible.

That wasn't it, though. Arwin's eyes caught on the Mesh once more. It hadn't said he'd crafted just a Unique item. He'd made an Awoken one. A delighted grin stretched across his lips and he nearly pumped a hand in the air with delight.

Arwin waved the window away, then quickly summoned his status to make sure the title remained. After confirming that it had, he turned his gaze to the newly forged hammer in his hands.

It felt right. The hammer had a weight to it, but not so much that it would be unwieldy to use. The large, fighting head had crystals jutting out of it, their points blackened and dancing with faint flame.

Its other side had a single crystal, turned flat side out so he could use it to strike metal without putting holes in it. The perfect blend of combat and crafting capabilities, condensed into a single weapon.

The Mesh bloomed as Arwin inspected the hammer.

Verdant Blaze: Unique Quality

[Awoken]: This item has taken on life of its own. With every death it causes and every magical item it is used to craft, it will grow slightly more powerful. Upon reaching [Unknown] threshold, it will be able to bond with its wielder.

[Shieldbreaker]: This weapon hungers to destroy. Every consecutive blow against the same target will deal increased damage. Changing targets or blocking an attack with this weapon will reset any power that Shieldbreaker has generated.

[Firestarter]: This weapon is one with the fire used to forge it. It will drink in [Soul Flame], imbuing its blows with it at the cost of magical energy.

[Unique]: This item was created for Arwin Tyrr, and it will never know another owner. This item will attempt to burn anyone who attempts to wield it other than its owner. Information about this item may be hidden from others.

“Now that,” Arwin breathed, letting the Mesh fade as he held the hammer before him, delight in his eyes, “is one hell of a hammer.”

Chapter 50

Arwin wasted no time in trying to bond Verdant Flame to himself with [Arsenal], only to be reminded that he still had his other smithing hammer bonded to him. He found the mental bond to the weapon in his mind and severed it without a second thought.

His armor instantly snapped into place around him as [Arsenal] faded. According to the skill description, it wouldn't come back until the following day – which meant Arwin wasn't going to let his new weapon out of his sight for just as long.

He reached up to his armor, frowning slightly as his hands ran along a rough gouge in its center. He'd still yet to actually get around to fixing the damage he'd taken during the dungeon. And, as much as he wanted to show off his new creation, it was more important to make sure he didn't have a glaring 'stab me here' target right in the middle of his chest.

Arwin set his hammer down by his anvil and worked himself out of his armor, setting the scale mail down beside the hearth. He still had enough scales to patch the damage his armor had

taken, but he did pause for a moment to consider if he should make himself a plate chestpiece rather than a mail one.

No. Not yet. I promised myself I'd try to sell some shit today, and that's what I'm going to do.

He gathered some scales and brought them into the hearth, letting his [Soul Flame] heat them before setting about patching the damage to his shirt. He'd gotten pretty decent at working with the scales, so the entire process took him less than an hour.

Arwin pulled the [Soul Flame] from the Hearth and donned his armor once more. Nodding to himself, he slung his hammer over a shoulder and paused to hide its properties from any prying eyes before scooping up the armor he'd made to sell and striding outside, balancing it on his shoulder in a large pile.

He was a little weary for having missed sleeping, but something about forging almost seemed to sustain him. It definitely wasn't the same as getting a good night of rest, but he didn't feel anywhere near exhausted as he should have.

I wonder if energy from the Mesh counts as energy for your brain as well. That's an interesting thought. Could you hypothetically make so many items that the Mesh just gives you endless energy and you never have to sleep?

Arwin let out an amused huff and locked the door to his smithy behind him, double checking the handle before setting off. It wasn't like anybody was going to break into the smithy, but it was still his, and it was the first of many steps into turning the drafty old building into a home.

Once I get these things sold, I'll go spend some of the money getting materials to patch the place up. I think it's about time those cracks go. I need a cart as well. Hm. Need a cart to sell the goods, but need to sell the goods to get the cart.

That's bothersome.

He arrived at Lillia's tavern and stepped inside, blinking to let his eyes adjust. Arwin wasn't sure he'd ever get used to it being darker inside the building than outside, even when the sun was literally sunning right beyond the doorway.

"Morning," Reya said through a mouthful of food, raising a hand in greeting from where she sat by the counter. "Lillia made pancakes."

"Finish chewing before you speak," Arwin said automatically, joining her by the counter. He'd been taught a lot of things in his training as the Hero, one of which being the proper way to conduct himself amongst others. And, while some of that training had eroded over the years, a few bits still stuck around like stubborn specks of dirt.

Reya started to nod, then froze as she caught a glimpse of Arwin's hammer in the dim lantern light. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She swallowed her food. "You've got a new hammer. Did you..."

"Find it in the gutter? Yeah."

Reya frowned. "Oh. I thought—"

"I lied," Arwin said with a sigh. "It was a joke. I thought it was funny."

"I'm sure you'll get there," Reya said, not even paying attention. Her eyes were transfixed on the dull gemstones in the hammer's head. "Is it magical? Did it work?"

Arwin chuckled and nodded. “Yes. Best weapon I’ve ever made, without a doubt. Not that I’ve made many, but still.”

“Best?” Reya’s eyes widened. “Even compared to my dagger?”

“The one that’s currently inside a Wyrms? Yes, I’d say so,” Arwin said with a wry smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll make you a new weapon at some point. I’m not sure if a dagger fits your new Class anyway.”

“I don’t want a new weapon,” Reya muttered, sticking out her lower lip and crossing her arms. “You made me that one. I want that one.”

Arwin repressed a laugh at her expression. She looked like a child whose birthday present had just been confiscated – which, now that he thought about it, really wasn’t all that funny.

“We’ll kill the Wyrms and take the dagger back,” Arwin promised. “Besides, I’m sure it’s probably not actually in the Wyrms anymore. It’s probably, well... out.”

“As long as I get it back one day, I don’t care where it is,” Reya said. “What’s the hammer do?”

“A lot,” Arwin replied honestly. He hoisted the armor he was carrying. “But, for the time being, I want to follow through with what I was talking about yesterday and get to selling this stuff. It’s starting to get heavy.”

“You really think it’s going to go any better than last time?” Reya asked doubtfully. “There isn’t anything magical in there, is there?”

“Just plain old armor,” Arwin confirmed. “But I’m thinking this time we go buy a cart first. I’ve still got 22 gold, which should be more than enough to get one. With that, we’ll look more legitimate.”

“A sign would probably help.”

“Well, I don’t have a sign. Maybe I’ll buy one of those too,” Arwin said.

Lillia poked her head out of the kitchen. “Do you have a name for your smithy yet?”

“Well, no.”

“Then why would you get a sign?”

“Because Reya told me to,” Arwin said irritably. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll call it Arwin’s Smithy.”

“No,” Reya and Lillia said in unison.

“What?” Arwin asked defensively. “It’s a good name.”

“No, it really isn’t,” Reya said. “And if you’re going to sell stuff, don’t you need a smith’s mark or something?”

Arwin frowned. “A smith’s mark?”

“You know, the little badge or stamp that shows you’re the one that made something,” Reya said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You put it on all the equipment you make so when people travel out with it, it’s easy for them to figure out that you’re the one that made something. It’s good for brand recognition.”

“Brand?” Arwin raised an eyebrow.

“I dunno. I just heard it somewhere. Do you want advice or not?”

“Please, continue,” Arwin said. He would have raised his hands in surrender if doing so wouldn’t have caused him to drop everything he had on the floor. The idea of marking his work was actually rather appealing, and it made a lot of sense.

It’s like free marketing. I just need to make sure the mark doesn’t look stupid. Well, that and I also have to get around to actually making a brand of some sort to put my mark on anything I make.

“That’s kind of it. I didn’t think of anything beyond that,” Reya admitted.

Why stop at just a mark, though? One of my biggest concerns has been that the guild could bring me trouble before I’m ready to handle them if they figure out who I am. What if I get a whole persona, mask and everything? People love masks. I could make it as well, from a sheet of scrap metal or something.

“You’re a genius,” Arwin said. “I can’t just be Arwin. I should pretend to be someone else.”

“I didn’t say anything about that at all,” Reya said, staring at him in befuddlement. “Are you okay?”

“Perfectly,” Arwin replied with a grin. He laid the armor on the ground beside Reya, then nudged it with his foot. “Watch over that, would you? I need to make something really quick.”

Before either she or Lillia could respond, Arwin was out the door and down the street. He shot back into the smithy and hurried over to his forge, throwing some [Soul Flame] into it and pumping the bellows.

While they heated, Arwin let his eyes drift over the room. He didn't have any of the metal that Reya had gifted him left over – he'd used every single piece of it in making his hammer. He still had some of the other stuff she'd brought over, though – and that would be more than enough for his purposes.

Arwin gathered some of the scrap and tossed it into the hearth, more occupied with figuring out exactly what his seal would be.

Something catchy. Maybe something to do with fire. Flame, perhaps?

No. Too generic.

What about... Black Flame?

Wait, that definitely won't work. It sounds badass, but I don't use Black Flame. Also, something tells me someone else is already using that. I mean, isn't every branding of flame on a piece of armor going to end up being black?

As Arwin mused, a thought struck him. A snicker escaped his lips, but the longer he thought about it, the more tempting it became. It was a bit on the nose – more than a bit, if he was honest with himself.

I could be Ifrit. A monster known for immense magical power and the ability to grant wishes, though it twists them to make sure the result is always as horrible as possible. Calling myself a Genie would be too arrogant – but this fits perfectly. And, once the guild learns who I am, I imagine it won't be long before they start calling me a monster as well. Might as well lean into it.

Arwin took a piece of metal from the hearth and set it on the anvil. He hoisted Verdant Blaze and brought it down on the burnt orange metal with a ringing crash. It was a bit awkward to hold because of its size, but after a few more swings, Arwin started to pick it up.

Flakes of metal fell away from the piece as he worked, shaping it into a rough circle. It didn't take long before he had a several-inch thick disk resting on the anvil before him.

For the design, something simple and clear should work great. But how do I actually put the design in? I'll have to make it stick out so it gets pressed into whatever I'm marking, but I don't really have any small tools.

Arwin looked around the shop, half-hoping he'd find a Jeweler's kit lying around somewhere, but there was no such luck. Huffing, he brought the disk he'd made back to the hearth to re-heat it.

Guess I'll do this like a kid. It's finger art time.

Once the puck was glowing, Arwin pressed a finger into the softened metal and started to – very slowly – press a design into it.

It was slow, borderline infuriating work. Arwin had never been a master artist, though art had always fascinated him. Fortunately, the design he was hoping for was far from complex. But, even still, it took him nearly five hours before he actually managed to get the disk to look the way he wanted it to.

His Ifrit design consisted of two symmetrical pieces that made up two halves of a mask, each roughly in the shape of the letter F. The letters were stylized so that the holes in the top of the letter were the shapes of the mask's eyes, and their tops curled off to the sides at a slight

slope to form the bridge of a face. Arwin then added in a few flowing lines running out from either side of the mask to give the vague impression of fire.

Far from beautiful, but it looks how I wanted it to. Definitely recognizable.

Most people probably would have had to stick a handle onto the disk so they could handle it properly when it was hot, but Arwin wasn't most people. He stuck the disk into a pocket, satisfied with his creation.

Perfect. Now I just need to make a matching mask and I'll be good to go. Then I'll definitely gather a lot of attention – everyone is going to want to know what the creepy smith with the metal mask has for sale. This is flawless. I can't wait to see what Lillia and Reya think.

Chapter 51

“That... is terrifying,” Reya said.

It was the following morning, and Arwin had completely missed his previously imposed deadline of the previous day to get to the market and sell his armor. He'd spent the rest of the day making a metal mask that matched the design on his newly-made stamp, but he was proud of the results.

Perhaps the delay had been a blessing in disguise, because it had given him time to bind Verdant Blaze to himself with [Arsenal]. He'd also been able to dismiss his armor, so he was just walking around in his normal clothes.

Arwin lowered the mask from his face. “Right? It looks memorable.”

“It’s definitely something,” Lillia said, her features unreadable. “Is there a reason you went with a monster design rather than a human or a symbolic one?”

“Nothing wrong with being a monster, is there?”

Lillia tilted her head to the side. A small smile traced across her lips and she shrugged one shoulder. “I suppose not.”

“So we’re going to go try and sell the stuff now?” Reya asked, hopping down from her chair eagerly. “You said we were doing it yesterday, but—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Arwin grumbled. “I got distracted. We’re doing it today.”

He slipped the mask back over his face. The eye and nose holes weren’t quite in the spots where he would have liked them, but he could still see and breath, which was all that mattered. “I just have to do this first.”

Arwin knelt beside the sets of armor and took out the disk bearing his mark. He let [Soul Flame] rise up from his palm and heat the mark until it was glowing red. He then pressed it into each piece of armor, just enough to burn the impression of the Ifrit onto them.

“Perfect,” Arwin said, drawing his [Soul Flame] back out of the disk so he could return it to his pocket. “Now we’re ready. We just need to go get ourselves a cart and we can make some money.”

“I might know a place that could have a cart,” Reya said. “I’ve been keeping an eye out.”

“Not a stolen one.”

“It isn’t stolen.” It was Reya’s turn to be defensive, though Arwin strongly suspected that she’d left off a *yet* somewhere in her sentence. “It’s just not getting used much. I’m sure nobody would miss it.”

“So maybe we could buy it,” Arwin said with a grin. He then realized Reya couldn’t see his face behind the mask and cleared his throat. “Well, shall we? I’m eager to do this already.”

And I also don’t have all that long. I haven’t really eaten anything magical recently, and even though I don’t feel the stomachache coming on yet, I don’t think it’s going to be long. I’ll need to get materials and make something right after this is done.

“Do you want to come, Lillia?” Reya asked as she headed over to the entrance.

“Who, me?” Lillia started.

“I didn’t think there were any other Lillia’s here.”

“I have to stay at the tavern,” Lillia said, putting a hand on the counter. “What if someone shows up while I’m out?”

“You left when we were doing the dungeon.”

“That was a special circumstance.”

And she didn’t have to go into the town, dragging the cloud of darkness along with her. Someone would figure out something was off pretty quickly if she was just standing around on the street.

“Maybe next time?” Arwin offered, giving Lillia a way out.

“Yeah, maybe that,” Lillia said with a grateful nod. “Good luck, though. If you happen to find anyone looking for a good meal, send them my way. No inn-goers, though. I don’t have enough rooms for more people right now.”

Reya shrugged and scooped up half the armor on the ground. Arwin picked up the other half.

“Noted.” Arwin raised a hand in farewell, then followed Reya as she headed out onto the street.

He followed her down the streets of Milten, still getting used to looking out of his new mask and barely keeping up with her brisk pace. After a few minutes of walking and weaving through the alleys, Reya brought them out onto a small street.

There were a few storefronts and buildings along it, but it looked like a relatively quiet area. Reya walked over to a run-down, two story building directly across from the alleyway they’d stepped out of.

“This place,” Reya said. “They’ve got a cart in the back, and it’s never moved. I’ve seen it from the rooftops.”

“What were you doing on the rooftops?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to.” Reya rapped on the door with her knuckles. “I think this place is a really small inn, but nobody ever uses it. I have no idea how it’s still in business.”

No sooner than she had finished speaking did the door creak open. An elderly man with an underbite and a thinning bed of white hair stood on the other side, his face already pinched in distaste.

“What do you want?” He stared at Arwin suspiciously, keeping a hand on the door to slam it shut at a moment’s notice.

“We’re looking to buy a cart.” Arwin held his hands out in what he hoped was a placating manner. It was a little difficult to do with all the armor he was clutching to his chest. “Something I could sell these out of. I’m a smith.”

“You’re a freak in a mask,” the old man said curtly.

“A freak in a mask that wants a cart,” Arwin said. “Do you happen to be in possession of one that you don’t to be in possession of?”

“What?” he squinted at Arwin. “Speak louder. I can’t see you.”

You can't what now?

“A cart!” Arwin said, nearly yelling. “Do you have one? I want to buy it!”

“Oh, a cart. I’ve got an old piece of shit in the back, yeah. It rolls just fine, but I’m not giving you a donkey to drag it with you.”

I don't recall ever asking for a donkey.

“That would be perfect,” Arwin said, keeping his heightened tone. “How much for the cart?”

“You don’t have to yell,” the old man said with a grunt. “Twenty gold.”

“Twenty?” Reya exclaimed. “No! Five!”

“Five? It’s not made of gold, it’s made of wood!”

They both stared at him.

“That’s why we don’t to pay twenty gold for it,” Reya said with a baffled frown. “If it was made out of gold, we’d pay more. It’s not made out of gold, though.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Reya said. “Five gold.”

“Fifteen.”

“Seven.”

“Ten?” the old man offered. “Last offer.”

“It’s literally just sitting back there!” Reya protested. “You aren’t even using it!”

“How do you know that?”

“Ten is fine,” Arwin said hurriedly, fishing five gold out of his pocket and handing the coins to the man. “Other five once we take the cart out.”

Shrugging, the man nodded over to a fence beside his building. “It’s open. Feel free to drag the cart out, but don’t think about trying to take a step away from the street with it before you pay up, or I’ll beat you for an inch of your life.”

Arwin was pretty sure the man wasn’t capable of beating a common cold, much less another person, but he didn’t say anything. There was no reason to antagonize him and, while ten

gold felt like it was more than a bit steep, he really didn't need people poking further into Reya's dealings.

Reya ran over to the gate and pulled it open before heading through it. Arwin followed her in to find an old wooden cart wedged between the walls of the old man's house and the house next door.

The wood was cracked and dry, covered with a layer of dust that spoke tales of the last time it had been used. But, in spite of that, the wheels looked to be in decent condition. They weren't great, but they weren't trash either.

The wagon itself was a little on the small side, with just enough counter space on either side to support his arms if he wanted to lean on it. Old metal hooks hung along the ceiling, giving spots to hang merchandise from.

"This is perfect. Step out of the way, Reya," Arwin said. He dumped his pile of armor down at the bottom of the cart. Reya did the same.

Arwin then grabbed the handles at the front of the cart. He straightened and gritted his teeth, his muscles bulging as he pulled.

The cart was stuck fast, buried in a layer of mud. Arwin activated [Scourge], letting power course through his body and empower his movements. With a snarl, he pulled the cart free of the ground with a lurch.

He dragged it out onto the street, moving slowly at first to make sure nothing fell apart. When it became clear that it would stay in one piece, Arwin lowered the cart again. He walked over to the old man in the doorway and handed him the last five pieces of gold.

“Pleasure,” Arwin said, ignoring the wide-eyed look he was getting.

“You an Adventurer or something?” the old man asked. “I didn’t peg you for one.”

“I’m just a smith,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “You can call me Ifrit.”

“Hey, can I ride in the cart?” Reya asked, climbing in before waiting for Arwin to answer. She held one of the beams and grinned down at him. “To make sure it can bear the weight of the armor and stuff.”

“I suppose it would be a good workout.” Arwin raised a hand in farewell to the stunned old man, then grabbed the cart and drew on [Scourge] once more, trotting off down the street with the cart rumbling behind him.

Excitement swirled in Arwin’s stomach. Even if he was only selling mundane gear, he was confident that he’d be able to impress people with the quality of his work. He hadn’t seen anything like the scale armor in the other blacksmith’s shop.

And, once I start to get a steady flow of money, I’ll be able to start doing magical weapons and armor on commission for people that I think deserve them. Then I’ll be able to upgrade the smithy even more.

It was time for Ifrit to make his name known, and he couldn’t wait to do it.

Chapter 52

The market was busy when Arwin and Reya arrived. But, unlike the last time where not a single person had glanced in their direction, their entrance drew a fair number of eyes. Arwin wasn’t sure if that was because of his mask or the cart at his back, but he didn’t care.

He scoped out an empty area beside a merchant selling dumplings and brought the cart over beside him, setting it down with a grunt. Reya hopped down and gave him a grin.

“Cart seems safe.”

“You think?” Arwin asked dryly, brushing his hands off on his shirt. “I can’t tell if I want to sell everything as fast as possible, or if I want to find the right person for the armor instead.”

Reya rolled her eyes. “Maybe worry about selling anything at all first? And this is just normal gear. Don’t be picky about that stuff. You can be picky once you’re famous.”

“Good point,” Arwin admitted. He picked up a set of scale mail and hung it from one of the hooks, holding his hands out to catch it in case the hook failed. Fortunately, it looked like the metal was in good condition and it held firm.

Reya helped him hang the rest of the armor, and then they settled in to wait. It was still somewhat early in the day, and the market was just starting to get to its busiest hour.

Minutes ticked by, turning to an hour. People walked by their cart, a few of them craning their necks as they passed, but nobody was stopping by. Arwin frowned behind his mask.

“Why is nobody stopping by? They aren’t even trying to take a closer look.”

“Probably because you look intimidating,” Reya said from where she sat at the base of the wagon. She stood up, brushing some specks of wood from her clothes, and glanced around.

“Here. Let me try something.”

“What are you going to—”

“Hey!” Reya screamed, thrusting a finger at a bald man with a sword at his side. “You!”

The man froze in surprise, spinning to face Reya. “Me? What—”

“Where’s your armor?” Reya demanded, hopping down from the cart before Arwin could even think of saying anything. She stormed up to the man and thrust a finger at him. “What if monsters attacked the town? You’re an adventurer, aren’t you?”

“I’m just not wearing it right—”

“You’re not wearing it because it’s no good,” Reya said. “It’s uncomfortable. It’s unwieldy. Probably heavy and a huge pain to lug around, isn’t it? But look at me!”

Reya slapped her chest. She’d taken her armor off – which was probably wise, as it was magical and had no way to conceal its properties – then pointed over at the cart with her other hand. “Look at that. Light, easy to wear – and yet, just as effective as metal.”

“I already have—”

“You don’t have *this* armor,” Reya said, fluttering her eyes. “Though you’re going to wish you did when a horde of Forest Lizards run you down and rip your limbs off in your clanky, heavy armor. Good luck running anywhere in that crap. Your loss, though!”

She spun, sauntering back to the cart with a smirk on her face that only Arwin could see. The adventurer’s eyes traced Reya’s walk, then lifted up to Arwin and the armor. His head tilted slightly to the side, and after a moment of standing in the middle of traffic, he walked over to join them.

“All you,” Reya whispered as she climbed back onto the wagon. “Don’t screw it up.”

Arwin found himself supremely grateful for the mask on his face, as it was doing a fantastic job of covering his mouth, which was currently hanging open.

“What kind of shop you got here? Only four sets of armor?” the adventurer asked, peering past Arwin. “Interesting design, though.”

“Scale mail,” Arwin said, getting himself back under control and taking down a set of armor so the man could inspect it. “And the greaves are plate, though made from the same material. It’s considerably lighter than metal, but has almost the same level of protection.”

The adventurer ran his hand over the greaves, the mild interest on his face growing as he took in the armor. “You made this?”

“Yes.”

“How’d you get the scales like this? I’ve never seen someone make a set of armor with them that wasn’t scale mail,” the man said, turning the greaves over in his hands to try and find if there was a trick to them. “Is this really as effective as metal?”

“I’ve tested them myself,” Arwin said. “The shirt protected someone from a Wyrms blow, though it was badly damaged in the process.”

“You’re shitting me,” the man muttered. “A Wyrms?”

“It did break,” Arwin reminded him.

“But the person wearing it lived,” Reya piped up. “I’d say that’s a damn good trade.”

“So it is,” the adventurer mused. “Can I try this on?”

“Help yourself, but don’t run off with it. I’m faster than you are.”

The man laughed at what he presumed to be a joke, then pulled the greaves on. Fortunately, his build wasn’t too far from average, so they seemed to fit him pretty well. Arwin

had left them fairly loose, and a lot of their fit relied on the latches, which he helped the adventurer fasten properly.

Shifting from foot to foot, the man's expression continued to grow more interested. He gestured for the scale mail and Arwin handed it over, letting the man pull it over his head.

“Well, I'll be damned. This is a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be. Why is the shirt mail while the pants are plate?”

“Still working on plate shirt,” Arwin replied with a shrug. “This is lighter, though. If you value your mobility, it'll give you the best of both worlds.”

The adventurer nodded slowly. “How much is it?”

“Forty gold a piece, or seventy for the pair?” Arwin offered, taking a shot at a price. He was pretty sure it was on the lower end, but he had no name as a smith yet. Getting some people to buy his gear and get the word out would be far more effective than trying to sell it at high prices initially.

The adventurer considered Arwin for a moment, then reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out a small leather bag. He sifted through it, removing a handful of coins, and then set the bag on Arwin's counter.

“Seventy. Feel free to count it.”

Arwin quickly checked the bag, but it looked like the amount of coins was right. He inclined his head. “Thank you for your patronage. I hope the armor serves you well. If it ever gets damaged, feel free to bring it back to me. I'll repair it at a low cost.”

“Seriously?” the adventurer grinned and held his hand out. “I’ll keep that in mind, mate. What’s your name? You must be new around here.”

“Ifrit,” Arwin replied, shaking the man’s hand.

“I’m Ted. Pleasure, Ifrit. If your armor is half as good as it feels, you’ll be seeing me again.”

The adventurer strode off, raising a hand in farewell. Arwin looked down at the bag on the counter, then over to Reya. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“When did you become so good at being a saleswoman?”

“Good? All I did was cut him off a bunch of times and sway my ass when I walked back here,” Reya said with a snort. “You did everything else.”

That’s one way to completely undersell yourself.

“I’m not so sure that was it. You definitely—”

“Eyes up ahead,” Reya said with a grin, looking past Arwin’s shoulder. “You’ve got some more interest.

Arwin turned to find that several other people had walked over to the cart and were studying the armor hanging around him. Now that one person had bought something, he’d functionally proven himself and drawn the attention of other passersby.

“Good luck,” Reya said, crossing her arms behind her head and closing her eyes. “And don’t forget to leave me a cut.”

About five hours later, they sold out. Even though a lot of people came by to look at the armor, most of them didn't end up buying anything. But, even so, with the small crowd that Reya had summoned, there was enough interest to sell every piece of armor they'd brought.

Arwin found his purse had gone from a mere 10 gold to a shocking 362. In the span of five hours, they'd gone from destitute to rich. He wasted absolutely no time in counting out one hundred gold from his profits and tossing it to Reya.

"This much?" Reya asked, staring at the bag in disbelief. "I barely even did anything!"

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't have sold anything at all if you weren't here. You earned that."

"You made the armor."

"Are you really asking me to give you less gold?"

Reya blinked, then shook her head. "You know what? Never mind. I deserve this."

They both laughed.

"You're going to have to make a bunch more of that. I think I'm going to get addicted to having this much money," Reya said.

"I think I'm going to end up spending almost all of this immediately," Arwin said, feeling the bulging bag at his waist. "I need some more of that metal you bought me as well. Could you say how much it was?"

“The whole lot was eighty gold, and I got it at a huge discount,” Reya said. “Someone ordered a bunch of it and then didn’t pick it up. I think it’s normally around thirty gold a bar.”

“Could you get me three bars of it?” Arwin asked, pouring another hundred gold into Reya’s bag. “I need some to work with.”

Reya blinked, then shrugged. “Okay. What about you?”

“I’m going to bring the cart back, then go shopping for some supplies to upgrade the smithy. Come tomorrow, we aren’t going to have any more cracks in the walls.”

Reya grinned. “I’m looking forward to it. I’ll see you back at the tavern, then?”

“Sounds good,” Arwin said, hopping down from the wagon to lift it by the handles. He nodded to Reya, and the two of them set off, their spirits high from a successful day.

“He was right here, Jessen,” Tix said, thrusting a finger at the open space in the market. “I swear.”

“I believe you,” the man beside her said, running a hand through his dark beard. He wore heavy black armor with spiked pauldrons and carried a huge greatsword on his back that shimmered with poorly hidden magical energy. “Unfortunate. I had hoped to speak with him. Our guild needs a new crafter.”

“I’ve been trying to find the street that I heard he lived on, but I haven’t had any luck thus far. I’ve sent out some feelers to see if anyone has heard anything, but so far, the only ones that have claimed to know anything are a bunch of worthless grubs.”

“Grubs?” Jessen asked, tilting his head to the side and glancing at Tix. “I believe I told you to spare no expenses.”

“Yes, but they’re a gutter trash thieves guild,” Tix said. “They’d lie through their teeth just to get our coin. There’s no point—”

“Tix?” Jessen asked, his voice cold.

She cut herself off mid-sentence, then swallowed heavily. “I’ll speak with them.”

“Good,” Jessen said. “It’s just a little bit of gold. It hardly matters when there’s so much profit on the line. In the meantime, how has our side project been going?”

“Well. We should have the materials we need soon. A month or two, if I had to guess,” Tix replied.

“As you were.” Jessen strode off, somehow blending in with the crowd in just seconds despite his striking armor and towering height. Tix turned back to the empty lot, then grimaced. She had a meeting with a bunch of worthless thieves to catch, and she wasn’t looking forward to it in the slightest.

Chapter 53

Arwin got back to the smithy after spending a little over one hundred gold on various supplies and repair materials. He took them out of his cart and brought them into the cracked building one by one, stacking the extra stone and brick by the wall beside the mortar and a slew of new tools.

Reya swung by with the Brightsteel he'd requested, dropping it off by the forge before heading over to brag to Lillia about how well their efforts had gone. As tempting as it was to get started on the repairs, Arwin shifted gears and grabbed one of the Brightsteel pieces, firing up his forge.

A tightness had started to form in the pit of his stomach, and it wasn't going to be long before he ran out of time and needed to eat a magical item. He had pretty high hopes for the new material.

Better stuff to work with means it's more likely I'll be able to sate the [Hungering Maw] without having to make a bunch of crap. The best way to test that would be to make a nice bracelet with this instead of some crappy metal.

And that was exactly what Arwin did. As the heat of his [Soul Flame] washed across the smithy, he got to work forming a bracelet out of one of the three ingots. He used Verdant Blaze to hammer it down, flattening the piece into a long strip before starting to work it into a ring.

Instead of just making a basic circle, Arwin took one of the new tools he'd purchased – a small handle with a pointed end and used it to start tracing designs into the steel. He wasn't sure if it would actually change the quality of the magical item, but it probably couldn't hurt.

He carved a vine that ran from one end of the circlet to the other, then started putting in leaves. The more he worked, the more the Brightsteel helped him. His design went from sub-average at best to something that he was actually rather proud of, and the steel matched his delight.

Arwin set the tool down away from the flame and held the finished bracelet up. It had been several hours since he'd started working, but that only made the tingle of the Mesh as it raced across his skin all the more delightful.

[Brightsteel Bracelet: Art Quality] has been forged.

Arwin waited for more to appear, but it never did. That was it. He'd never heard of Art quality before, but it wasn't hard to deduce what it meant.

It was just a beautiful bracelet. It didn't do anything special, but at the same time, the Mesh recognized it as more than just a mere bracelet. It wasn't exactly magical, but it wasn't *not* magical either.

Arwin examined the design on the bracelet for a few minutes, marveling at the work. It was hard to believe it had come from his hands – but it wasn't long before curiosity overcame his other thoughts.

He brought the bracelet up to his mouth and carefully nibbled at it. To his relief, the metal melted instantly as it met his mouth. It was still edible. Arwin ate the rest of the bracelet, then waited with bated breath.

The tightness in his stomach faded. A huge grin passed over his lips and he let out a relieved sigh.

“Art Quality seems to be good enough, then. Lucky me,” Arwin said. He glanced over at the other two pieces of Brightsteel. There was still a lot he could do with them, but he wanted to make sure he had an emergency backup in case he needed to eat more magic in the near future.

Probably best to save it for now. Maybe I should get some rest, then go about fixing up the smithy tomorrow. That'll be nice.

Arwin brushed his hands off and sucked the [Soul Flame] from the hearth, heading for the door. He paused as he reached the exit, putting his mask back on.

Now that I've made my debut, I'll have to be more careful about wearing the mask whenever I enter or leave the smithy. Never know when someone will be waiting around to meet me, even though it's probably a bit too early for that.

Arwin headed into the street and locked the door behind himself. It was, as usual, completely desolate. Unbothered, Arwin headed off to Lillia's tavern. There was a lot he wanted to do the next morning, and he was worried he'd start early if he didn't force himself into bed soon.

Lillia and Reya had already retired by the time Arwin got there. So, after carefully making his way through the darkness of the tavern below, he ascended the stairs and slipped into bed whilst trying to make as little noise as possible.

Sleep took him, but it felt like a fleeting embrace.

Before Arwin knew it, the sun was streaming through the window once again. He was out of bed nearly instantly, his thoughts already on his new smithy repairs. He could practically see the remade building in his mind.

Lillia nodded to Arwin as he stepped off the stairs and into the tavern. "Reya told me yesterday went well."

“Very well. She’s a good saleswoman,” Arwin said. “I got everything I needed to start some repairs, and I think we might be getting some more attention on the street pretty soon. Is your tavern ready for more customers?”

“Working on it,” Lillia said with a wince. “It’s hard to do much with no funds, but I’m slowly getting there.”

“You don’t have a bath, do you?”

“Not yet. It’s on the list.”

Arwin counted out fifty gold and set it on the counter. “Here.”

Lillia stared at the pile of money with undisguised desire. “What’s this for?”

“I want a bath. Consider it an investment, not a donation. The more people come to the street, the better. We don’t need anyone looking down on us.”

Lillia looked like she wanted to refuse, but practicality won over ego. She swept the coins into her pocket and gave Arwin an appreciative nod. “Thank you. This is going to go a really long way.”

“I figured it would. Maybe start with a door.” A grin flickered across Arwin’s face.

“Doors are nice, you know?”

“What is it with you and doors?” Lillia asked with a laugh.

“It just makes it feel more like a home. If you can just stride in without having to stop and do something, it feels wrong.”

“You know what? That’s fair enough,” Lillia said. “I’ll get a door. And a tub, at the very least. At some point, I’d love to have a whole hot spring. That might cost a bit more than 50 gold, though.”

“You think?” Arwin asked. “I’m sure you’ll get to it soon enough, though. You still have that Lesser Imp acting as a waiter?”

“Yeah. It’s just not out right now. No reason to waste energy when nobody is around.”

“Makes sense. I’m going to go work on repairs, then,” Arwin said. “I’ll try to be back for nightfall, so you don’t get penalized for me not sleeping in the inn.”

Lillia gave him a grateful nod and he headed off, whistling to himself as he pulled his mask on. It struck him that, despite everything that had happened, he was happier now than he ever had been as the Hero of Man.

Before his supposed death, Arwin’s life had consisted of war, killing, and training to kill. The best moments had been the ones when he’d had a few seconds to breath and relax with his friends – back when they’d still lived.

It had felt like he was living underwater, slowly drowning a little more every day. But now, the only things he had to do were make more armor, upgrade the smithy, and make sure they were ready to handle a small horde of Wyrms.

It was far from a completely carefree life, but it finally felt like a worthwhile one.

“Wish you were here with me, Blake,” Arwin muttered to himself, a pang of guilt shooting through him as he strode down the street. He’d always dreamed of leaving the war

behind after it was over and settling down, but the desire to become a crafter hadn't actually been his.

It had been Blake's dream. The man had talked Arwin's ear off for hours on end about all the things he'd make once the demon queen had fallen, to the point where he'd started paying more attention to his own armor and weapons purely because of how much he'd inadvertently learned about smithing.

I'll live it for the two of us, Blake. I can't help but feel as if you had some hand in me ending up as a smith. I bet you'd have gotten a huge kick out of it.

A faint smile formed on Arwin's lips. He reached the smithy and lifted the key to the door, going to turn the handle – and froze. It was already unlocked. Arwin's grin fell away and his eyes narrowed.

The thieves's guild? Did those idiots come back?

He threw the door open, striding in and preparing to activate [Arsenal] at the first sign of an ambush or an attack.

But, instead of armed men, Arwin found the only person in his smithy to be a young teenager, probably around fourteen or fifteen years old. The boy was holding a brick of Brightsteel.

He spun as he heard Arwin enter, dropping the ingot and lunging to grab it before it could hit the ground. The boy backed up, setting the brick on the anvil and swallowing as he held his hands out defensively. "I didn't realize someone moved in here, mister. I don't mean any harm."

Arwin let his hands lower. "What are you doing here?"

“I used to use this place as my hideout. Thought it was weird when someone put a door on it, so I picked the lock to come in,” the boy said hurriedly. He turned the pockets of his pants inside out. “I didn’t take anything, I swear. I was just looking around.”

Arwin studied the boy for a moment, but it looked like he was telling the truth. He was as thin as a rail, and Arwin strongly suspected he didn’t have a class by how little threat he felt from him. “What were you doing with my ingots?”

“I dunno. They were shiny,” the boy said sheepishly. “Looked expensive.”

“They are,” Arwin said. “I didn’t realize this was your hideout. I apologize.”

“It’s fine. There’s lots of other places on the street,” the boy said with a shrug. “I’ll find a different one. I just liked this one because my dad was a smith. Made me feel like I was with him.”

Arwin coughed into his fist. It wasn’t like anyone owned the smithy when he’d moved in, but he still felt a pang of guilt – though not nearly enough to offer up the smithy. There were other perfectly useable buildings around them.

“You hiding from something?” Arwin asked.

“What? No. Nothing like that, sir.”

“You can just call me Ifrit,” Arwin said, shaking his head. “And you said this was your hideout, so I figured you were hiding.”

“Oh, no. The thieves’ guild just expanded and took over the area I was camping out in before, so I came back to this one. It’s a bit farther from the markets, but…” he shrugged. “It’s fine. Not too busy, aside from you.”

“And the tavern down the street,” Arwin said. “I can’t recommend trying to rob either me or the tavern, though.”

“I ain’t no robber!”

Arwin raised an eyebrow.

“I’m a re-allocator of goods.” The boy gave him a gap-toothed grin. “Sounds better that way.”

Arwin couldn’t help himself from laughing. The kid had a certain upbeat air to him that made it difficult to stay upright. “What’s your name? If you’re moving in next door, I might as well get to know you.”

“Zeke. You aren’t mad about me breakin’ in then?”

“Not as long as you don’t do it again or try to take anything,” Arwin said. “I’ve got bigger problems than people checking out my forge.”

Zeke’s stomach rumbled loudly. His face went bright red and he scampered to the side, making to loop around Arwin so he could leave.

“I’ll be off, then. Sorry ‘bout the bother.”

“Hold on,” Arwin said. “You want to earn some coin? Actually earn, not steal.”

Zeke paused. “How?”

“I’m doing some repairs, if you couldn’t tell,” Arwin said, nodding at the wall with all his neatly-stacked supplies. “There’s probably going to be a good bit of labor. Dragging crap out,

putting crap in. That kind of thing. I'll pay you five gold if you help me shuffle everything around today."

Zeke's eyes went as wide as saucers. "Five gold? I'm your man, Mister Ifrit!"

"Just Ifrit," Arwin corrected, grateful that he'd worn his mask.

I better get that habit out of him before he and Reya meet, or I'll never hear my actual name again.

"Yessi – uh, Ifrit. I'll call you King if it gets me that gold."

Arwin rolled his eyes. "Come on, then. Let's get started by taking out all the debris and cracked stones in the walls. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Chapter 54

Zeke was a hard worker, and he made clearing out the smithy considerably faster than it would have been if Arwin was working on his own. Between the two of them, in just a few hours, they'd removed the majority of the worst damage in the building.

Around midday, Arwin brought Zeke over to Lillia's tavern for lunch.

"Why's it so dark in here?" Zeke asked, squinting through the shadows.

"It's meant to be a little creepy. For fun," Arwin explained. Zeke shot him a suspicious look, but that vanished the moment Lillia stepped out of the kitchen with a large plate of fried rice.

"I'm surprised you're eating real food today," Lillia said. "What ch—"

She froze as she spotted Zeke standing beside Arwin. “You brought someone new?”

“He broke into the smithy,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “And he’s been helping me do some renovations. Can I get him lunch?”

“Obviously,” Lillia replied, setting the plate down on the counter and snapping her fingers. “Come. Eat.”

Zeke sprung to obey, shoveling food from the plate into his mouth without even waiting for Lillia to set out any utensils for him. Arwin and Lillia exchanged a glance, but both chose to say nothing.

It only took the boy a few minutes to completely mow through the entire meal. Once he’d polished off the last scraps and licked the plate clean, he leaned back in his stool and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Was it good?” Lillia asked.

“Best food I’ve had in years,” Zeke replied without a second of hesitation. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Just call her Lillia,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “If you’re up to it, let’s get back to working, shall we? I’d like to get the shop built up a bit more before tomorrow.”

“You’re not gonna eat?”

“I’ll be fine,” Arwin replied.

Zeke nodded empathetically and hopped to his feet. “Thanks for the food. It was really good.”

He zipped out of the tavern, heading back for the smithy. Arwin shook his head as he watched the boy go.

“Interesting kid. Seems more than willing to work for his money.”

“Polite, too,” Lillia said. “I kind of like the sound of Ma’am. It feels really official, like I’m a real tavern keeper.”

“What are you, an old woman?”

Lillia glared at him. “Oh, stuff it. Go follow the brat.”

Arwin chuckled and headed after Zeke. In the time it took him to catch up, the boy had already picked the lock to the smithy back open. Arwin stared at the lock, then looked over to the boy, who had started bringing bricks over to the gaps in the walls.

“Is this lock really that easy to break through?” Arwin asked as he joined Zeke.

“Nah. I’m just good at it.”

“Well, I suppose that’s a good thing,” Arwin said dryly. The two of them got to sliding the stone into the gaps and applying the mortar to them with a flat plate of metal. They worked quickly, soon running out of easy fixes.

Arwin set about using a small spike to carve the rest of the stones to fit into the oddly shaped gaps in the walls. Zeke continued supplying him with stones as he slid them into the gaps.

A few more hours of hard work passed, but it came with reward. By the time the sun started to dip in the sky, the cracks had been filled. Arwin’s smithy was actually a proper building, without any holes in it that didn’t belong.

It was a bit darker than it had been before, with the only light coming in through the holes that had been windows, but Arwin couldn't have been more thrilled. The two of them spent a few minutes bringing all the extra materials over to a corner so they wouldn't be in the way.

"You did a pretty damn good job," Arwin said, counting out 5 gold coins and handing them to Zeke.

Zeke barely seemed to hear him. He stared at the gold in his hands, his eyes twinkling in disbelief. "I can really have all this?"

"I promised it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but I kinda figured you'd stiff me after the meal," Zeke said.

"If you thought I'd do that, why'd you stick around?"

"In case you didn't."

The answer was so matter of fact that Arwin couldn't keep from snorting. "Fair enough. Well, you earned it."

"I really didn't. This wasn't worth 5 gold, but I'll take it anyway. If you can give money away like this, why are you moving into such a crappy building?"

"It's not crappy anymore," Arwin said. "I'm actually rather taken with it. With just a little more polishing up, this place can become something incredible. It's not ugly. It's just got enormous potential."

"That's what my mum used to say about my face," Zeke said with a snicker. "Thanks again for the food and the money. I won't break into your place again, I promise."

Arwin started to nod, then caught himself. “Say... you have any interest in a longer term job?”

Zeke blinked. “What kind? You going to tear this whole place down or something?”

“Nothing like that, but it could be useful to have an assistant,” Arwin said. “Someone to help me get some things when I need them, or to help out in the forge while I’m working.”

Zeke’s gaze bore into Arwin like twin drills. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah. Maybe a gold a day? I don’t know how much money I’ll have in the long run, but I imagine I should be able to—”

“A whole gold?” Zeke exclaimed. “Every day? How long?”

“As long as I stick around, I guess,” Arwin said. “Is that—”

“Done deal!” Zeke said, grabbing Arwin’s hand and pumping it in a furious handshake. “I’m your man!”

Sad state of affairs when a kid his age has to be a man at all, but hey – this is another person to stay at Lillia’s tavern.

Wait, didn’t she say she didn’t have room for more people yet? Whoops. Oh well, I’m sure we’ll figure something out.

Having an assistant should be pretty useful, especially as I start to expand and get more people. At some point, maybe I can have Zeke manage the storefront when Reya and I go out to the dungeons. And, who knows. In the long run, if he seems to be a genuinely decent person, I’ll help him get a class and he can join the guild.

“Come along, then,” Arwin said. “Let’s go back over to that tavern so we can figure out your lodgings. I should also introduce you to everyone and we can figure out what your exact duties will be.”

They returned to the tavern at the perfect time. Lillia and Reya looked like they’d both just started on dinner. It was more fried rice, but Arwin suspected Zeke wouldn’t mind all that much.

“We’re back,” Arwin said, nodding for Zeke to take one of the stools. “Do you have enough for another, Lillia?”

“Yeah. Give me one second.” Lillia vanished into the kitchen, returning a few seconds later with another plate of metal stacked high with food. She set it down before Zeke, this time making sure to put down utensils for him.

“This is Zeke, then?” Reya asked. She noticed Arwin’s surprised glance and grinned. “Lillia told me.”

“Ah. Yeah. He’s been doing some pretty good work helping me rebuild the smithy today,” Arwin said. “I hired him on to help out with some other basic tasks. Maybe run the storefront once we get a little more popular.”

“Good idea,” Reya said through a mouthful of food. “You can’t sit in the smithy the whole time. You’ll have to leave occasionally to get materials and stuff. It’s nice to meet you, Zeke. I’m Reya.”

Zeke nodded in greeting, swallowing to make sure he didn’t risk losing any food before responding. “Yeah. Thanks. I’m Zeke.”

It was a tad awkward, but Zeke seemed considerably more interested in eating than he did in socializing. Arwin didn't blame him. Considering how skinny Zeke was, Arwin suspected he didn't get much opportunity to eat.

"I know you said not to get more people for the time being, but do you have somewhere he could stay?" Arwin asked. "I'll look into getting another bed."

"I'll handle that," Lillia said, shaking her head. "It's my inn, and you've already put in enough gold. Does he know any woodworking? If he could help me patch up some of the floor, we could get another room functional."

"I'm a fast learner," Zeke said with a hopeful glint in his eye.

"Better than nothing," Lillia said with a shrug. "Mind if I steal him tomorrow?"

"All yours," Arwin said. "I'll be smithing again tomorrow, but nothing too crazy. I shouldn't need any help."

Might be better to keep him out of the smithy for now anyway. I don't need to be broadcasting to the world what I can do yet. Either way, I want to try to make some headgear before we head back into the dungeon.

"What about where he'll sleep tonight?" Reya asked.

"I can take the floor," Zeke said hurriedly. "It's better than outside. If I have a real spot to sleep in tomorrow, then I'll have nothing to complain about."

There was nothing to argue with there, so they all fell silent as Reya and Zeke finished off the rest of their food. Lillia caught Arwin's eye while the others ate and nodded to the kitchen before heading into it. Arwin followed, trailing Lillia back to her room.

“When are we heading back into the dungeon?” Lillia asked, keeping her tone low so nobody would overhear them. “There are some things I’d like to try.”

“I was thinking day after tomorrow, assuming Rodrick and Anna are both fine with it,” Arwin replied. “We can probably push deeper than we did last time, especially if more monsters haven’t moved in by the time we get there.”

“You think that’s likely?”

“Probably not,” Arwin admitted. “Dungeons never have a shortage of monsters that show up to use their energy, but I can’t complain. More monsters means more material for me to work with. Is there something in particular you need?”

“Mostly supplies, just like you. It sounds like we’re going to have more people coming by the street soon, and I want to try to get some more stuff to sell. I need a lot of expansions and more ingredients to cook with.”

“Fair enough,” Arwin said. “We’ll aim for day after tomorrow, then. What do you think of Zeke?”

“He seems too young to be on the streets,” Lillia said with a frown. “But I think he should be fine. Seems honest enough, and you’re the only one that has anything really worth stealing.”

“The things I have that are most worth stealing are impossible to steal,” Arwin said, even more grateful for [Arsenal] than he had been before. “Let me know if you have any trouble with him, though.”

“A human brat isn’t going to give me any issues, but I’ll take note of that. In any case, I’m going to start cleaning up the kitchen and getting ready for tomorrow morning. You never know when people will show up.”

Arwin nodded, thinking much along the same lines. His equipment was out on the market now, which meant that it wouldn’t be long before his name started to build. He had a lot of smithing to do if he wanted to properly establish himself.

But that would come. For today, Arwin had done more than enough work on his smithy to be satisfied. Right now, the only other thing he wanted to do was get some rest and prepare for what tomorrow held.

Chapter 55

When Arwin got out of bed the following morning and stepped into the common room after pulling on his mask, he found he wasn’t the first. In fact, it seemed like he might have been the last.

Rodrick, Anna, and Reya all sat at the counter across from Lillia, who was busy trying to fix up the weathered wine rack with Zeke’s help. Even though the shadows in the inn were just as dark as they always seemed to be, it felt brighter than normal.

“Were you hibernating or something?” Rodrick asked with a chuckle as he saw Arwin. “Also, what’s with the... well, ugly thing?”

“My mask is not ugly,” Arwin said curtly. “It’s intimidating.”

“It’s ugly,” Rodrick said.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night. It’s to protect my identity. I’m well aware it’s far from the most effective way to handle things, but even a small layer of defense is better than nothing.”

“I think you just like wearing ugly masks.”

“Oh, stop it,” Anna said, shoulder-checking Rodrick and nearly knocking him out of his chair. He grabbed onto the counter to balance himself, chuckling.

“No rough housing,” Lillia said, glancing over her shoulder at them. “Not unless you plan to replace my barstools. In that case, feel free. They’re kind of rickety. I’m honestly hoping someone breaks one so I don’t have to pay for an upgrade.”

Anna and Rodrick hurriedly straightened back up, taking on the posture of model adventurers and returning to their meals.

From what Arwin could tell, everyone seemed to be getting on pretty well with each other. Zeke clearly knew his way around a toolset, and Arwin couldn’t help but notice some of the tools he’d bought to fix up his smithy were in the boy’s hands.

He didn’t bother saying anything. Zeke was using them to fix up the tavern, and the kid seemed to have his head screwed on right. If he’d wanted to steal, he could have done that in the night.

Guess the guild has another member. Faster than I expected, but I can’t complain. We need someone to hold the fort down while we go to the dungeon. And, judging by the presence we’ve got around today, I think that’s looking pretty likely.

“Is today good, then?” Anna asked Reya.

“I think it should be.” Reya sent a look at Arwin. “Is it?”

“Good? For what?”

“Heading to the dungeon.”

“Oh,” Arwin said, shaking his head and laughing. “Yes. I was just thinking about that, actually. I’m prepared, so long as the rest of you are.”

Zeke sent Arwin a surprised look. “You go into the dungeon? You’re a smith!”

“I don’t do any fighting,” Arwin said as he raised his hands, showing his lack of a weapon. “I just travel along and pick up the supplies that look useful. I bought a bag yesterday for that exact reason, actually. Stuffing my pockets got a bit old.”

“Oh, yeah. Tell me about it. You can barely fit half a loaf of bread in,” Zeke said with a knowing nod.

“You can fit half a loaf into your pockets?” Reya exclaimed, her eyes going wide. “I can barely get a pouch of coins in mine!”

“That’s because you’re wearing skinny women’s pants. You gotta get the good stuff, not the pretty stuff.”

“I didn’t realize there was a difference. I stole these,” Reya said, looking down at her pants with a frown. “Where’d you get yours?”

“Oh, I stole them too.”

They both snickered, and Arwin was struck with the realization that bringing two thieves together might not have been the best idea if he wanted to keep his guild strictly above the board. He cleared his throat to get their attention.

“No more stealing, please,” Arwin said. “I’d prefer to avoid any trouble with the authorities.”

Zeke rolled his eyes. “As if I’d get caught.”

“And as if they care,” Reya added. “It’s all just a front, you know. They pretend to care, but Milten is one of the crime-ridden cities in the kingdom. Even if you do get caught doing something, as long as you bribe them, it’s fine.”

“Even so, I’d prefer to keep our activities legal,” Arwin said firmly. “At least, whenever possible.”

“Aren’t you technically squatting?” Reya asked.

Arwin opened his mouth, then closed it and crossed his arms. “You may have a point, but it is a point that I am going to choose to ignore because I don’t have a good argument for it. If we can’t keep all our activities legal, what if we do our best to minimize the illegal ones?”

“Buddy, I think you’re losing the argumemnt,” Rodrick put in.

“You’re on my side if you want more armor.”

“No doing illegal shit, kids,” Rodrick said.

Anna smacked him on the back of the head. “Don’t curse in front of children.”

“I’m not a kid!” Zeke protested. “I know a whole bunch of curse words, like—”

“We don’t need a demonstration. I believe you,” Anna said curtly, cutting Zeke off while he was mid-breath, likely preparing to launch into a long list that he’d been waiting to share for who knew how long. “But Rodrick certainly isn’t going to be encouraging you. Isn’t that right?”

“Yup. I’d never do something like that. What’s the kid going to be doing, Ar–” Rodrick caught himself as Anna pierced him with a sharp look. He coughed into his fist and continued, “doing with us? Surely not dungeons.”

“He’s not ready for that,” Arwin said. “Zeke will be helping me with some smithing activities as well as with the repairs for the smithy and the inn.”

“Seems useful,” Rodrick said. He finished the rest of his plate and slid out of his chair, stretching his arms over his head and yawning. “In that case, should we get moving? No point letting good hours slip away, and I want to test out some moves.”

“I don’t see why not. I’ll just check up on the smithy before I leave,” Arwin said. “You made sure to lock it, right, Zeke?”

Zeke glanced at the tools in his hands and his cheeks reddened. “Yeah, I did. All locked up.”

“Good enough for me. I’ll just see if there’s anything that strikes me while I’m there. I haven’t had a chance to make a helmet yet – I do want to get around to that, but it can wait for after we’ve gotten back. I just need to grab my bag and I’ll be good to go.”

The others nodded and Arwin headed out, crossing the street and making for his smithy. He paused at the door, taking a moment to appreciate his newly built walls, all devoid of cracks and damage.

Sure, the building still looked old, but it was in one piece. The next step would be to get some furniture and really spice the place up, but that could come after he'd forged enough to really fill the shop out and draw customers.

Arwin unlocked the door and headed inside. Zeke had barely disturbed the locations of anything he had, so it only took him a second to find the old tarp bag he'd purchased along with all the repair supplies.

He slung the bag over a shoulder and did one last check over the smithy to make sure nothing was out of place before heading back outside. He went to lock the door behind him, but paused as the key entered the lock.

A middle-aged woman was standing across the street, leaning against the wall of a crumbling building. It took Arwin a moment to realize he recognized her dark hair and blue eyes. It was Tix, the adventurer who had purchased some of his work from him at the tavern.

"Can I help you?" Arwin asked, locking the door and pocketing the key. He didn't even have to work on deepening his voice – the mask muffled his words enough that they already sounded quite different.

"I believe you can," Tix said, walking over to stand before him. "I've been looking for you. You're Ifrit, right?"

"I'd hope there aren't other people running around with my design on their masks," Arwin said dryly. "Yes. I'm Ifrit."

"Great. You have no idea how damn hard I've been looking around to find you," Tix said, holding a hand out to shake. "My name is Tix. I'm with the Iron Hounds."

Arwin took it. “Pleasure. What is it that you need me for? I didn’t realize I was worth drawing that much attention.”

“Are you kidding? Don’t downplay the value of the work you put out. I’ve heard of people working with scales for armor, but not in the way you have. My people got their hands on some of the gear you put out yesterday, and I’ve never seen anything like it.”

It really isn’t all that special. I know I’ve seen similar before when I was the Hero... which either means this place is much farther out in the boonies than I thought, or Tix is trying to butter me up for something.

“You overpraise me,” Arwin said. “And you still haven’t said what you want.”

“Not one for small talk, are you?” Tix laughed and shrugged. “Fine with me. Neither am I. Look – the Iron Hounds need someone like you. We’ve been working our way up the guild ranks, and we’re starting to get access to some pretty big jobs, but it’s really hard getting everyone outfitted. I’m sure I’m preaching to the choir here, but you have to know how hard it can be to outfit a raid group. Getting good quality armor that isn’t magical is like ripping nails out.”

“Why not just get magical armor?”

Tix burst into laughter and slapped Arwin on the shoulder. “Jokester, are you? I said that we were up and coming, not filthy rich. We can’t afford magic armor for everyone but the top of the guild. Buying enchantments and gathering the materials... we aren’t anywhere near the point of that for anyone but our main group. That doesn’t mean we want everyone else getting cut down left and right, though.”

“Sure,” Arwin allowed with a shrug. “That makes sense. But I’m not sure what your question for me is. You’re welcome to buy my work whenever it goes up for sale.”

“That would be great, but we need a lot more than that. Our guild has fifty members,” Tix said. “Do you have any idea how long it would take to get individual sets from you that fit all of them?”

“You’re asking for custom commissions?”

Tix wagged a hand in the air. “That would be nice, but then you’d still be able to make gear for other guilds.”

Arwin blinked in confusion. “Why would that matter?”

“Because they’re our competitors,” Tix said, the smile fading from her lips as her eyes darkened. “And they’re the ones we’re fighting. If you make us armor, and then you make them armor, it’s no different than where things were before, isn’t it?”

“I see your issue,” Arwin said, grateful for his mask once more as it concealed the disgust on his features.

Why the hell are you fighting other guilds? That’s not what guilds are meant to do.

“Fantastic,” Tix said. “Then you can imagine why I came here. We’d like to offer you a position among the Iron Hounds. You’d be well paid, and we’d provide all the material you could ever—”

“I refuse.”

Tix blinked. “What?”

“I have no interest in joining a guild,” Arwin said. “Not yours, and not someone else’s. Does that answer your question?”

“You’d better put more thought into this,” Tix warned. “You aren’t going to get another offer, and if you aren’t with us, you’re against us.”

“That sort of idiotic attitude is why your guild is never going to go anywhere meaningful,” Arwin said, unable to contain his distaste any longer. “I am a smith. If you wish to purchase gear from me, you may join the line whenever I arrive at market. Just like all the other guilds.”

“Final answer?” Tix asked.

“Ah. By asking again, you have changed my mind.”

“I did?” Tix asked, her face brightening. “Great. I—”

“I lied,” Arwin said flatly. “I appreciate your invitation, but I am unable to accept it. If it makes you feel any better, any other guilds that bring me the same offer will receive the same answer. It won’t impact the Iron Hounds.”

Tix’s jaw clenched. For a second, Arwin thought she’d start insulting him. But, instead, she just shrugged and turned, heading down the alleyway she’d come from.

“Suit yourself. Have a good day, Ifrit.”

Chapter 56

Arwin watched Tix until her back had completely disappeared into the darkness, remaining in place for another minute before heading back to the tavern.

“You took a bit longer than I thought you would. What happened? Get lost?” Reya asked.

“No. Someone from a guild called the Iron Hounds tried to get me to join their guild,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “They were a little pushy, but they gave up.”

“Iron Hounds? I don’t think I’ve heard of them,” Reya said, chewing her bottom lip. “Maybe they’re new to the area.”

“Probably,” Rodrick said. “I haven’t heard of them either. Why’d they want you to join? They need a personal smith?”

“Yeah. It seemed like they were more concerned with stopping me from making gear for other guilds than they were with getting it for their own,” Arwin said with a shake of his head. “Can you imagine that? What a stupid notion. It sounded like their opponents were the other guilds more than anything else.”

Lillia nodded in agreement, but everyone else stared at Arwin as if he’d suddenly sprouted a horn.

“That’s like... half the point of a guild,” Reya said with a snort of laughter. “Of course they don’t want you working for anyone else.”

“Wait, what?” Arwin asked. “Fighting other guilds? That’s not the point of a guild at all.”

“Yes it is,” Rodrick said. “What do you think they’re for? Guilds are a way to get stronger in a safer environment. And, if you want to get stronger, the Mesh won’t let you do that in any way other than seeking challenge.”

“Which is why you fight monsters.”

“Sure, but not everywhere has a ton of monsters to fight and a lot of dungeons are protected by guilds that don’t let other people get to them,” Rodrick said. “Because if other people can, then they can get stronger. You keep the resources for yourself. That’s how it works. Besides, if you’re just worried about monsters, you go with a small team rather than a guild. It’s not like you can fit an entire guild in a dungeon at once – it would be too packed.”

“You rotate out.” Arwin frowned in confusion. “That’s the point. Everyone is good at their own things, so a guild lets you make sure you’re properly outfitted for every kind of fight. They’re not meant to... fight off other guilds. We’re meant to work together.”

“If you think that’s how the guilds work, I don’t know what to say other than sorry,” Anna said with an apologetic smile. “Nothing is keeping our guild from being different, of course.”

“Until another guild shows up while we’ve got our backs turned,” Rodrick said. “Then we become just like the rest of them.”

“What I meant was that we don’t have to attack anyone,” Anna said, shooting a sharp glare in Rodrick’s direction.

“You’re saying that the guilds have turned to fighting each other and are using that as challenge instead of defeating monsters?” Arwin asked in disbelief. “Why? Guilds are meant to protect people!”

“Only in stories,” Rodrick said. “The truth of the matter is exactly what you just said. Why protect when hunting down another guild will give you way more power? Safety is weakness. They want conflict.”

Arwin and Lillia exchanged a look. Based on the expression on her face, Lillia definitely had the exact same view of guilds that he had. Arwin had never thought about it, but if some monsters were just as intelligent as humans, then it wasn't unrealistic for them to also have guilds.

Just how sheltered were we? I thought I knew almost everything there was to know this shit, but with every passing day, I realize that the Adventurer's Guild completely kept me in the dark. I was just a puppet on their strings.

"Well, that's... disheartening to hear," Arwin said, pursing his lips. "But Anna is right. We won't be like them. We'll protect ourselves with all the force we need, but we aren't going to be preying on others."

"That's reassuring to hear, even if I already expected it," Anna said. She rose from her spot by the counter and brushed her hands off on her pants. "Is it time to get moving, then? All this talk of guilds puts a bad taste in my mouth."

"I think it is," Arwin said. "Zeke, it's still a little too dangerous for you to come to the dungeon with us right now, but you're welcome to hang out in the tavern, the smithy, or wherever you'd like to."

"Really?" Zeke asked. "I don't have to leave?"

"Why would you?" Arwin asked with a chuckle. "Just don't get into trouble and, if you do end up going into the smithy, make sure to lock the door behind you. Sound good?"

"Yeah," Zeke said with a nod. "Will do."

"I don't suppose I need to give you the key?"

Zeke grinned in response and Arwin shook his head, grinning. “Figured. Let’s go, everyone. Daylight is burning, and we’ve got a dungeon to work through. I’m looking forward to getting my hands on some more materials to work with.”

Their second run at the dungeon kicked off much smoother than their first. With Arwin at the lead, the group advanced past another Landsquid without any difficulty – though, this time, Lillia didn’t try collecting any of its tentacles.

None of them got so much as hit, much less injured – though it did come a little close for Arwin, who had failed to take his mask off and almost didn’t see a blow coming. The mask came off soon after that, and that was the end of their issues with the Landsquid. Unfortunately, Anna didn’t have a chance to land any blows on the monster. While they were able to take it down without too much difficulty, it was too dangerous to let her near it.

That opportunity arose in the second room, which had changed considerably since their previous run.

It had turned into a long rectangular room that vaguely resembled a banquet hall without any of the tables. Vines still hung from the walls and crawled across the floor, and water dripped from the ceiling and flowed in small rivers to pools that forms at cracks in the ground.

Several short, bald creatures with wrinkly green skin and rusted weapons paced around the room and chewed at the vines, completely unaware of the group of adventurers.

“Why’d the room change? Did we get lost?” Reya whispered.

“Dungeons can change their layouts. They’re magic,” Anna muttered. “I wasn’t expecting goblins, but I suppose I should have. They fit right into the swamplike environment this dungeon seems to favor.

“Haven’t fought these before,” Rodrick said. “I’ve heard they can be nasty in groups. Any suggestions, Arwin?”

“Nasty in groups is accurate. But, alone, they should be quite simple,” Arwin said as he studied the nearest monster with a careful eye.

[Swamp Goblin – Apprentice 8]

The other goblins were all roughly around the same tier, with a few going above or below by one or two spots. None of them were going to be a significant threat in any stretch of the imagination – not to a trained fighter, at least.

From Arwin’s experience with goblins, he knew the monsters were far from the cleverest. They generally threw themselves at their enemy with reckless abandon, hoping to win through sheer numbers.

They were also incredibly deaf, generally due to their –

One of the goblins let out an ear-splitting shriek and bashed its head against the wall, snarling in fury. A few of the others spotted it and did the same, filling the room with a cacophony of screeches and thuds for a few seconds before they went back to wandering around aimlessly.

Deaf and half–blind. Typical.

“We can handle them with no trouble,” Arwin said. “This is a perfect opportunity for you, Anna.”

“For me?” Anna asked doubtfully. “They might be stupid, but I don’t think I can handle a fight with one of those things.”

“You don’t have to handle a full fight. Just the last blow,” Arwin said. “Rodrick, with me. Reya, stay farther back and focus on slowing the goblins – and Rodrick, aim to cripple rather than to kill. The goblins are all going to horde, so let me take their attention initially. After that, just take them out one by one. Anna can just hang back for now.”

Rodrick’s eyes flashed with understanding and he nodded. “I’m with you. Let’s do it.”

“Me too,” Reya added.

Arwin strode forward and activated [Arsenal], summoning Verdant Blaze to his hands. He hadn’t had a chance to use its [Soul Flame] related abilities yet, but he wasn’t about to splatter a goblin with them and steal the chance to gain credit for the kill from Anna, Rodrick, or Reya.

I’ll use the stronger abilities when we run into an enemy that I actually have to try against. Goblins aren’t that enemy.

The first goblin spotted Arwin when he was already upon it. The monster’s ears shot back as it bared its teeth, throwing its head back in preparation to let out a battle cry. Arwin’s hammer fell on the creature’s shoulder, pulverizing through flesh and bone as if nothing were there.

Screeching in pain, the goblin crumpled. The other monsters in the room spun, finally spotting the adventurers. Their eyes locked onto Arwin and they sprinted toward him, drawing their weapons and screaming challenges.

The first jumped – only to be enveloped by a shimmer of blue energy midair. The hilt of Rodrick’s sword slammed into its head, knocking the beast out cold and send it sprawling across the ground.

None of the other goblins met better fates. Arwin and Rodrick carved through their ranks with the help of Reya’s restraining abilities, putting the goblins down like they were cutting grass. Between the three of them, only two goblins ended up dead on Rodrick’s sword. The rest laid, unable to fight, in piles around the ground.

“You’re up,” Arwin said, nodding to Anna. “Get to it. None of us are going to get hurt fighting these things, so you can’t get energy from healing us. That means you’ve got to do the dirty work.”

“This... somehow feels wrong,” Anna muttered. Rodrick walked up to her and flipped his sword around, offering it hilt first. She took the blade, holding it awkwardly in her hands.

“You won’t get much credit for this. The Mesh isn’t stupid,” Arwin explained. “But you’ll still get some. There’s a degree of risk, and any challenge can give energy. Just be careful and take care of business. Who knows when you’ll get another free opportunity like this.”

Anna nodded. She went up to the first goblin and plunged the sword down, missing its heart and driving through its chest. The monster hissed and bucked, trying to slash at her legs with its claws. She barely managed to jump out of the way in time to avoid getting hamstringed.

“Don’t miss,” Arwin suggested. Lillia snorted, but Arwin could tell from the way that she was shifting from foot to foot that she was impatient to get to the point where she could do something. She hadn’t had a chance to fight anything since they’d entered the dungeon, and nothing they’d met so far had been edible either.

Anna plunged the sword back down, putting the goblin out of its misery, and then glared at Arwin. He grinned in response. Shaking her head, Anna made her way around the room, killing the monsters.

It only took about five minutes for her to finish the creatures off, but by the time she returned Rodrick’s sword to him, her forehead was covered in a sheen of stressed sweat. Her gaze was unfocused, a telltale sign of reading a message from the Mesh.

“That was terrifying,” Anna said.

“Did it work?” Arwin asked.

Anna swallowed, then nodded. “Yes. It worked. I can’t believe it, but I got an achievement that will upgrade one of my new skills when I reach the next level in my Tier.”

“Just for putting down a bunch of goblins?” Reya asked, blinking in disbelief.

“Even though I didn’t get much energy, I think the Mesh still sees me killing nearly ten goblins in the span of a few minutes as a healer,” Anna said, chewing her lower lip. “I imagine that won’t work again to this effect, but... how’d you know it would do that?”

“I didn’t,” Arwin replied, letting his hammer disappear and shrugging. “But energy is energy, and I told you that you’d be working to catch up with the rest of us. Now, shall we continue? I’ve yet to find anything I can craft with, and I think we can go deeper.”

Chapter 57

The temperature dropped as Arwin approached the door leading into the next room. It was at the far end of the hall, isolated from the rest of the room by a patch of dead foliage. The vines around it had withered and turned a dull white, and the water pooling near the base of the door looked sickly.

“That doesn’t seem hospitable,” Rodrick said, kneeling beside the puddle but taking care not to touch it.

“It feels... off,” Anna added. “Wrong, I guess.”

“I’m inclined to agree. Could be some form of necrotic presence in the area,” Arwin theorized. “Or just normal dark magic. I doubt it’s anything too powerful since we’re still in a Journeyman dungeon, but we should still keep our guard up. I’ll take the lead as usual.”

“I’ll back you up,” Lillia said.

Rodrick looked her in surprise. “Really? Shouldn’t that be me? I mean, I know you can handle yourself, but I’m the warrior.”

“Someone needs to watch our back in case something happens to be behind us,” Lillia said smoothly, with all the grace of an older sister redirecting her sibling from something she wanted.

“I suppose that’s a good point,” Rodrick allowed, falling for it completely. He stepped back, letting Lillia move up beside Arwin. With their new formation established, Arwin summoned his hammer back and pushed the door open with its head.

Dried vines squelched and cracked beneath it as it swung open, opening a passageway into the darkness. Not too far down, two dim purple flames flickered at the end of the hall, illuminating an old stone door. Arwin's eyes narrowed.

That's definitely a secured room. Something strong is probably in there.

"Probably got a nasty bugger up ahead," Rodrick whispered. "Look at those torches. The dungeon is warning us."

Arwin wasn't so sure warning was the right word. Dungeons did tend to mark their more powerful rooms, but it wasn't to scare people off. At least in his opinion, it was to bring them closer.

When adventurers stumbled across a room that stood out, curiosity almost always got the better of them and drew them to investigate it further. Stronger monsters meant better rewards, and that meant people were willing to take bigger risks.

And, in the end, magical energy was magical energy. Dungeons didn't care where it came from. They just wanted more. Monsters, humans, it was all alike. As long as more magical energy entered and didn't leave, the dungeon would be happy.

Those torches are bait, not a warning.

Of course, Arwin's thoughts were just theory. Nobody knew exactly how dungeons worked.

Then again, maybe the Adventurer's Guild lied about that as well. I bet there could be some people that have researched dungeons a lot and could tell me more about them, but now isn't the time to wonder. Warning or bait, the result is the same. I think we can handle this. We

haven't gone deep enough to be at the base of the dungeon, so this enemy shouldn't be so strong that we can't handle them.

“We can handle it,” Arwin said, edging toward the door. “But, on the off chance that we can't, get out of the room. Let Lillia and I try to handle it while the rest of you run.”

Nobody questioned his orders, and Arwin got a round of understanding nods. They advanced into the darkness until they stood before the stone door. There was no handle, but there was an imprint clearly inviting Arwin to push it open.

I suppose I'd be rude to refuse at this point.

Arwin pushed the door open. Stone ground on stone and purple light spilled out, illuminating a circular room with several doors running along its edges. A locked stone chest sat in the middle of the room. Directly behind it was a large marble pillar riddled with cracks and worn with age.

And, clutching onto the pillar with alabaster skin that matched it nearly perfectly, was a monster. Fangs jutted out from its lips and curled around its lips, and two massive wings were folded against its back.

It had a humanoid body, but its hands and feet were disproportionately large and bore large claws that dug into the stone like butter. The monster was roughly eight feet long, from head to the base of its barbed tail.

[Bone Gargoyle – Journeyman 6]

Unlike many of the other monsters, the gargoyle wasn't content to sit around while they figured out a plan. As soon as Arwin stepped into the room, the monster's grey tongue flicked out and tasted the air.

It released the pillar, dropping to the ground with a crash. It stood on all fours like an irate cat. A very, very large irate cat. Bone wings unfurled from its back with a series of loud cracks, raining dust down onto the ground around it as the monster let out a deep, brassy hiss.

"I don't suppose you count as a magical material?" Arwin asked the gargoyle. It roared in response. Arwin grunted and spun the hammer in his grasp, calling on his [Soul Flame]. A gargoyle wasn't an easy enemy, and they weren't going to win this if they pulled any punches.

"Oh, shit," Reya muttered, swallowing heavily. "That's *big*."

"Go all out, but focus surviving over doing damage," Arwin ordered. "Gargoyles are really difficult to keep injured, but we win the war of attrition. Let me and Rodrick take most of its aggression. Lillia – well, do what you can."

I don't want to force you to blow your cover, but we might need the power of your demons if we're going to win this.

Lillia gave Arwin a slight nod, showing she would step up if they needed her to. They didn't have any more time to discuss strategy. The gargoyle leapt forward, letting out a catlike yowl.

Stepping forward, Arwin poured [Soul Flame] through the handle of Verdant Blaze. The weapon responded with a roar of its own. The crystals in its head ignited, sending shimmering green light dancing across the room.

He brought the hammer into the gargoyle's side as it charged him, empowering his blow with the full strength that [Scourge] would afford him. Fire erupted from the head of his hammer with a roar as it connected with the gargoyle and a wave of scorching heat rolled past Arwin.

And, while the heat of the flame didn't hurt Arwin, he couldn't say the same for the gargoyle. The monster hurtled back, coils of flame rolling off the huge crater Arwin had just put in its side and slammed into the wall with a resounding crash.

It dropped to the ground, a few wisps of persistent fire still burning at its side. Scrambling to its feet, the gargoyle let out a snarl. Even as chips of bone rained down from its body, the damage faded away as if it had never been there.

"Godspit," Lillia muttered. "Where in the Nine Underlands did you learn how to do that?"

Arwin adjusted his grip on the hammer, trying not to look too surprised at his own strength. Verdant Blaze vibrated in his hands, as if hungry for more. It was warm to the touch – the [Soul Flame] had completely permeated the weapon, and it almost felt as if it was hungry.

"I don't think the gargoyle is impressed," Rodrick muttered under his breath. "How do we kill it?"

"By hitting it a lot," Arwin replied, striding toward the gargoyle to keep the monster's attention on him. Despite his words, he had no plans of blindly flinging himself at the gargoyle. The claws on its paws weren't just for show.

Even with his armor and enhanced defenses, the gargoyle would probably shred him to ribbons pretty quickly. The monster was simple, but it was effective. Generally, the best way to defeat gargoyles was through magic.

Unfortunately, Arwin's team didn't have a proper mage. The closest thing to that was probably Anna, and she had no way to do fight back.

That's fine. Magic is the easiest way to take out a gargoyle, but it's not the only way. There's always another way. And, in this case, that other way is to wear this bastard down until there's nothing left of him to regenerate. Any healing skill is going to be either really slow or really taxing. And, considering the gargoyle regenerated that wound in just a second, we're looking at the latter.

"It can't keep up the healing forever," Arwin said. "Just keep safe and wear it down. Reya, focus on slowing it if it's about to hit someone. Your job is to keep us safe, not to help us land hits."

"Understood," Reya said.

The gargoyle threw itself for Arwin, turning into a white blur. If Arwin had been with anyone else, he would have tried to dodge the blow. Taking the monster head-on was far from the best way to handle it – but he was the best defended out of the entire group, and they were all behind him.

With a roar, Arwin channeled [Scourge] and swung Verdant Blaze. The head of the hammer erupted with flame as it connected. At the same time, lines of heat carved through Arwin's shoulder.

The gargoyle shot off like a bullet and slammed into the wall, shattering both the stone and its own body. At the same time, Arwin nearly lost his grip on the hammer. He stumbled, blood pouring down his arm in rivers.

In the brief instant the gargoyle had been beside him, it had managed to snag his arm with one claw. And, in that glancing blow, it had ripped his armor open like a can, gouging deep into the muscle and scratching the bone beneath.

If I didn't have [Indomitable Bulwark], I think I would have lost my arm there.

Anna rushed up to Arwin and pressed her hands to his arm. Relief flooded through him as the wounds knitted shut. The few seconds it took her to heal him were just enough for the gargoyle to rise as well, the last smoldering embers falling away as its body reformed.

Arwin's second blow had done more damage to it than the first had – likely because it had been head on and also had the additional force from [Shieldbreaker], but it still wasn't anywhere near enough to kill the monster.

“How many times do you have to kill that thing?” Rodrick demanded, adjusting his grip on his sword.

“Until it stays dead.”

“Fair enough.”

The gargoyle charged again, screaming. This time, before Arwin could attack, Rodrick lunged forward. Despite Arwin's orders, Reya thrust her hand forward with a yell of her own. Blue light enveloped the monster and its dash slowed for a flicker of an instant.

Rodrick's sword ignited with burning yellow light and he released a flurry of three blows into the monster's side in rapid-fire succession before throwing himself back just in time to avoid getting carved apart.

Each of his cuts left a deep gouge in the monster's side – and the cuts weren't healing. Arwin nearly burst into laughter as realization struck him. The gargoyle craned its head back to study the damage it had taken, flapping its wings and creating a powerful gust of wind to keep them back.

“Your attacks count as magic?” Arwin asked of the air rushing past them.

“Yours don't?” Rodrick demanded. “What's all the fire if not magic? And why does that matter?”

“It's [Soul Flame]. I think soul attacks count differently,” Arwin replied. “And gargoyles can heal from physical attacks easily. Magic disrupts them.”

“Why?” Rodrick asked.

“Now really isn't the time for a lesson,” Arwin said as the gargoyle stopped flapping its wings and turned baleful eyes toward them, its gaze locked on Rodrick with revenge promised in its eyes.

“It's because they're made of magic, and magic always disrupts magic,” Lillia answered for Arwin.

Arwin started to nod, then paused.

Wait. It's made of magic, and gargoyles aren't technically living creatures. They're objects that have gained sentience, usually stone.

Does that mean...

“What’s that look on your face?” Lillia asked. “Focus!”

“Sorry,” Arwin said, letting his tongue wet his lips as he moved to stand in front of the gargoyle. “I just realized I was feeling a bit peckish.”

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“You’re what?” Lillia asked, but there was no more time for Arwin to reply. The gargoyle was already hurtling through the air toward them, propelled by a single beat of its enormous wings.

The monster’s path set it straight for Rodrick, and at the speed that it was moving at, Arwin wasn’t completely confident he’d be able to hit it in time. If he got so much as a glancing blow, it would barrel through and carve the warrior to shreds.

So, instead, Arwin shoved Rodrick to the side and threw himself forward with a roar. Perhaps he’d caught the gargoyle by complete surprise or perhaps it was just luck – either way, Arwin cleared the monster’s claws and drove his shoulder into its side, throwing all [Scourge] had to offer behind the blow.

It was just like sprinting into a wall at full tilt. Arwin’s armor shuddered and the bones in his shoulder cracked. Without the extra force of his hammer, Arwin only just barely managed to redirect the gargoyle to the side.

The monster spun, slamming into the wall before it could fully skid to a stop – but Arwin didn't wait for it to turn. He sprinted forward and dismissed his hammer before flinging himself at the gargoyle, much to the horrified yells of everyone behind him.

Arwin ignored them. He wrapped his arms around the gargoyle's neck and swung himself onto its cold back, ignoring the pain that arced through his broken arm as he pulled himself close. The gargoyle let out a confused hiss, spinning to try and throw Arwin off.

But, before it could, Arwin leaned in and bit into the monster's neck with all his might. It was as solid as, well, stone. For a horrifying instant, he thought he might have miscalculated and was about to earn himself some early dentures.

Then, with a crunch, the monster's cold body gave way. His teeth dug through its flesh and power coursed into Arwin's body. The gargoyle screamed and bucked violently, finally throwing him free.

Arwin landed on his feet, skidding a foot back. His arm popped and shifted. Blinking in surprise, Arwin flexed his hand. A grin crept across his face. It had healed. The power he'd stolen from the gargoyle was already fading away, but it had been enough.

“Oh yeah,” Arwin said, baring his teeth in a hungry grin. “You're on the menu, buddy.”

The gargoyle stared at Arwin, trying to process what had happened. And, in that moment, Lillia struck. Condensed shadows carved out from beneath her feet and drove up, sending spikes straight through the monster's stomach.

Lurching, the gargoyle flapped its wings desperately in attempt to free itself, but Lillia's magic had it pinned firmly in place.

Damn, I completely screwed this up, didn't I? We do have an offensive mage.

The battlefield wasn't the spot to lament mistakes. Arwin extended his hands and Verdant Blaze reformed within it, the crystals in the hammer's head igniting with power as he broke into a run.

Struggling even harder, the gargoyle tried to free itself – but a shimmer of blue light enveloped it, stopping the monster from ripping free of Lillia's bindings. Rodrick darted forward, gritting his teeth as his sword lit with burning light once more.

Three flashes of light cut into the gargoyle's neck as Rodrick unleashed his flurry of strikes into it. An instant later, Arwin's hammer came crashing down on the monster's head. Fire bloomed with a roar, blowing his hair back as he unloaded every ounce of strength that he could bring to bear on the monster.

The gargoyle's head caved in and shattered. For a moment, the bone that made its body up started to knit itself back together, trying to reform the head, but a second set of unified strikes from Arwin and Rodrick put that notion to rest.

Smooth bone turned grey and cracked. Arwin stepped back as the gargoyle crumbled away, collapsing into a pile of discolored rubble at his feet.

“No!” Lillia groaned, dropping to her knees and rifling through the pieces of the monster. “I can't cook any of this! It's inedible!”

“Tell that to him,” Rodrick said, sheathing his sword and eyeing Arwin. “Did you take a damned bite out of a rock monster?”

“Bone,” Arwin corrected. “And I may have – which is something I’d appreciate you keep to yourself.”

The air before Arwin shimmered, and he blinked in surprise. The gargoyle had been troublesome, but he hadn’t expected to get any sort of achievement for taking it out. It wasn’t like he was going to complain, though.

Achievement: [Rock and Stone] has been earned.

[Rock and Stone] – *Awarded for hitting a magical rock with a magical hammer really hard. Effects: Forging materials. This achievement has been consumed.*

This gargoyle wasn’t made out of rock, though. It was made out of bone.

The Mesh seemed to take offense to Arwin’s thoughts, because the materials he had been promised manifested themselves directly above his head. He jumped out of the way a moment before several ivory bars fell to the ground with loud clangs.

“Well,” Arwin said, brushing his shoulder off and clearing his throat. “That was convenient. Nobody got hurt, right?”

“We can’t just gloss over the fact that you took a bite out of the gargoyle,” Rodrick said, looking at the others. “Right? I mean, how are your teeth still in your mouth?”

“I was more focused on biting than it was on not getting bitten.”

“You – oh, come on,” Rodrick groaned. “That’s just gibberish. You’re screwing with me.”

“Maybe,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “Does it really matter? We’ve all got our secrets.”

Rodrick opened his mouth, then let it fall shut and sighed, rubbing the back of his neck and shaking his head. “I suppose so. Fine. I figured you had some sort of nasty ability anyway, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“If anything, I’m more surprised by Lillia,” Anna said, glancing at the demon queen out of the corners of her eyes. “I didn’t realize you were a mage.”

“I’m not,” Lillia said. “I just have a few combat abilities that I happened to earn. I’m an innkeeper. Nothing more.”

“Right,” Anna said. “Well, Arwin said it first. We’ve got our own secrets, and it’s not right to pry when Lillia just used her abilities to help us. Isn’t that right?”

It was Rodrick’s turn to clear his throat. He nodded. “Right. Don’t worry, I won’t press. Just curiosity getting the better of me.”

Lillia stood up, brushing her knees off and gazing at the remains of the monster with a disappointed frown. “I was really hoping I’d be able to eat this.”

“You didn’t get an achievement for helping out?” Rodrick asked. “I would have thought an innkeeper would get *something* for taking out a monster like this, even if it wasn’t what you were looking for.”

“No, I did,” Lillia admitted. “It just wasn’t what I was hoping for. It’s an ability upgrade.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re complaining about that?” Reya demanded. “That’s incredible!”

Lillia sent a despondent look at the rubble. “Yeah. I just got excited. Imagine how excited people would be to eat gargoyle. Could you imagine? It would be incredible. The meal of a lifetime.”

Talk about dedicated to her craft. Did Lillia always want to be a chef or something?

Arwin shook his head and knelt beside the bars of metal he’d been awarded with. He picked one of them up, testing its weight in his hand. It was heavier than the Brightsteel, but not unbearably so. For a bar its size, it seemed quite balanced.

I’ll have to test this out later. Doesn’t seem magical, but it looks like good metal. There’s a lot here – probably sixty or so pounds worth. I can make a lot with that. I believe an average set of plate armor is around thirty to fifty pounds, so I should be able to do a lot with this. Maybe I can finally get a full set.

Arwin glanced down at his chest and grimaced. The left side of his chest piece was completely shredded. The Mesh within it felt faint and distant. It had done a lot more for him than he’d thought during the fight – a furrow ran across the left half of his chest, only turning to a full rip when it reached his arm.

This piece is on its last legs. For one of my first pieces, it served its purpose. The effect is pretty damn useful too, even if it doesn’t always go off. Too useful to ignore. I’ll see if I can get this back to the forge and use [Soul Flame] to break it down and put the ability to use in a different piece of armor.

“Do we keep going?” Reya asked. “The only one that got hit was Arwin, right?”

“Yeah, but he nearly got ripped in half from just one cut,” Anna said, nodding to Arwin’s armor. “I mean, look at that. If that was anywhere else, he could be dead. I think we’re pushing our luck.”

“We could go deeper,” Lillia said, but Arwin was pretty sure she was more concerned with getting something to cook than she was with the actual threat anything further posed them. “The room after this one is likely going to be a little easier. There isn’t going to be another powerful monster like this just sitting around.”

“Maybe we should open the chest first?” Arwin suggested, nodding to the stone box beside the pillar that the gargoyle had been hanging off. “We can determine if we press farther or not after we see what’s in it.”

Nobody had any objection to that, so they crowded around the chest. Arwin knelt beside it and studied the latch, trying to figure out how it was locked. They hadn’t been graced with a key, and a lot of chests had traps that would trigger if their locks were broken. But, still, the Mesh rarely offered up prizes that were completely out of reach.

He just had to figure out how to –

Lillia squeezed in beside Arwin, not even bothering to tell him to move. She reached out, grabbing the lock from Arwin’s hands and sending a tendril of shadow into the hole. There was a soft pop a second later and the latch clicked open.

Arwin stared at the lock, not even registering their proximity. “How did you do that?”

“Made a shadow solid,” Lillia replied with a smug grin. She stood back up and brushed her pant legs off as she took a few steps back. “Feel free to open that without keeping me in the blast radius, though. You never know.”

Arwin snorted. He tossed the lock down and pulled the lid of the crate open slightly, squinting to see if there was a thread attached to anything. There didn’t seem to be, so he pulled the lid the rest of the way back.

Resting within the chest was a single dagger, made out of the same material that the gargoyle had been.

Bone Dagger: Average Quality

[Splintered Wrath] (3 Charges): This item was forged from the flesh of a living gargoyle, imbuing it with hatred. It leaves a piece of itself behind with every strike to worm into its victim’s bloodstream and seek out their heart. After all charges have been consumed, this item’s magic will be fully depleted, and it will irreparably shatter.

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“Whoa,” Reya said. “That’s one nasty dagger. Who’d make something like this?”

“I can think of a lot of people,” Rodrick muttered, looking over Arwin’s shoulder at the bone dagger. “Still, that’s a magical weapon. Not the prettiest, but magic is magic. Could probably sell for around a hundred gold, maybe more. If it wasn’t limited uses, it would go for a lot more.”

“Anyone want this?” Arwin asked. “I have a possible use for it, but I don’t know how it’ll turn out.”

“Not me,” Reya said hurriedly. “I want *my* dagger back, not this one.”

Arwin wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or feel flattered by how much Reya liked the dagger he’d given her. It had definitely been quite the weapon, but he was pretty sure he could always make another one.

Not sure if she wants another one, though. I suppose I’ll have to hope the magic was enough to keep it safe in the Wyrms. With any luck, we’ll be able to get it back after the Wyrms leaves – or dies.

“Daggers aren’t of any use to me,” Rodrick said. “I don’t know how to use them. Anna?”

“I prefer to heal, not kill.” Anna’s lips pressed thin in distaste as she shook her head.

“And this dagger is meant for killing people. Not for me.”

“Can’t cook with it. It’ll get bone in the food,” Lillia said with a shrug. “All yours.”

Arwin wasn’t surprised. The dagger hadn’t been something that he thought any of the team would have wanted, but it was still good to check. And, if anything, their refusal to take it was a reassurance.

He’d known far too many people that would have gone for the weapon just so they could sell it. Money was a powerful lure, even when people had everything. A group that only took what they needed and nothing more was a group that would be able to work together for a long time.

Arwin carefully placed the dagger in his bag, making sure to keep it as far from the metal ingots as possible. He closed the bag and straightened back up, nodding to the others.

“Right. Shall we continue on, then? We can take on one more room before calling it for the day and heading back to celebrate our victories.”

The next room wasn't anything of particular interest to anyone other than Lillia. It contained a large, fuzzy monster that the Mesh only identified as a Wiggler. It was really more of a furry cylinder than anything else. Arwin hadn't even been able to figure out which end of the Wiggler had been its head, but it had gone down before it had a proper chance to fight back.

None of them got any Achievements from killing it, a fact which Arwin was somewhat thankful for. If the Mesh was going around handing out Achievements for killing moldy turds, the world would have probably been headed for disaster.

Unfortunately for everyone, the Wiggler had turned out to have a rather fleshy interior that very strongly resembled normal meat. Lillia carved the monster up, then stuffed her arms – and the rest of Arwin's bag – full of its meat. Considering it was the only thing that she was going to take from the dungeon, Arwin didn't complain too much.

The group didn't push their luck any further, not wanting to press so deep into the dungeon that they ran into something they couldn't handle yet. They retraced their steps and made their way back to Milten. Before they returned, Arwin pulled his Ifrit mask back on to hide him from any prying eyes. He dismissed his armor and hammer as well.

As usual, Rodrick and Anna split off once they were inside the city, promising to meet back up with everyone after a few days. The remaining three headed over to Lillia's tavern, only to find that something had changed.

"What in the Nine Underlands?" Lillia asked, nearly tripping over her own feet as she entered the tavern. She managed to catch herself at the last second and Arwin grabbed a piece of Wiggler steak as it fell from her arms to prevent it from falling to the ground.

Not that falling on the ground would have been much of an issue anymore. Someone had gone through the entire tavern and made it *spotless*. It had been relatively clean before, but now it was polished.

Sure, the majority of the building was old and dilapidated, but the worst of the cracked stones had been replaced and repaired. The floor had been swept and the last remnants of dust that had been in the corners was gone.

It was still dark, but the tavern looked... fresh. Ready. Lillia hurried into the kitchen, only to find that it had received a similar treatment. Everything had been wiped off and dusted, and the damaged parts of the walls had been replaced.

"Whoa," Reya said from behind them. "It's almost shiny in here."

Lillia set the pile of steaks in her arms down and turned in a circle. Even in the darkness, Arwin could see the delight on her features.

"What happened?" Lillia breathed, running a hand along the counter. "It's so clean!"

Arwin took the steaks out of his own bag and stacked them beside the pile Lillia had made. He then crouched and squinted at the grout that had been used to patch the walls over. It

was the very same one that he'd used to patch over the smithy, and the stones that had been put into the tavern in place of the damaged ones were identical to the ones he'd bought as well.

"I think Zeke has been busy while we were out," Arwin said, rising back to his feet. He headed out of the kitchen and headed up the rickety staircase to check out the second floor. It was identical to the last time he'd seen it, which only made sense.

There was only so much time in a day, and it would have been impossible for Zeke to singlehandedly repair every single part of the tavern in the hours they were gone. Still, it was a pretty impressive feat.

He must have been working ever since we left to pull this off.

Arwin headed back downstairs, where Lillia was walking around the common room. It was devoid of any tables and still painfully dark, but Arwin could almost picture what it would look like in a few more weeks.

"Zeke did a damn good job," Arwin said.

"He did," Lillia agreed, pulling her gaze away from the walls to look at Arwin. "Where'd he go?"

"Probably the smithy," Arwin replied, picking at the hole in his armor. "Which is where I'm going to head as well. I've got some new toys to play with and new gear to make."

"Let Zeke know I've got a few meals with his name on them, would you?" Lillia asked. "I'll thank him personally whenever he swings around the tavern again. Maybe I'll work on patching up one of those second-floor rooms sooner than I'd planned so he can have a room to himself."

“I suspect he’d appreciate that. You might want to focus a large ice box first, though,” Arwin suggested, glancing at the large stack of meat on the countertop. “Because most of that is going to go bad way before you can use it.”

Lillia paled and nodded. “Yeah, good point. I’ll get on that.”

“I’ll come with you,” Reya volunteered. “I’ve got a little gold, so some shopping would be fun.”

The three all headed out of the tavern, splitting off in their respective directions. Arwin checked the door of the smithy when he got to it. It was locked, but he could hear clangs coming from within it.

Arwin slid the key into the lock and stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind him. Zeke stood at the anvil, hammering away at a rough sword. The hearth flickered with faint light behind him, not nearly as hot as it should have been.

“Having fun there?” Arwin asked with a wry smile.

Zeke glanced up at him, his cheeks coloring. “I’m not using your metal. It’s just scrap I found on the streets.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Arwin said, walking over to join Zeke and depositing his bag in a corner of the room. He studied the sword, tilting his head to the side. Even though it was still rough, it was surprisingly decent looking. Better than his first few attempts at a sword had been.

Beyond that, there were waves in the metal where it looked like two different pieces had been layered over each other. It was far from perfect, and the metal was separating at the seams instead of melding together.

“What were you going for with the kinds of metal you used?” Arwin asked. “Was it just that you couldn’t find enough of the same kind?”

“No. I was trying to layer them,” Zeke said wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of a hand. “My dad would always say layering metal was the best way to make a sword. You use metals of different kinds so you get the best bits of each one, you know? Cuz some metal is springy and other metal is really stiff. So, if you mix them, you can get a balance.”

“Huh,” Arwin said. “Interesting. I’ve seen smiths fold metal together, but I just thought folding it was a way to work it into shape, not to mix different metals to get a better result. I guess it’s almost like cooking.”

Zeke stared at Arwin with doubt in his eyes. “I don’t really think it is.”

Arwin burst into laughter and slapped Zeke on the shoulder. “Perhaps not. I’m flying by the seat of my pants here. You’re doing great, though.”

“Not really,” Zeke grumbled, sending a glance over his shoulder at the hearth. “That’s not hot enough, and we don’t have any oil to quench the stuff we make.”

Oil, no. I’d tell him about my little hole next to the ditch, but I think that might just make things look even worse. Better keep that as a surprise.

“Resources have been tight up until recently,” Arwin said with a sheepish grin. “That will come in time. And getting the hearth hotter is a pretty simple task.”

“I already used the bellows,” Zeke said, crossing his arms. “But it’s way too windy, even with all the repairs. Also, your wood supply is almost entirely gone. How was that thing hot enough to do anything?”

“If you can keep a secret, I’ll show you.”

Zeke’s eyes widened and he nodded without missing a beat.

“Lillia says thank you for all the work you put into the tavern, by the way,” Arwin said as he approached the forge.

“It wasn’t much,” Zeke said, glancing away as his cheeks reddened. “I just wanted to help out a little more. I didn’t have anything better to do with my day anyway.”

“Well, we’ll get that changed soon enough,” Arwin promised. He held his hand up and summoned a ball of [Soul Flame] to it, tossing it into the hearth. The fire roared up, instantly tripling in size.

Zeke’s eyes widened and he rushed forward – though he made sure to keep enough space between himself and the crackling flame to avoid getting burnt.

“Whoa,” Zeke breathed. “You can throw fire?”

“It’s one of the abilities my Smith class got,” Arwin said. “No sharing that, though. I don’t think it’s a big deal, but I don’t want the extra attention, you know?”

“Oh, yeah. I won’t say a word,” Zeke promised. He fidgeted in place, and Arwin could tell he was resisting the urge to look back at his sword.

“Go on,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “Get your sword. Let’s finish it, shall we?”

Zeke didn’t need to be told twice. He grabbed the blade, then carefully edged forward and stuck the first half of the blade into the fire. Arwin took the unfinished piece between two fingers and lifted it into the fire, ignoring Zeke’s yelp of warning.

“It’s my fire,” Arwin said. “It won’t burn me. You’re a different case, though.”

Zeke, who had been moments from sticking his hand into the fire, quickly yanked it back and cleared his throat. “Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. I’ll work the bellows.”

He ran over to the other side of the forge and started to pump air into the fire, causing it to roar even higher. It wasn’t long before the sword had turned a mixture of bright orange and cherry red.

As tempting as it is to whip out Verdant Blaze, I don’t think this is the right spot for it. This is Zeke’s sword, and he can’t use my magic hammer safely. He’ll have to settle for the normal one.

“Go ahead and grab the hammer,” Arwin said. “I trust you can swing it considering you’ve already got this much of the sword made.”

Zeke picked up the black hammer and hoisted it over his shoulder with a grunt, giving Arwin a sharp nod. “I can hold it.”

“Good. Don’t hit my fingers,” Arwin said, bringing the heated sword over to the anvil. “I’ll hold it in place. Get to swinging.”

Zeke grinned, and then the two of them got to work.

Chapter 60

“Tip of the sword, toward the left,” Arwin ordered.

The hammer slammed home with a loud clang, and another shimmer faded from the sword as it continued to come together. Arwin could have finished it a good bit ago if he'd been working on his own, but this wasn't his weapon.

If anything, he was surprised his abilities were still working when he wasn't even the one technically forging the blade. He certainly wasn't going to complain, though. With Arwin's direction, Zeke continued to bring the sword closer to completion.

Every strike made it just a little more whole, and the telltale tingle of the Mesh was already shimmering within the blade. After a few more trips through the hearth and some more work by Zeke, the last of the shimmers faded.

"Perfect," Arwin said. "Do you have wood for the—"

Before he could even finish speaking, Zeke hurried over to the pile of organized supplies and brought back two pieces of a handle that had already been carved into shape. "Made the handle before I started."

"Nice," Arwin said. He nodded to the tang of the blade. "Go on, then. Get it on there. You have anything to fix it in place?"

"Some nails." Zeke slid the pieces of wood around the tang, then pulled several small nails out of his pocket. That wasn't the best spot that Arwin could think up to keep loose nails, but he shrugged.

"That works," Arwin said. "Get to it."

Zeke held one of the nails above the wood and started to tap away at it with the hammer. Arwin helped by holding the handle in place, and Zeke soon had the nail driven all the way through.

They repeated the process for several more nails, and Arwin then broke off the parts of the nails that jutted out the other end of the handle. Zeke procured a strip of leather before Arwin could declare the sword done and wrapped it around the handle in a practiced pattern.

“Done,” Zeke said, stepping back as Arwin hoisted the sword. “We just need to quench it. You don’t have a barrel for that yet, do you?”

“I’ve got something even better,” Arwin said, well aware he was lying straight through his teeth. He took the sword out of the smithy and Zeke followed behind him. The two walked over to a gutter near the ditch, a confused frown on Zeke’s face.

“Where are we going?” Zeke asked.

“Here,” Arwin replied, stopping and pointing at his makeshift quenching spot – a hole in the ground that still had just a quarter foot of still water resting in it. Arwin stuck the sword into the water, squeezing his eyes shut as steam hissed and erupted from the blade as it was brought down to a cooler temperature.

“You can’t be serious,” Zeke said after the bubbles had stopped and the steam had abated. “That can’t count.”

“Tell that to the Mesh,” Arwin said. He rose, pulling the sword free, and picked at the blade with [Scourge] to clean it up for a few minutes. “Now we’re done.”

The Mesh agreed.

[Sword: Average Quality] has been forged.

[Sword: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [Better Together] has been earned.

[Better Together] – *Awarded for crafting your first magical weapon while working with another smith.* Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

Holy shit. I got an achievement for helping him make a sword? Does that mean...

“Nine Underlands,” Zeke exclaimed, staring into the air above Arwin’s shoulder. “I got an Achievement! I don’t even have a class!”

“Not just that,” Arwin said, directing his eyes toward the weapon in his hands. “You made a magical weapon.”

Sword: Average Quality

[Resilient]: This item was forged by two burgeoning smiths, granting it the fortitude of an army. Its blade has been magically sharpened and it will be considerably more difficult to damage or dull by any means.

Zeke nearly choked as he took in the blade. His mouth hung open and disbelief swirled within his eyes.

“What? How? It was just a normal sword!”

“Not anymore,” Arwin said. He set the sword down on the anvil and walked over to his supplies, ruffling through them in search of something he could wrap the sword with. He didn’t have any more spare leather lying around, so he settled for grabbing a piece of canvas.

Wrapping the blade to keep anyone from realizing the weapon was magic, Arwin held it out to Zeke. “Here.”

“What? I can’t take this.”

“Sure you can. You made it.”

“But—”

“It’s yours, Zeke,” Arwin said, pushing it into the boy’s arms. “You made it. I just helped.”

“There’s no way I’d just make a magical weapon by accident,” Zeke said accusingly, but he held onto the sword as Arwin released it. He clutched the weapon to his chest like a baby, unwilling to release it.

“Perhaps not,” Arwin allowed. “But you can keep a secret, can’t you?”

Zeke’s eyes hardened with determination, and he gave Arwin a sharp nod. “I won’t tell a soul. I’ll take this to my grave, I swear. I’ve never had a magical item before.”

“You didn’t just get this,” Arwin reminded Zeke. “You made it. And I’d prefer you keep the sword until you don’t need it anymore and then hand it off to someone else, not get yourself killed, eh?”

“I’ll do my best,” Zeke said with a laugh. He swallowed, his grip tightening on the hilt of the sword and lifting it into the air. “A magic item. I can’t believe it.”

“It’s a sword,” Arwin reminded him. “Be careful with it. You don’t want to—”

Zeke gave the sword a test swing. The blade flew from his hands and Arwin ducked as it spun across the smithy, striking a pot of grout and shattering it with a crash. Zeke yanked his hands back and froze in place.

Arwin’s eye twitched, but he didn’t let his annoyance slip out. Grout wasn’t that expensive. He just shook his head and walked over to the sword, picking it up and wiping the grout off on a bag.

“I – sorry,” Zeke stammered. “I didn’t—”

Arwin spun the sword around and held it out handle-first to Zeke. “Don’t swing this around until you can actually use it.”

Zeke swallowed heavily. “Sorry.”

“Just clean up the mess,” Arwin said, nodding to the grout. “Then you can go show Lillia the sword. She might even show you a trick or two with it – but please don’t swing the damn thing until someone’s supervising you.”

Zeke hurried to comply, not even risking so much as a word. Once he’d cleaned the spilled grout up, he stood awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot and waiting for Arwin to say something.

“Go on. Git,” Arwin said, making a shooing motion. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t, so wipe that look off your face. You can trust anyone in the guild. You’re part of it too, so long as you want to be. Lillia’s got a hot meal waiting for you in the tavern.”

Zeke’s face lit up and he nodded. “I will. Thank you, Ifrit! I’ll never forget this, I swear.”

He hurried out the door, closing it behind him. Arwin expected to hear him sprint away but was instead rewarded with the sound of Zeke picking the lock shut behind him. Grinning, Arwin shook his head as he heard Zeke's hurried footsteps fading in the direction of the tavern.

That puts me at two Achievements that upgrade my skills upon my next level advancement within my tier, as well as the improvement to the next helmet I make. Pretty damn solid, if I do say so myself.

Zeke got himself a pretty good enchantment on that sword, but it makes me wonder. I feel like some of the stuff I've made with similar material and less knowledge turned out better, and I refuse to believe that was entirely due to luck.

Was it because Zeke was the one forging it instead of me, so my abilities didn't activate as much? Perhaps that's for the best, as it would have sucked for him to make a magic weapon with a nasty detrimental trait.

Arwin shrugged to himself and made his way back over to the bag he'd left at the door. One way or another, Zeke would be a good addition to the guild. The kid had his head screwed on right, and his lack of a class was hardly an issue.

Maybe we'll go try to get him one after the Wyrms' babies are dealt with. I don't think it would be safe for him in either the dungeon or the forest right now.

That would come when it came. For now, Arwin had another goal in mind. He needed to make more armor, and he had to replace his chest piece. He had more than enough metal to work with between the remaining two pieces of Brightsteel and the three ingots of the new metal the Mesh had given him.

Let's see. The Brightsteel absorbs shock really well, so it would be a pretty good material to use on the inside of the armor. Maybe I could layer it with the harder metal that the Mesh gave me? I don't see why the technique wouldn't work on armor if it works on a sword.

Before I even start with that, I don't want to just walk around wearing a heavy breastplate with no padding. I should get some leather for the inside and for any parts I need to attach without metal clasps.

Arwin took a moment to do an inventory of his smithy, then headed out for the markets at a brisk pace. It was already late in the evening, and he didn't want to wait until tomorrow to get started on his new project.

Fortunately, Arwin was able to find the leather he needed for ten gold. It ended up taking him considerably more time to walk over to the markets and walk back than it did to actually buy the materials.

Now stocked with everything he needed, Arwin tossed an ingot of Brightsteel into the forge. Once it got hot enough, he took it out and set it on the anvil. Arwin then summoned Verdant Blaze and got to work hammering an ingot of Brightsteel out into a sheet. Time flew by, and it didn't take long before Arwin set the large sheet to the side, brushing the flakes of metal off it, and got started on one of the ivory bars.

Every strike he delivered with Verdant Blaze seemed to do twice what it should have and pouring [Soul Flame] into the weapon only increased his forging speed even further. The metal seemed to absorb the heat from the hammer strikes, staying hot for longer than it should have.

It didn't take long for Arwin to have two large sheets of different metals ready and waiting for their next step. He paused for a few moments to consider the design of what he was going for, then used his chisel to separate portions of the sheets away.

Once he'd gotten them to workable sizes, Arwin overlaid the sheets of metal and started hammering once more. Flame coiled at the head of his hammer, flowing around Arwin with every strike.

The temperature in the smithy rose. Sweat poured down his skin as he worked, but Arwin was too focused to stop now. His hammer rang out through the night, each strike bringing him closer and closer to his goal.

Even though the materials he was working with weren't magical, Arwin could still feel them guiding his motions. The metal sensed his desire and matched it, aiding his blows with faint shimmers of energy only visible to him.

As the hours ticked on, the front of a breastplate took form. Arwin still had absolutely no idea if his folding of the two metals had worked, but the faint ripples running through the metal seemed to imply that it had.

Even if it hadn't, he wouldn't truly know until his work was done. Once the front of the breastplate was in roughly the right shape, he moved on to the back half of the armor, repeating the process.

I should bring everything to the spot where it's nearly finished, then wrap it all up at the end. That'll give me more room to modify things if I need to.

In that manner, Arwin continued his work. The back half of the chest piece took form, followed by both pauldrons. He brought every part of the armor to the point where it was the rough shape that it needed to be so he could envision the project as a whole, but he made no moves to put finishing touches on anything.

But, as Arwin studied all the pieces of what would be his armor, he frowned. The base was there – of that, there was no doubt. But... for all the effort he was putting into it, the armor was strikingly plain.

It was beautiful, but it didn't have any flair. And, no matter how much Arwin would argue against it, he had a bit of a flair for the dramatic. Strong armor couldn't just be effective. It had to be cool.

There was definitely something to be said for making a beautiful set of plain armor, but the silvered-ivory mix of metal he had before him was screaming for something more. Arwin's eye caught on a glint sticking out of his belongings and his frown slipped away.

He still had some of the green crystals from the dungeon left over – not to mention the purple gem he'd taken from the orc shaman. Arwin hurried over, scooping some of the crystals up and snagging the circular gemstone. He brought it back over to the armor and set it down on the anvil before holding up one of the gemstones to the pauldrons.

“What do you think?” Arwin mused to himself. “Good extra layer of protection. Maybe a few per pauldron? I don't want to be too shiny.”

A dull, warm hum ran down his fingers, making him drop the crystal. Arwin scrambled, catching it an instant before it could hit the side of the anvil. He stared at it for a second, then let a slow grin cross his lips.

It's my Title, [Stonesinger]. The crystal approves, huh? Well, far be it for me to stand in the way of your destiny. Let's turn you into some armor.

Chapter 61

Tix pulled a seat out across the table from a balding man, sitting down and letting out an exasperated sigh. The rest of the tavern around them was a dull roar of hushed conversations that mixed into a soup that made it impossible to make out anything farther than a few feet away from her ears.

“He refused, Erik. Told me to kick rocks,” Tix said.

“You’re kidding. Did he cut you off before you could say anything?” the bald man asked, pausing to take a sip of ale from his wooden mug. Tix’s throat was parched. She would have ordered something for herself if the tavern had anything other than swill.

“Yeah, he heard it. Said we could wait in line like everyone else.”

“Cocky bastard,” Erik said. “That was a deal to die for. Most smiths would jump at it.”

“Well, not this one.” Tix grimaced at the rough wood digging into her back and shifted, trying to find a way to make herself comfortable on the poorly made chair. “And I don’t think knocking on his door again is going to change anything.”

“That’s fine. He didn’t follow you here, did he?” Erik asked. He wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his head and Tix grimaced again. The room wasn’t even hot. Erik might have been the most terrified man she’d ever met. But, for some reason, Jesson had chosen *him* as second in command of the Iron Hounds.

It makes no sense. This idiot's paranoia isn't even effective. He just jumps at every shadow and thinks everyone's out to kill him. Nobody even knows what your ugly bald face looks like, moron.

“What do you think he is, Erik?” Tix asked, trying to keep her features patient. Stupid or not, Erik was still the second in command of the guild. And, as bad as he was at tactics, he was a filthy good mage. “He’s a smith, not an adventurer. He might make good armor, but he’s not going to start playing detective and track me down after a rejected offer.”

“That’s true. That’s true,” Erik said, almost as if he was trying to convince himself. He nodded along with his words, then licked his lips. After draining the rest of his drink, Erik spoke again. “No matter. There are other smiths. He would have been useful, but we can find someone else.”

That's... surprisingly reasonable of you. Maybe Jessen finally gave you the talk I've been begging him to do.

“How are things going with the Wyrms?” Tix asked, lowering her voice even in spite of the noise in the tavern. Nobody was close to their table and she highly doubted anything would get overheard, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Erik’s features darkened. He peered into his finished mug, then set it on the table and sighed. “Not good. Someone has been trying to screw with us.”

Sure they are. Just like someone was poisoning your food last week. That definitely wasn't because you eat like a pig and forgot to wash your hands after taking a shit.

“How so?” Tix asked. “What’s happening?”

“Jessen’s Wyrms are acting off. It’s barely listening to his orders and has basically been laying around in the forest doing nothing for the past few days. It even snipped at him when he went to try and figure out what’s going on.”

“Maybe it’s having a tantrum. Have you fed it well?”

Erik’s glare bored into Tix’s skull. “It’s in a damn forest full of food. Of course it’s fed. I think it’s been poisoned.”

I’m sure you do.

“Why would anyone bother poisoning a Wyrms?”

“I don’t know,” Erik said with a shrug. He narrowed his eyes and glanced over his shoulder – as if Tix wouldn’t have noticed someone standing right behind him – before leaning in and lowering his voice. “But what if they figured it out?”

“Are you telling me there’s a leak?” Tix did her best to keep from retching at Erik’s hot breath. He stank of carrion and poor beer. “There are three people that know about the Wyrms, Erik. You, me, and Jessen. Which of us do you think went leaking things, when we all have so much to gain from this? Jessen certainly didn’t. It was his idea. And you couldn’t be accusing me of it, could you?”

“I don’t know,” Erik said. “Maybe someone has a way to magically listen in.”

“Right. Someone with magic of that level would definitely be sitting around Milten, spying on Apprentice and Journeyman ranked adventurers,” Tix said dryly. She rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers under Erik’s nose. “Come off it, you idiot. Nobody knows. The Wyrms probably just ate some mushrooms or something. It’s a high tier Journeyman monster. Do you

really think there's poison anywhere in the area that's strong enough to cause it enough of an issue to kill it?"

Erik chewed his lower lip, then grunted an agreement. "Maybe. I don't know. I won't be relaxed until the plan is finished."

Up until the next minor inconvenience pops up and you suddenly get terrified of something new, sure.

"I feel the same," Tix lied. "But just focus up. It'll only be a month until we've finished all of our preparations, and then we'll be so strong that it won't matter."

"Right. You're right," Erik said, shaking his head and letting out another sigh. "Whatever. For now, we're going to need another blacksmith. Go back to the original plans, I suppose."

"Easy enough," Tix said with a shrug. "We've got so many people looking for a decent one that I've got no doubt that we'll find someone smart enough to take us up on the deal in time."

Tix pushed her chair back and rose from the table, making to leave.

"Tix?"

She gritted her teeth and turned back to Erik. "Yes?"

"Deal with the other blacksmith." Erik's eyes were as cold as ice. "We don't need him outfitting the other guilds. There can't be any threats to the plan."

"You're kidding. He's just a random—"

“Deal with him,” Erik snapped. “I don’t want to see him selling on the market again, you hear me? The thieves’ guild said he lived on an abandoned street haunted by some ghost legend, didn’t they?”

“That was a legend,” Tix said, rolling her eyes. “I don’t see how—”

“Nobody will hear anything. It’s far from the rest of the city. Destroy the smith and any stock he’s got, but make sure it can’t be tied back to you. Strike at the right time,” Erik said, cutting Tix off again. “Do you understand?”

Tix’s hands tightened at her sides. One day soon, when Jessen got his head screwed back on the right way, they’d be rid of the fat idiot at the table. But, for now, all she could do was give him a curt nod.

“Understood.”

Arwin hummed to himself as he worked, the clang of his hammer and the roar of the flame filling the air around him. He’d already worked the gemstones deep into the pauldrons, working the metal up and around them to only leave their tips exposed.

The result was a set of ridges that ended in spikes jutting out from the end of the pauldrons, their blackened tips actually heat-treated crystals. Arwin had worked some of the crystal into the chest and back as well.

He’d quenched every piece of armor as he’d made it and was now onto the last part – the front of the chest piece. He could feel everything coming together, but it still wasn’t quite there.

Even as he smoothed out the metal and coaxed it to its finished state, there was one final piece missing. Fortunately, he was pretty sure he knew what it was.

The purple crystal that he'd taken from the Orc Shaman had been whispering at the back of his mind, waiting for its time. And now that he'd finished just about every other piece of the chest plate and could hear the Mesh tingling at his fingertips, he was ready for it.

Arwin didn't know the proper way to slot a gem into armor. He was pretty sure there was a more elegant way to do it than sticking the entire piece into the flame and using [Scourge] to shove the stone in and push metal over its top, but that was the only way he knew – and so that was what he did.

He smoothed the rough edges of the metal around the gem out, then shifted it slightly to the side to make sure it was centered right in the middle of his chest. The fire dulled the sheen of the gem to a faint purple that was only an inch past grey, but that suited him just fine. If anything, it suited the ivory armor even better.

The forging was complete – but Arwin wasn't finished. He grabbed his Forest Lizard Scale Mail and tossed it into the [Soul Flame] burning within the hearth, letting it join the newly finished piece.

Tingles raced down Arwin's arms and neck, but the Mesh held off as if it could sense what he was doing. In all likelihood, it probably could. Arwin extended his senses to the flames, and they responded instantly.

A tiny mote of glowing light lifted out of the scale mail, so faint that he could barely see it within the fire. It drifted out, then sank into the new plate armor he'd just made. Grinning, Arwin reached into the fire and took the armor out, setting it on the anvil to cool.

He'd already cut some leather into the right shapes, so Arwin hammered it in place with some pins he'd made. He returned the armor to the fire briefly, just to make sure everything was completely set, and then finally laid it out once more.

The Mesh surged, finally freed from its reins, and flooded into the armor with such intensity that Arwin had to yank his hands back to avoid getting burned. Energy swirled before him and twisted into golden letters.

Ivory Executioner Armor: Unique Quality

[Resonant]: The crystals buried within this armor sing with every magical attack it takes, absorbing a small amount of the attack's energy and storing it within the gem at its center. When the gem has filled, the bearer of this armor can infuse its power into their next attack.

[Smelted Fury]: This item was born again within the flames of [Soul Flame]. The wearer of this item gains heat resistance. Upon being struck, this item may forcibly draw magical energy and release a whip of [Soul Flame] at the attacker.

[Unique]: Once donned, this item will bond with its owner. It will change sizes so long as material permits to fit them perfectly, and anyone else who attempts to wear it may suffer retaliation. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

It possesses [1] concealed property.

Arwin wished he could use [Arsenal] to bond with the armor on the spot, but it was still bound to his old Scale Mail armor. He broke the bond and the ability instantly deactivated,

turning itself off for the remainder of the day. That was fine – Arwin didn't plan to let the armor out of his sight any time soon.

He scooped it up with a huge grin, already anticipating testing the armor out on their next trip to the dungeon. There was still a lot of metal left to work with, so he could make a helm next. After that could come gauntlets and boots – and then he'd have a full set.

I kind of want to hide this until the dungeon. That might be a bit petty of me, but the looks on everyone's faces will be so much better if I can pull out a whole set.

Arwin stuffed the armor into a tarp bag, then adjusted his mask and left the smithy to return to the tavern, humming to himself as he pictured what his full set of armor would look like. This was going to be a good week.

Chapter 62

The next week passed quietly, and Arwin enjoyed every second of it. He managed to keep his new armor hidden until he could bond to it, but he ended up spending considerably more time than he'd planned to helping Lillia and Zeke refurbish the tavern.

They rebuilt a large portion of the second floor, getting two more rooms into a usable state. Rodrick and Anna both moved into her tavern with almost no hesitation, taking one of the rooms so Zeke could have the other.

Lillia added a proper bathroom at the back of the tavern through a door that she and Zeke installed, and Arwin spent most of his time polishing the smithy up even further or planning his next armor sets.

The entire group – Zeke excluded, of course – made another dungeon run midway through the week and sold everything they’d gotten for a tidy profit. Arwin then used all the money he’d just earned to buy more metal to work with.

A good portion of that metal had gone into making two magical swords that Arwin had eaten throughout the week to keep [The Hungering Maw] at bay, but weapons weren’t currently his focus.

He made several drafts for a helmet, but none of them sat quite right with him and they were scrapped. Several of them felt like they would have turned out magical, but none of them felt *right*.

When he wasn’t working on figuring out how to make his helm, Arwin spent his time in the smithy forging new sets of armor to sell at the market. He was out of lizard scales for the time being, but armor was still armor.

Arwin also found himself spending far more time with Zeke than he’d initially planned. While he’d just wanted the boy to occasionally help him tidy a few things up and give some slight help while smithing, he ended up letting Zeke work the forge nearly as much as he did.

They invested in an oil barrel, and the two of them worked together on more sets of plain armor than Arwin made himself. Zeke’s snippets of memory paired with Arwin’s pushed the two further, and the boy was a fast learner on top of everything.

“You know what your helmet is missing?” Zeke asked on the night of the last day of the week.

Arwin glanced up from the half-finished helm in his hands, well aware that it was nothing like what he wanted it to be. “No. What?”

“It’s not cool enough,” Zeke said.

“Not cool enough?” Arwin’s brow furrowed. “I need an effective helm, not a cool one. I mean, cool is good to, but the most important part is that it does its job.”

“Sure, but nobody is going to be scared of you if you show up with a bunch of crystals jutting out of your heads like a weird porcupine,” Zeke said with a laugh. “I think armor is more than just what it does, you know? It’s what it looks like. It’s almost like fashion, but fashion that protects you.”

Arwin glanced down at the crystal he’d wedged into the top of the helm and cleared his throat. Zeke had a point. He tugged the crystal out and sighed, shaking his head.

“Okay, you’ve got a point. I see where you’re coming from,” Arwin said. “But I don’t know how I’m supposed to make a helmet look cool.”

I wonder what he’d think of my new Ivory Executioner armor. It’s too early to show it off, though. I need the helm at the bare minimum. It’s just an unfinished set right now.

“Horns?” Zeke offered.

“Why would I want horns? Where would I get those in the first place?”

“Not real ones. You could make ‘em,” Zeke said. “Think about it. Demons have horns. All the really big monsters have horns. They’re scary.”

“Okay, I can agree to that,” Arwin said. “But do you really think the reason none of the helms are turning out the right way is because they don’t look cool enough?”

Zeke shrugged. “It’s your magic, not mine. I dunno. I just think that if something doesn’t look the way you want it to, how can it act the way you want it to?”

“I guess appearance and ability can be two halves of the same coin when you’re talking about pure armor,” Arwin said slowly, tapping a finger against his chin. “I was just thinking that magic should make that irrelevant. As long as the helm is made properly, shouldn’t it work regardless?”

Zeke shrugged once more. He turned back to the hearth, where he had a metal ingot heating. They’d invested in some normal coal and a new bellows for Zeke so he could work while Arwin wasn’t actively working, and the hearth was currently crackling with normal flame. Using a pair of tongs that Arwin had bought him, Zeke brought the ingot over to the anvil.

“It’s magic. I don’t know how it works,” Zeke said. “But maybe it’s because you aren’t telling the magic what you want, so it’s confused?”

That’s not possible. I’m literally speaking with the metal. Stonesinger lets me communicate with magical materials as well. It knows exactly what I –

Arwin blinked, a frown slipping across his features.

Wait. When did my mindset shift like this? I started by listening to the metal and helping it become what it wanted to be, but now I’m telling it what it should be. Shouldn’t the real answer be somewhere in the middle? I should be finding materials that actually want to be a helmet, and then I should be asking them to form into what I want, not just telling them.

“Shit,” Arwin said, looking at his helm and shaking his head. “I turned into an arrogant ass and I didn’t even realize it.”

“What? You didn’t do anything like that,” Zeke protested. “I just meant–”

“No, you’re fine,” Arwin said with a laugh. “I didn’t mean that in regard with what you were saying. You just made me realize something really important. Thanks, Zeke.”

“I did?” Zeke raised his gaze from the metal rod to find Arwin’s old hammer, then grinned. “Well, you’re welcome, I guess. I’m just a genius.”

Arwin chuckled. “Don’t get too excited. I can just be a bit nearsighted sometimes. Either way, I appreciate it.”

“You want the forge now?” Zeke asked. “I can do this later.”

“Nah. You already started working, so I won’t get in the way,” Arwin said. “It would be rude. The forge is all yours tonight. I’ll probably head back to the tavern and help Lillia on the second floor again. We’re pretty close to getting a third room functional.”

“Okay,” Zeke said. “I’ll head in later, then. And I’ll make sure to lock the smithy up, don’t worry.”

“I didn’t,” Arwin said with a chuckle. “Don’t stay up too late. That’s my thing, and I don’t like sharing. You need some rest.”

“Why?” Zeke asked. “A few hours a night is more than enough.”

“Not if you’re hunting monsters.”

“Hunting monsters? I’m not–” Zeke cut himself off, his eyes going wide with realization. “Wait. We’re going to go get a class for me? I was hoping I’d get the blacksmith one, but the Mesh hasn’t recognized anything I made yet.”

Arwin had been hoping the same thing, but Zeke had been in the forge and had helped with enough magical items by now to make it clear that smithing wasn't necessarily his final calling.

"We are," Arwin said with a nod. "So long as you want to, of course. I won't force anything."

"Are you kidding? Damn right I want to!" Zeke exclaimed, nearly dropping his tongs in his excitement. He hurriedly adjusted his grip on the hot metal, sending Arwin a sheepish look. "Sorry."

"Just focus on your work," Arwin said, setting the unfinished helmet on the ground at the corner of the room. "And remember what I said. Don't stay up too late."

Zeke nodded absently, but Arwin could tell the boy wasn't paying attention as he headed out of the smithy and locked the door behind himself. If Arwin was honest, he couldn't blame Zeke. There was something enrapturing about the feeling of creating something.

A small shiver of desire ran down Arwin's spine.

I want to make my helmet. Not now, though. I'll wait. Zeke's already doing something, and he's been helping me out all day. He deserves a chance to use the smithy. I'll just occupy myself helping Lillia out and then sleep until tomorrow.

Arwin was ripped from his sleep by a deafening crash. He flew from his bed, his armor slamming into place around him as his hammer materialized in his hands. Visions of past

battlefields flashed through his mind and tightened his chest, and he spun, searching for enemies in the shadows.

He sprinted out of his room, the last vestiges of sleep gone by the time he took the second step, and raced down the stairs. Lillia was already in the common room, swirls of darkness gathered at her back and a Minor Imp standing at her side.

The windows, which they'd still been in progress of replacing, were covered by large tarps that blocked view of the street.

“What in the Nine Underlands was that?” Lillia’s eyes darted around the room; her lips peeled back just enough to reveal fangs. Her eyes seemed to gaze into the same past that Arwin saw at the edges of his own vision.

“No damn idea,” Arwin said. His chest felt tight, but he didn’t give himself time to consider it. “It wasn’t the tavern. We’d be smoldering by now if it was.”

Light poured into the entrance of the tavern, though it didn’t make it deep into Lillia’s magical darkness. Confusion passed over Arwin’s features.

It’s the middle of the night. Why is it so damn bright?

Arwin stepped past Lillia, trying to get a look into the street – and froze as he saw where the light was coming from. Fire twisted and smoke rose into the air from the shattered remains of his smithy.

He burst into a run. Lillia yelled something behind him, but Arwin didn’t even hear it. He skidded to a stop before the broken remains of his door, burnt black by intense flame – flame far too intense to have been created by any mundane means.

Arwin's ears rang as he charged through the flame, ignoring the heat as it burned his skin. He wasn't resistant to this like he was to [Soul Flame], but the heat resistance from his armor was enough to let him tolerate the inferno.

He coughed as he pushed through the smoke, moving more from memory than from sight as he staggered into the smithy.

"Zeke!" Arwin roared. "Where are you?"

There was no response. Arwin's foot hit the anvil and he cursed in pain, doubling over as a coughing fit gripped him. His head spun at the intensity of the thick smoke pouring into his lungs, but he didn't care.

He crawled, his hands desperately searching across the ground. "Zeke! Say something!"

A form took shape near the corner of the room, just barely visible from the light of the flame in the rapidly deteriorating room. Arwin scrambled toward it, squinting as his eyes stung and watered from the acrid smoke.

"Zeke!" Arwin yelled, coughing and grabbing at the body. It was burnt black and almost unrecognizable. Metal rang out as it rolled across the ground, inadvertently pulled free of the body's grip.

Arwin's breathing sped up even as the world seemed to slow around him, his throat constricting as a shape took form in the shadows. A helmet, with two pieces of metal jutting out of the top. It was unfinished, but Arwin knew what they were.

Horns.

“Arwin!” Lillia’s voice rang through the darkness, muted by the roar of the flames and the thick smoke.

Clawed hands dug into Arwin’s arm as Lillia’s Lesser Imp found him and let out a screech, but he didn’t even notice. He couldn’t comprehend the scene before his eyes, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away either.

“Arwin!” Lillia yelled, choking and coughing on the smoke as she stepped out of the flames.

She froze as she saw the body, but a cracking support beam spurred her back into motion. She grabbed Arwin, yanking him to his feet. “We need to move! The building is collapsing!”

Arwin didn’t respond. Lillia grabbed him under the arms and yanked him back into the flames, dragging him toward the door. All Arwin could do was stare into the consuming fire as Lillia pulled him away and the smithy collapsed all around him, the roaring flames drawing shut like curtains on a cruel play.

Chapter 63

Flames danced in Arwin’s eyes long after the smithy had burned to the ground and the consuming inferno that had swallowed it dwindled to embers and ash. The world transformed into a muted swirl of dimming color and sound.

He vaguely recalled the others around him, but none of their words so much as reached his ears. It just sounded like mumbles beneath the ocean, lost within the crash of the waves. Arwin remembered getting pulled away from the street and into the darkness of the tavern. He didn’t know who the guiding hands belonged to, and he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Even in the darkness, flame still crackled in Arwin's mind. The explosion rang through his mind over and over again, always ending with the same scene in the end. It burned itself into his mind, one more death to join legions of others.

And yet, this one wasn't the same. The adventurers had known the risks that awaited them. They'd entered the battle for money, glory, and power. They'd been *prepared* to die.

Zeke hadn't. The boy had barely even started to live. He hadn't had a class. He'd barely just joined the guild and gotten off the streets. And now he was a charred corpse in a broken building, beyond the reaches of even the strongest magic.

Over and over, the scene ran through Arwin's mind. He couldn't seem to shake it from his mind. Time passed, but it was hard to tell how long. The darkness of the tavern was a blanket, swallowing up the hours and leaving him with peaceful nothing.

Nobody was trying to say anything anymore – of that, Arwin was thankful. He didn't need words. He didn't want words. Words would change nothing.

He wasn't sure what *would* change anything. Nothing he could do would ever bring Zeke back. There was no magic in the world that could raise the dead in true. There was no number of people he could kill that would undo what had happened.

The darkness didn't carry any answers for him, but it didn't ask for them either. It simply accepted and waited.

At some point, Arwin became aware of a presence in the dark with him. He wasn't sure when it had arrived or how long it had been there. It simply sat in silence. In some odd way, even though not a word was said, Arwin took solace in its presence.

But, as it always did, time continued to pass. A single mote of heat swirled in the sea of shadow, keeping him grounded. The visions of embers faded to memory, and Arwin could sit still no longer. He didn't know how long it had been, but it couldn't have been more than a few days because [The Hungering Maw] had yet to activate.

For the first time, Arwin turned toward the other presence in the room beside him. Even in the darkness, he recognized Lillia's features – and he recognized the look in her eyes. It was the very same one that was within his own.

“I know,” Lillia said simply, and Arwin knew she did. If there was anyone else in the world who knew what it felt like to lose and lose, to watch their allies vanish before their eyes until only they remained, it was her.

The mote of heat that had accompanied him through the dark was her hand, laid over his. A lifeline, possibly not just for him but for the both of them. Arwin drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly as a deep anger burned within his chest, begging for him to let it free. To destroy.

“That was an attack,” Arwin said, his voice raspy as he broke the silence. “Magical fire. Someone was trying to kill me. I should have been in the forge. Zeke offered to let me use it, but he'd started on something—”

“It isn't your fault,” Lillia said, her hand tightening around his. “You didn't kill him.”

“I know that,” Arwin said, his teeth grinding against each other as he fought to keep his breathing under control. “But someone did, Lillia. They tried to kill me, and they got him instead.”

“It will not go unanswered,” Lillia promised, and a flash of the demon queen that Arwin had once known passed through her features. “Zeke was innocent. He didn’t deserve this.”

“Nobody ever does,” Arwin said. For some reason, the only thing keeping his growing anger in check was the warmth of Lillia’s hand against his.

“Could it have been the Adventurer’s Guild?” Lillia asked. “There’s no way they found us, is there?”

Arwin dug through his memories – and one stuck out instantly. He hadn’t made any enemies since the fight with Lillia. The guild shouldn’t have had any way to know where he was. There were only two groups of people that even knew where he lives, not counting the members of his own guild.

The first was the thieves’ guild. There was a chance they were the ones that had attacked, but he doubted it. If they’d had access to the destructive magic that had been used to destroy the smithy, they would have used it when he’d attacked their own base.

No, it hadn’t been them. And, if it wasn’t the thieves’ guild, then there was only one other person that knew where he lived.

Tix. The woman that had invited him to her guild to monopolize his work. She’d even bought armor from him before. She hadn’t struck Arwin as the type of person to attempt a murder, but he didn’t care about what her motives had been.

She was the only possible one who could have wanted him dead and known where he lived. And, if her vile guild had been responsible, then Arwin could guess why as well. They had

wanted him to exclusively sell to them. So, when he'd rejected their offer to join, they'd tried to make sure he could never sell to anyone.

"You know," Lillia said. "Who did it?"

"A guild called the Iron Hounds," Arwin said. "The ones that came trying to recruit me."

"You're sure?"

"I strongly suspect. They were the only ones that had any reason to dislike me. And, other than the local thieves' guild, they were the only ones that knew where I lived. They must have come to the smithy, heard someone working in it, and assumed that it was me." Arwin's voice broke and his brow tightened in anger.

"Then they will die," Lillia said. "We'll kill all of them."

It was so tempting to agree. Arwin nearly dragged Lillia out of the house then and there to track down the Iron Hounds, but a tiny portion of his mind voiced itself. And, to Arwin's infuriation, it was just loud enough to give him halt.

"Not yet," Arwin ground out.

Lillia stared at Arwin in disbelief. "What? You're just going to let them go? After what they did?"

"No," Arwin said. "The ones that killed Zeke will die. Their guild is large, though."

"So what?" Lillia demanded. "Both of us have slaughtered entire legions. I think we can handle a godspitten group of fucking murderers."

“I’m sure we could,” Arwin snapped. “And what if some of them aren’t murderers? Did we even know what our own armies were doing? How can we assume that the ones at the bottom of the guild knew about what the others did? Will we orphan more children? Slaughter more friends? How do we know, Lillia?”

Lillia froze in place, the anger creasing her brow flickering with shock. “I – but, they’re a guild. They should know. They work together.”

“Then why didn’t we know?” Arwin demanded. “We led entire armies that didn’t even follow our command. They may not have even been following our orders, and we knew nothing. If it was that bad there, how do we know it isn’t the same here?”

Lillia’s jaw clenched. Her hand lifted from Arwin’s slightly, but she stopped before breaking contact and let it sink back down as she cursed under her breath. “Shit. What the hell are we supposed to do then, Arwin? I don’t care how much blood I have to spill. I’m not leaving things as they lie.”

“We find out who did this,” Arwin said. “We figure out who they worked for, and everyone related to Zeke’s death. Then we kill them. Every. Single. One. Maybe it’ll be the entire guild. Maybe it’ll just be Tix. I don’t know, and I don’t care. The ones responsible will die, but nobody else. I won’t tarnish Zeke’s afterlife with anything but the blood of the ones that killed him.”

“You’re right,” Lillia said. The shadows twisted around her, betraying the fury and loss she felt, but the only thing in her eyes was cold determination. “Together, then.”

“Together,” Arwin agreed without even a flicker of hesitation. If there had ever been even the slightest speck of doubt remaining in him about Lillia, it had long since vanished.

The former Hero of Lian and Demon Queen would ride together.

Chapter 64

Arwin and Lillia didn't spend much time ruminating on their decision before a problematic thought struck both of them at roughly the same time. There was only so far that righteous fury could take them. What they needed was power – something that crafting classes were hardly known for.

“How are we supposed to take on an entire guild?” Lillia asked. “I can fight a few people in Apprentice Tier, but from that explosion... they have to have at least one Journeyman level member. Probably more.”

“With gear,” Arwin replied. “I'll make armor for both of us. A weapon too, if you need it. Something enough for us to challenge the Journeyman level members as long as we catch them alone. We can't storm into their guildhall, but we can take them one at a time.”

“Armor would work for you, but I don't think it's something I can rely on anymore,” Lillia said bitterly. “I'm an innkeeper, Arwin. I don't have the strength that you do as a blacksmith, much less what I used to have. I won't be able to move in anything heavy enough to let me survive an attack.”

“I'll work around it,” Arwin said firmly. “I'll make chainmail, or I'll make armor with magic that makes it lighter. I have to, I'll figure out how to work leather. We can't bring the rest of the guild into this.”

“They're not ready for it,” Lillia agreed. She swallowed, a wave of emotion passing over her features. Arwin said nothing as she gathered herself, keeping the pain buried beneath the

surface and refusing to let it seep out. Lillia had been there for him in the dark, and he would return the favor. “We will be. If you can make me armor—”

“I can.”

“Then we’ll kill them together,” Lillia said. “And we’ll do it before they can destroy any more lives. We’ll rebuild the smithy or find enough of it for you to work with – at least until we can take the rest of what we need from the ones that killed Zeke.”

“At least we won’t have to worry much about the guards given what I’ve heard about them,” Arwin said with a flat, emotionless smile. “We have to do this the right way, but I’m not letting a single person walk free.”

Lillia nodded. She let out a slow breath and rose to her feet, keeping her hold of Arwin’s hand and pulling him up beside her. The darkness in the corner of the room shifted and a Lesser Imp emerged from within it, holding a burnt metal helm in its hands.

“I had one of my imps grab this,” Lillia said, taking the helm and holding it out to Arwin. “I thought you might want it.”

Arwin’s throat tightened as he took the helmet in one hand. He swallowed, blinking hard. “Thank you.”

Lillia just nodded. “I suppose we have to leave now. It’s been a while, and the others are probably worried. I haven’t been cooking recently.”

“Yeah,” Arwin said, nodding once. “Thank you.”

“You already said that.”

“That was for the helmet.”

Arwin released her hand, taking one last moment to steady himself. The darkness around them peeled back just enough for Arwin to recognize that he was in Lillia's room. They walked out together, stepping back into the main room of the tavern.

Reya, who sat between Anna and Rodrick at the counter, looked up at them. She started to rise from her chair, then stopped halfway up, her shoulders hunching.

"I tried to clean the smithy up a little," Reya said, staring down at the counter. "I tried to find Zeke's body, but—"

"He already just about the best burial I think we could have given him. It's hard to beat a pyre," Arwin said, his jaw clenched. "That's more than what the people that did this to him will get."

"I'll help you find them," Reya said.

"No," Arwin said. "This isn't your fight."

"Are you kidding?" Reya demanded, pounding a fist against the counter. "What, do you think I didn't care about him? He joined the guild! He was one of us!"

"And I don't want you joining him in the afterlife," Arwin snapped. "You aren't ready to go against a real guild, Reya. I'm not going to lose you too."

"A guild?" Reya asked, taken aback – but only for an instant. Her eyes narrowed. "The ones that came after you. The Iron Hounds?"

"Don't," Arwin said softly. "Lillia and I are going to handle this ourselves. You can help from the back, but I don't want you on the frontlines. Not this time."

“Why not? I know how to fight. I’ve got a class! I’m not just going to sit around while you take revenge!” Reya yelled, striding up to Arwin, the hurt clear in her eyes. “You aren’t the only one that cared!”

“I know that,” Arwin snarled. “Do you think your class is going to save you, Reya? Do you know how many people I’ve seen die with stronger classes than you? Do you know how many of them I’ve killed myself?”

“I—”

“Hundreds,” Arwin said, not giving Reya a chance to speak. “I’ve watched men die avenging their partners. I’ve seen parents die for their children and children die for their parents. Their classes didn’t fucking matter. Everyone dies the same with a piece of steel through their head – especially ones that only got their class a short while ago!”

Reya took a step back, a flicker of fear passing over features. Arwin realized that his tone had been steadily raising into a yell, but it was too late to take his words back now.

“What kind of smith are you?” Reya demanded. “Why do you talk like you were a soldier? What did you do?”

“I killed,” Arwin replied, letting out an explosive breath. “That’s all that matters.”

“Fine,” Reya snapped. “Keep your stupid secrets and keep letting your enemies kill all of us. Maybe you can come get revenge for the rest of us after we all get killed too.”

Reya spun and stormed out of the building without another word. Arwin made to go after her, but Anna stepped in front of him and shook her head.

“Not right now, Arwin,” Anna said. “I’ll speak with her, but you have to understand how she feels. I know why you’re keeping her out of this, but you’re keeping her from getting revenge for a friend.”

“Revenge doesn’t heal wounds. It just make sure that someone can’t make more of them,” Arwin said.

“Spoken like someone who’s taken it before. She hasn’t,” Anna said. “And I know you’re trying to protect her from that, but shield her too hard and she’ll set out on her own instead of doing it with you.”

“What do you want me to do?” Arwin demanded. “She’s not ready for this.”

“For now? Nothing. I told you, I’ll speak with her,” Anna said, putting a hand on Arwin’s shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. “She’s hurting. Just like you are.”

Anna turned and headed out in pursuit of Reya. Arwin watched her leave, his jaw clenched so tightly that the muscles in his face ached.

What am I supposed to do? I can’t let anyone else die. Not now. I don’t think I could take it.

“Reya didn’t mean what she said,” Rodrick said as he slipped down from his stool. “Anna will handle her, don’t worry. We’re all mad about this. I don’t know what your background is, Arwin, but I’ve seen men like you before – and they never spoke about what they used to do. Just... don’t forget we’re here, okay? Anna and I joined this guild because you seemed like you cared. Don’t get so caught up in protecting people that you forget to let them grow.”

Arwin let out a heavy sigh, wishing that there was something he could punch in the area. “I know. If Reya shows back up while I’m working, can you tell her to come speak to me? And please keep an eye out. I don’t know if those Iron Hound bastards will come back, but if they do, I don’t want anyone else dying.”

“Oh, I will,” Rodrick said, his features as cold as ice. “I assume you plan to pretend to be dead?”

“Yeah,” Arwin said. “At least until I can start hunting the Iron Hounds, they need to believe they succeeded.”

“What about the Wyrms problem?”

“That’s still over a month away,” Arwin said, anger sparking within his chest before he snuffed it once more. “And if you think I’ll let the bastards that did this live that long, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Rodrick gave Arwin a nod and stepped past him, heading toward the door. He paused right outside the tavern, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Make it painful,” Rodrick said. “Zeke was a good kid, but I know I’m not strong enough to handle anyone that could blow up an entire building. Anna and I pooled some funds to help you recover, and we’ll do anything we can to help from the sidelines. Just... promise you’ll help us get strong enough to fight alongside you at some point. I hate sitting around doing nothing.”

“You will,” Arwin said. “I swear it.”

“Good,” Rodrick said. “Send them to the Ninth Underland for me. I’ll make sure Anna and Reya are okay. I don’t think it’s a good idea to travel without protection right now.”

With that, Rodrick stepped out of view. Arwin and Lillia were left in the darkness of the tavern, staring out into the light pouring through the doorway.

“I’ll help you make the armor,” Lillia said. “I don’t know how much I can do, but I want to be involved if I can.”

“I’ll find something for you to do,” Arwin promised, the knot in his stomach growing tighter as his thoughts drifted to Reya. He hadn’t handled that conversation well. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt even more of his friends. “I’ll probably need materials, and parts of the smithy will have to be rebuilt if I’m going to do anything with it. I don’t know what’s left.”

“Maybe that’s something we can all help with,” Lillia offered. “It would give the others something to do so they don’t feel like they’re being completely sidelined.

That was a good idea – and it was one Arwin wished he’d had just a few minutes earlier. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do anything to wind back time. All he could do was forge onward.

“That could work,” Arwin said, looking out into the daylight pouring through the doorway. “Let’s go. We have work to do, and I’m not going to sleep properly until this is done.”

They stepped out into the street, heading to the remains of the smithy. Arwin had armor to create, and he was going to start with the burnt helmet clenched in his white-knuckled grip. He hadn’t thought that he’d have to kill after he became a smith.

Now he just hoped he’d be able to stop.

Chapter 65

The smithy was not in good shape. That really shouldn't have been much of a surprise, but it hurt Arwin more than he cared to admit to see the building in smoldering shambles. All the materials that he'd bought to repair it had been completely ruined.

Pots had cracked and stone had been burnt and cracked. The wolf pelt was nothing more than a scorch mark on the ground and the hearth had crumbled to bits. Even his tools hadn't been spared. The heat of the flame had been so intense that their metal had warped and bent, becoming unusable.

Lillia walked beside Arwin as he waded through the soot, trying to see if he could find anything salvageable in the ruins. The Iron Hounds had taken care to make sure to make sure nothing within the smithy would survive.

Several melted chunks of metal marked the sets of armor that he'd forged to sell at the market. They'd bent in on themselves and had been buried under a layer of brick that had collapsed on top of the hot metal.

Arwin still collected them, handing the dirtied chunks to Lillia who set them on the street, safely out of the wreckage. Unfortunately, his hearth had been completely destroyed. The bellows had gone with it, though the anvil had survived.

It was too heavy to lift easily with his normal strength, so Arwin used [Scourge] to pry the huge chunk of metal out of the wreckage and lug it over to the street himself. He set it down with a clang, then straightened with a grimace. His hands and legs had been stained pitch black by all the soot.

"There should be more pieces of metal somewhere here," Arwin said as he waded back into the smithy's remains. "Let me know if you see anything."

Lillia nodded, and the two of them got back to searching. Nearly an hour passed before they'd gone through everything about as well as they were going to be able to without literally diving through the soot.

They managed to rescue several sheets of the ivory metal and Brightsteel as well as a warped ingot of Brightsteel that Arwin had bought to make the suits of armor he'd planned to sell on the market. Everything else had been lost to the flames.

"What do we do with this?" Lillia asked. "Get rid of the soot and try to rebuild the smithy here?"

"No. Not yet," Arwin said. "If the Iron Hounds send anyone to check on the smithy, they'll obviously think something is up if the smithy is rebuilt. We leave it as is. I'll move the anvil to another building. We can rebuild after the Iron Hounds have been dealt with."

Lillia nodded. "What building, then?"

"Something far from the tavern," Arwin said. "I don't want anyone getting caught up in another attack if the Iron Hounds do end up coming back and figuring out I survived."

They looked over the surrounding buildings. They all looked like pretty basic shopfronts or plain houses, with nothing particularly distinctive about any of them.

"The one at the side over there should work," Arwin said, nodding to a dilapidated building with a caved in window and rickety door. "As long as the inside isn't completely ruined, that is."

He headed across the street and pulled the door open carefully to avoid accidentally ripping the rotting piece of wood off its weakened and rusted hinges. It only had a single room,

and whatever furniture may have been within it at one point had all been broken, stolen, or rotted away.

Piles of mush and rot were strewn across the ground, but the walls looked mostly steady. There were only a few cracks that let light filter through, and it didn't look like the building was going to cave in any time too soon.

An image of the repaired smithy flitted through Arwin's mind. Compared to it, this new building was a complete dump – but that would change soon enough. For now, this one would suit his purposes.

“Yeah. This one,” Arwin said. “I doubt it's going to muffle what I'm doing much, but there's not really a way to work quietly unless I somehow got deep underground, and I don't think that's possible with our current resources.”

“Probably not,” Lillia agreed. “Where are you going to put the fire, though? The whole building is wood.”

“I'll take the stones that aren't completely ruined and try to build an area for it. It isn't going to be perfect, but I don't need a chimney because I'm working with [Soul Flame] rather than normal flame, and it doesn't send up smoke since there's nothing to burn.”

Lillia nodded, and the two of them headed back outside to start bringing in the pieces that they'd rescued from the ruined smithy into Arwin's new workshop. That took considerably less time than finding them, and they soon had a pile of what amounted to garbage surrounding an anvil transferred into Arwin's new workshop.

He and Lillia stood in silence at the entryway, staring at all that remained of everything he'd built over the recent days. Drawing in a deep breath, Arwin closed his eyes and steadied himself as he exhaled.

“Right. Let's get to work. We have a lot to do,” Arwin said. “Starting with making a spot for the hearth. I'm going to need some grout for the stones.”

“Do you have any gold?” Lillia asked. “Or was it... you know.”

“In the fire? No. I kept it on me,” Arwin said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out several pouches. “I was going to the market so often that I figured it was easier than taking it on and off constantly. I've got ninety. Enough to get some grout. We can use brick from the smithy to save costs there. I think I'll need all the coin I can get for materials in the coming days.”

“I'd accompany you to the market, but...” Lillia trailed off and glanced at her tail. “I don't think that would go well.”

“Probably not. It's fine. Just keep an eye on the street and make sure we don't have anyone rooting around where they shouldn't be. I won't wear my mask for now – I don't think anyone from the Iron Hounds should recognize me without it other than Tix, and she doesn't think I'm the smith. At least, I'm pretty sure she doesn't.”

Lillia pursed her lips. “I'm not sure if that's a good risk to take. It might be better to send someone else.”

“Like who?” Arwin asked. “Everyone is—”

“Right here,” Reya finished.

Arwin spun toward the door. He'd been so distracted with his work that he hadn't noticed not just Reya, but also Anna and Rodrick walking up on the street behind them.

Damn it. I can't afford to be this damn distracted. I'm going to get us killed at this rate.

"Ah," Arwin said intelligently. He glanced over his shoulder at the soot-smearred metal behind him, then back over to the rest of his guild. "How long were you there?"

"I'll get the grout," Rodrick volunteered. "Anna can come with me."

"Then I'll make something for everyone to eat," Lillia said, looking from Reya to Arwin. "Let me know when I can help again."

Arwin nodded absently and tossed a bag of gold to Rodrick. "There."

"I'll bring back the change," Rodrick said, tucking the bag into his waistband and heading off with Anna at his side. Lillia slipped past Arwin and out of the building, leaving him alone within it.

Reya stood on the street across from him. For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Then Arwin sighed and stepped back, gesturing for her to follow him. "Come on. Let's talk."

After a moment of hesitation, Reya walked inside. Arwin sat down on the anvil, leaning forward and bracing his arms against his knees.

"Go on, then," Arwin said wearily. "Ask."

"Ask what?"

“You wanted to know my secrets,” Arwin said, rocking back to catch Reya’s gaze. “I’ll tell them to you, if you want me to. I’ve just been trying to protect you, but that didn’t work out so well for Zeke.”

“I’m sorry.” Reya’s hands tightened at her sides and her eyes dropped to the floor. “It was wrong of me to say you got him killed. It wasn’t your fault. I – I’m just so mad. Why did he have to die?”

“It’s okay, Reya. You weren’t entirely wrong. Zeke died because I was arrogant.” Arwin gritted his teeth. “I didn’t think that the Iron Hounds would try to kill me. I kept thinking that there was no way humans would do that to themselves, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. If I’d treated them the way I treat monsters, then I never would have dismissed the threat.”

“Nobody would assume that they’re going to get killed just because they didn’t join a guild,” Reya said, looking back up at Arwin. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“I don’t blame myself, but he did die because of me,” Arwin said. “That was an attack meant to kill me, not him. My secrets have nothing to do with why we were attacked, but you’ve been with me longer than any of the others. If you want to know who I really am, then I’ll tell you.”

Reya shook her head, her eyes watering. “I’m sorry, Arwin. I really am. I was speaking without thinking earlier. I don’t care about the secrets. I–”

“I’m not angry at you,” Arwin said, raising a hand to cut Reya off before she could continue. “You’re right, Reya. Even though my secrets aren’t the reason he died, I’ve been treating you like a child, and I apologize for it. I thought I could protect everyone.”

Reya wiped her face with the back of a sleeve, but Arwin continued speaking before she could say anything else.

“I was strong enough – at one point. And, at one point, I will be again. But, right now, I’m not,” Arwin said. “I can’t protect you like I could. So, right now, all I can offer is knowledge. I’m not giving this to you because you hurt my feelings, Reya. I’m offering it because knowledge is *all* I can offer. Well, that and armor.”

“How could knowledge protect me?” Reya asked with a snuffle.

“Knowledge is a tool, just like everything else. Now think, Reya – and tell me if you really want to know. You can’t unlearn anything. But, if you want to know who I really am, I’ll tell you.”

Reya didn’t respond immediately, which Arwin was thankful for. He wasn’t sure what answer he was hoping she’d give him. Part of him wanted to bury his past and never think about it again, but another part desperately wanted to share it. Either way, Reya was actually debating her answer rather than just choosing impulsively.

“I want to know,” Reya finally said.

Arwin let out a slow sigh and inclined his head. “I figured you would. I’m sure this comes as absolutely no surprise to you, but I wasn’t always a smith.”

Reya nodded, a flicker of a smile passing over her lips. “Yeah. I kind of guessed. What were you? A high-ranking warrior in a guild or something?”

“No,” Arwin said quietly. “I was the Hero of Lian.”

Chapter 66

“What?” Reya asked, the corner of her lip twitching preemptively into a faint smile, waiting for Arwin to finish the second half of his joke. He didn’t add anything else, and the grin fell away. “You’re serious?”

“Yes,” Arwin said. “I was the Hero, up until just a short time ago.”

He could practically see the gears spinning in Reya’s head as she tried to determine whether to believe him or not. Slowly, her expression changed from disbelief to wide-eyed shock.

“They canceled the funeral,” Reya muttered. “I saw it on the flyers. You mean you survived the explosion? I thought you killed the demon queen but died in the process!”

“Someone certainly tried to make it look that way. There was a bomb in my armor, and it’s one that I believe the adventurer’s guild planted. I was betrayed, but the Mesh saved me. I don’t know why, but it took my class and gave me the one I have now instead.”

“That’s why you know so much about monsters and fighting,” Reya said, pulling at her hair. “You’re literally the greatest warrior alive. And you’re saying the guild betrayed you? Why? What’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” Arwin replied with a shrug. “I haven’t figured that out yet, and something tells me I wasn’t the greatest warrior either. I think the guild intentionally kept me in the dark, but that’s a story for a different time. The point is, I used to be the Hero, but I’m not the Hero anymore.”

“That’s why you’re so deadset on protecting everyone?” Reya asked.

“I used to think that, yeah. Because it was my duty.” A short, bitter laugh slipped from Arwin’s mouth and he shook his head. “Not anymore. I don’t think I give a shit about duty or any of that. I just don’t want to see my friends die anymore. When I realized I survived the explosion, I had just planned to lock myself away and never deal with people again. It would have been easier.”

“If you were betrayed by the biggest guild in the kingdom, I can see why,” Reya said.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I ran into you,” Arwin said. “And then I met Lillia – and Rodrick and Anna after that. I realized that there wasn’t a point living life if there weren’t people to live it with you. Why be a smith if I can’t make armor for the people that are important to me? Not that it did anything for Zeke. As I said – I’m not the Hero anymore. I’m just a smith.”

“You already said you knew it wasn’t your fault,” Reya said, walking up to Arwin and putting a hand on his hunched shoulders. “I can’t even imagine what it must feel like to have all that power and lose it – but you’re far from just a smith.”

“I didn’t mean to turn this into a pity fishing session,” Arwin said, shaking his head and straightening back up. “But now you know. I was acting like the Hero, even though I wasn’t him anymore.”

“I don’t think people can change that quickly,” Reya said. “It does make a lot of things about you make way more sense, though.”

“Is that so?” Arwin asked, a small grin gracing his lips. “Like what?”

“Everything.” Reya waved vaguely in Arwin’s direction. She paused as a thought struck her, face going pale as a sheet. “Wait. There’s a new Hero and a new Demon Queen, isn’t there? Doesn’t that mean there’s a chance the first Demon Queen also survived? What if they team up against the Hero?”

Arwin squinted at Reya, trying to figure out if she was serious or not. He felt like it couldn’t possibly have been that big of a stretch to determine that Lillia wasn’t just really, really into her role of pretending to be a demon waitress and was an actual demon.

“I don’t think she’ll be a problem,” Arwin said finally. It was one thing to spill his own secrets, but Lillia’s were hers. Reya would probably figure it out pretty soon either way.

“Oh. That’s good,” Reya said, letting out a sigh. “What about the guild, then? If they betrayed you, doesn’t that mean they were working with the demons? That’s really, really bad.”

Pretty sure they aren’t working with the demons either. Not in the way Reya is thinking, at least. Lillia got just as screwed as I did.

“There’s something going on with them, but I don’t know if now is the time to delve into it,” Arwin said. “There’s another guild that I need to handle first.”

“The Iron Hounds.” Reya’s face darkened. “I know I’m not as strong as you, even as a smith, but can’t I help somehow? I know you don’t want me to fight, but I’m sure I could do something!”

“Yes,” Arwin said. “You can.”

“Just let me do something! I’m not completely incapable – wait. Did you say I *could* help?”

“I did. It wasn’t right of me to completely exclude you,” Arwin said. “You have every right to want to avenge Zeke that I do, but I don’t want you to die in the process. Revenge only matters if you live through it. Would you be willing to settle for helping making the armor that Lillia and I use to take down the people that killed Zeke?”

“I think I’d settle for that as a start,” Reya allowed. “But if there’s more I can do, I want to do it. I want to see them pay for what they did.”

“It won’t feel the way you think it will,” Arwin warned. “In the end, they’ll just be dead. Zeke won’t come back.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But what?” Arwin asked. “I’m not going to tell you to forgive them, but I want you to really think about what you want. The people that killed Zeke will die—that, I promise you. But what more do you want? Do you want to drive the blade into their heart yourself? Maybe take your time with it, make sure they feel all the pain that they made you feel?”

Reya blanched. “I – I don’t know. I just want them to pay.”

“We all do,” Arwin said, rising to his feet. “If you’re still determined to fight when the time comes, then I’ll see what we can do. Until then, promise me you won’t try anything on your own and that you’ll stay away from the Iron Hounds. We do this my way.”

Reya didn’t respond for several seconds as she mulled over his words. He could tell she still wasn’t happy, but she finally gave him a sharp nod.

“Fine. I won’t. I couldn’t handle them on my own anyway. But... why do you think Lillia can? She’s just an innkeeper.”

“If you still think people are *just* anything after speaking with me, then you need to be more careful,” Arwin said, putting his hand on Reya’s shoulder. Over her shoulder on the street, Rodrick and Anna stepped out from an alleyway and headed their way bearing two pots of grout.

Reya noticed Arwin’s distraction and turned to follow his gaze. “Oh. They’re back.”

“If you’ve got more questions, you can ask later,” Arwin said. “Don’t share what we talked about with them yet. It’s not the right time, and I don’t want to put undue stress on either of them.”

“Okay,” Reya said, giving him a final nod. Arwin took his hand off her shoulder just as Rodrick and Anna came to a stop by the open door.

“Not interrupting, are we?” Rodrick asked.

Arwin shook his head. “No. We’ve just finished up. You’ve got good timing. Did you run the whole way over and back from the market?”

“No comment,” Rodrick replied, stepping through the doorway and setting the pot of grout down on the ground beside Arwin. He then held out the pouch of gold. “Here. Got what you needed.”

“Thank you,” Arwin said. “I can get started, then.”

“How can we help?” Reya asked. “You said I could help forge, right?”

“I need stone to make a hearth before I can do anything,” Arwin said. “If you could look for stones from the smithy that weren’t completely destroyed in its collapse, that would be really useful.”

“We can do that,” Rodrick said. They all started for the smithy, but Rodrick paused in the doorway, blocking Arwin from leaving.

“You’re going to have to move for me to squeeze by you,” Arwin said. “I’m not that thin.”

“I was just thinking – wouldn’t it be better if you generally stayed inside?” Rodrick asked. “I haven’t noticed anyone spying on us, but it might be safest if the Iron Hounds have absolutely no reason to believe you might still be alive. The less prying eyes can figure out you’re here, the better it is.”

Arwin grimaced. As much as he wanted to dismiss Rodrick’s concerns, the warrior brought up a good point. He let out a sigh and took a step back.

“Damn it. You’re probably right, but I’m not happy about it. I’ll stay here, then.”

“We won’t take long,” Rodrick promised, following after Anna and Reya. Arwin watched him leave, then walked back over to his anvil and sat down, drumming his foot on the ground.

The last thing he wanted to do right now was be left alone with his thoughts. They weren’t going anywhere that he wanted them to, but it didn’t look like he was going to have a choice.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait too long. It only took the trio around an hour to gather all the stone that they’d need and bring it into the room, stacking it in a pile beside Arwin. Once they got enough to start working with, Arwin began layering stones on the ground and spreading grout onto them.

Reya joined him some time later, and by the time evening rolled around, the group had a fully built, albeit slightly sloppy, stone dome. It vaguely resembled an oven and was nowhere near what an actual hearth should have looked like, but it would work for Arwin's purposes once the grout hardened.

"Now what?" Reya asked, wiping her dirty hands off on her clothes. "What else can we do?"

"For today? Eat dinner," Arwin replied. "One step at a time. I can't do anything until the grout sets. Tomorrow, I think the main thing I'll need is supplies. That means either gold or hunting monsters, and I'm not sure hunting is safe right now."

"We can do it," Reya said. "I'm sure we can find a way."

"What's more important is not getting killed," Arwin said gently. "I know you want to help, Reya. But don't make me have to avenge two people instead of just one. For now, we've got gold. We can use that. When I run out – that's when we can look at alternative ways to get money."

Reya nodded reluctantly. "Fine. Just make sure you think of something. I'm not just going to sit around."

"And neither will we," Rodrick put in.

"I will," Arwin promised. "For now, just go get dinner. Lillia will be disappointed if nobody eats her food, and you aren't going to do anything on empty stomachs."

"What about you?" Anna asked. "You need food as well."

“Not that kind of food,” Arwin replied, turning to his makeshift forge. “And I’ve got something else to do.”

“Like what?” Reya frowned. “I thought you couldn’t do anything until the hearth was ready to work with.”

“I’m not going to forge,” Arwin said, picking the helmet Zeke had been working on up and running his hand over the burnt surface of the metal. Deep within it, a faint shimmer of intent spoke back to him. The helmet hungered to be more, and Arwin planned to give it exactly what it wanted. “I’m going to plan. It’s not something you can help me with.”

Reya and the others exchanged glances.

“Don’t stay up too late. Your own advice goes for you as well,” Rodrick said, putting a hand around Anna’s shoulders.

Arwin nodded absently as the three of them headed off, closing the rickety door behind them. His attention was fully focused on the helm in his hands. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Tell me,” Arwin murmured, his fingertips tingling as he felt for the faintest traces of the Mesh within the plain, burnt helmet. “What do you want to be?”

And, deep within the charred, damaged metal, something responded.

Chapter 67

Initially, there was nothing but the faintest whisper. The brush of the breeze across Arwin's skin, so subtle that even a mouse might have missed it. And, from within it bloomed a distant crackling flame.

Arwin flinched back as a wave of emotion slammed into him. Hunger and heat mixed in a roaring inferno that sprung up within his mind unbidden with such intensity that he saw fire dance across his temporary forge.

As soon as his hand left the helm, the vision vanished, and silence crashed back down over him. It did nothing to still his hammering heart. Arwin took a step back, staring at the plain helm on the ground and pressing a hand to his chest.

What the hell was that?

Arwin crept closer to the helm, reaching out and brushing the backs of his fingers across it. There was no response. It was just a piece of metal. He carefully picked the helm back up, extending his senses toward it once more.

And then, almost as if it had never left, the faint whisper of wind returned. Arwin hurriedly set the helm back down on the anvil, not willing to summon the vision forth again. He wasn't sure what would happen if he let it run its course, and he didn't want to find out until he was actually ready to forge it anew.

Arwin tucked the helm under his arm and rose to his feet, pushing the rickety door back to stick his head outside. To his surprise, it was already well into the night. The moon hung high overhead, over halfway through its trip back toward the horizon.

How much time did I spend in those visions? It felt like I sank into them almost instantly, but that clearly isn't the case.

It was a question for tomorrow. Standing around in the middle of the night and waiting for someone to see him was a damn fool thing to do, so he closed the old door and strode toward the tavern.

As usual, the tavern was somehow darker than it was outside. Arwin squinted as his eyes tried and failed to completely adjust to the dark. The lanterns had all been snuffed for the night, so the only thing he had to see by was memory.

He worked his way across the common room and up the stairs, moving slowly to avoid running into anything too loudly and waking someone up. After successfully completing his ascent and finding his room, Arwin lowered himself into his bed and laid back, letting his head hit the mattress with a soft thump.

It wasn't as dark in his room as it was in the tavern, likely because Lillia was farther away. And, even though the amount of light was so faint that it might as well have not been there, it was still enough to bore into Arwin's eyes like screws and ward sleep away.

He laid on his back, his mind rebelling against his desire to rest as it ran through the events of the previous day over and over. Things were only made worse by the presence of the room just behind him, now devoid of its occupant.

Arwin gave it another few minutes before cursing softly under his breath and rolling to his feet, resisting the urge to pound a fist into the bed. Hands clenched, he headed back down the stairs and into the tavern.

I wish the damn hearth was ready. At least I could do something through the night instead of just sitting around here like a damned idiot. Can't sleep. Can't work. All I can do is stand around.

He made his way over to the doorway and poked his head out, checking the position of the moon. It felt like it had been hours, but somehow, the shimmering sphere of silver had only inched ever so slightly across the sky.

Figures.

Arwin turned back, then nearly jumped straight out of his skin as he saw something shift in the shadows. He was halfway to summoning Verdant Blaze to his hands when a shimmer of pale moonlight forced its way through the darkness just enough to illuminate purple skin.

“Why are you awake?” Arwin asked in a hushed whisper.

“The same reason you are,” Lillia replied dryly. “The light isn’t going to help you sleep any better, though.”

“I’m not sure the darkness will either.”

“I’ve got something that might,” Lillia said. Arwin could just barely pick up the flickers of movement as she walked across the tavern and into the kitchen. He hesitated for a moment, then followed after her into the darkness.

The faint trickle of liquid pouring into a mug led him toward the back of the long kitchen, but it took him a little too far and he nearly walked straight into her before she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

“Here,” Lillia said.

“I have no idea where here is.”

Lillia’s hand found his and pushed a small cup into it.

“What is this?” Arwin asked, raising it to his lips and sniffing at it. His nose scrunched and he almost doubled over coughing at the strong scent – berries, mixed with a sour undertone like the greenest apple.

“Painful,” Lillia said, a note of humor in her voice.

Arwin shrugged, then tipped the cup back, draining it in one go. Fire stung his throat and worked through his chest like the fingers of a vengeful ghost. Arwin suppressed a cough, barely even able to notice the faint but pleasant aftertaste.

“Okay, now I really want to know what that was.”

“Something new I figured out,” Lillia replied. “Cider. I think.”

“How is this going to help me sleep? I feel like I swallowed hot coal. Tasty coal, admittedly, but still coal.”

“You’re thinking about it instead of other things, aren’t you?”

Arwin paused. Lillia wasn’t wrong, and she took his lack of answer as affirmation.

“Unfortunately, it’s far from a cure,” Lillia said. “It just makes sitting around a little more tolerable.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got more of that?”

“Gave you the last of it.”

“Sorry.”

A shift in the darkness marked what Arwin suspected to be a shrug.

“I wouldn’t have given it to you if I was going to drink it myself. I’m pretty sure it’s poisonous.”

Arwin almost laughed. “You fed me poison?”

“You eat magic. You’ll live. It’s only mild poison.”

Her footsteps headed off in the direction of her room, then paused. Arwin considered heading back to the tavern and trying to sit at the counter and wait for the morning to come, but that idea sounded about as appealing as trying to go back to bed.

He followed after Lillia, and her steps resumed a second later. Her actual room was even darker than the rest of the tavern, and he only managed to find where she was by following the rustle of straw.

“I’m not going to sit on anything important, am I?” Arwin asked. “I’ve got no blasted idea where I am.”

“You’re fine. Just straw.”

Arwin sat down on the makeshift mattress, then scooted back until his back was pressed against the wall. Lillia shifted beside him, copying his position. Neither of them spoke for several minutes.

“Of all the situations I would have seen in the future, I think this is the one farthest from anything I could have pictured,” Lillia said, breaking the silence.

Arwin grunted. “Tell me about it. I think the world got twisted on its head some time ago and nothing has been right since.”

“I don’t suppose anyone is going to twist it back?”

“I’m not sure if I want them to,” Arwin admitted. “If anything, I feel bad for our replacements. I wonder if they’re the same as we were.”

“It took us years to finally kill each other. I figure they can last until we get around to figuring that out ourselves,” Lillia said.

“Lofty goals,” Arwin said, shifting to try and get more comfortable. The wall was a little colder than he’d thought it would be, but it was better than just sitting without support – and he wasn’t about to sprawl out on Lillia’s bed. “We’ve got to deal with our much smaller problems before we can even think about going up against the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“We will,” Lillia said, a note of steel entering her voice. “It might not be soon, but we will. They’ll get what’s coming to them – just like the Iron Hounds will.”

“Except sooner rather than later for them. The new hearth will be ready tomorrow,” Arwin said. “And I think I know how I’m going to forge my helmet. I’ll start on your armor after that. We’ll have to deal with them before the Wyrms horde, or the entire city is going to have much bigger problems.”

“That could be the best time to strike,” Lillia pointed out. “Chaos makes it difficult to react. The larger the organization, the worse it’ll be.”

“Maybe,” Arwin agreed. “But I don’t want to let anyone else die. Not if I can help it.”

Lillia let out a soft laugh. “Still the Hero, even without the Class. Using the horde would be distasteful anyway. I want them to know why they died, not cut them down in the midst of panic.”

Arwin was pretty sure he should have warned Lillia off getting too caught up in revenge, but he couldn't help but feel the same way. He let out a huff. After everything he'd told Reya, he was still nothing more than a hypocrite.

Arwin shifted again, and his shoulder brushed against Lillia's in the darkness. Her arm was much warmer than the cold wall pressed against his back. Before Arwin could pull his arm back and apologize, she leaned slightly into him.

Neither of them said anything. They'd already spent all the words they had to share for the night, and now all that remained was the night and their looming thoughts. But, as Arwin's breathing slowed, he couldn't help but wonder if Lillia's drink had been a little more effective than she'd said.

He still wasn't anywhere near falling asleep and his heart still ached for what could have been, but the faintest flicker of warmth split through the cold, bringing with it the promise of solace.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to get through the night.

Chapter 68

As it always did, the morning eventually came. Arwin had no clue how Lillia knew, but she stirred from her spot beside him, quietly rising to her feet. Blinking himself out of the trance state that stood between sleep and awareness, Arwin stood as well. He took careful to move slowly, not wanting to accidentally headbutt Lillia on the way up.

"Are you going to need help on anything today?" Lillia asked.

Arwin shook his head. “No. It’ll probably take me the whole day to make my helmet, and that’s something I’m best off doing alone. Maybe keep Reya occupied somehow so she doesn’t feel like she’s just wasting time?”

“I can do that,” Lillia said. “Just don’t forget to bring me in to help when it’s time for my own armor. I don’t like sitting around and doing nothing any more than she does – and right now, unless we go hunting, I’m not going to have a whole lot I can do other than sit.”

“I won’t forget,” Arwin promised. He found the wall with a hand, using it to guide himself out through the kitchen and out into the dining room. Lillia followed behind him, lighting the lanterns to bring some light into the building.

A glance out the doorway told Arwin that the morning was still young, so he crept up the stairs to avoid waking anyone on his way to retrieve the burnt helmet. Armed with what he needed, Arwin headed back down and out the door, nodding to Lillia as he left.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about the previous night, or if he was allowed to feel anything at all. For the time being, his feelings didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was outfitting himself and his allies.

Setting out into the street, Arwin glanced around to make sure he couldn’t see anyone lying in wait before stepping out. He kept to the darkness that hid from the rising sun by the edges of buildings, making his way across the street and into his temporary forge.

Someone had brought a barrel into it. He walked up, peering inside, to find it full of water. A sad smile passed over his features. He’d finally gotten a proper quenching station, but Zeke wasn’t around to see it.

Arwin took a deep breath and let it out slowly, centering himself. His makeshift hearth and anvil waited for him, along with all the metal that he'd managed to salvage. He ran a hand along the stone, feeling the grout. It still wasn't completely set, but it would be enough. He didn't have the patience to wait any longer.

Summoning a ball of [Soul Flame] to his hand, Arwin tossed it into the hearth. Without any wood to burn, he had to use considerably more than he normally did, filling the mouth of the hearth with crackling, hungry flame.

He stared into the depths of the fire, then drew in a deep breath. As he exhaled, he sat down on the edge of his anvil and set the helm in his lap. Arwin ran his fingers along its rough, charred surface, letting himself sink into a reverie.

"I'm listening," Arwin whispered.

And, as it had the previous day, the helm replied. A whisper of wind danced across his arms and crawled up his back, followed shortly thereafter by the growing crackle of fire. This time, though, Arwin didn't shy from it.

He remained still in rapt attention as the flame spread through his mind, growing until it swallowed his view of the room entirely. His own body faded until the only thing that remained was the helm in a sea of flame.

The helm – and its desires. They slammed into Arwin like a crashing tsunami, nearly overwhelming his mind in a deluge of information.

Not all of it was useful. There were flashes of hunger and the intense feeling of burning mixed in with a deep-sated conviction. The helmet wanted to be greater than it was, and he was just the vessel through which it could make its wants manifest.

Arwin had been expecting the helm to give him some form of indication as to its shape or how to make it, but what he received instead was knowledge of the helm itself. He learned of the metal that had been used to make it.

How it had been mined from a local quarry and stolen by a bandit on the way over to Milten, only to be confiscated by a corrupt guard who sold it to the very smith who had originally bought it.

He saw himself forging it into a helm and felt the metal's disappointment that it would not become what it sought to be. And then he saw Zeke. The excited nervousness burning in the boy's eyes as he worked through the night, attaching the horns to the helm – but not just that. His passion was like fuel, flooding into the metal and infusing its very being.

It wasn't a work of art, but it Zeke had given it the desire to be one. And, in that burgeoning joy, right in the middle of the promise that Zeke had been making to the helm, there was an inferno.

The helm's future had been stolen from it. It burned away in the fire that scorched and warped its form, and the helm felt rage. The promise had been ripped away. The emotion was so intense that Arwin could feel it bubbling within his own chest like an overflowing cauldron.

There was no doubt in Arwin's mind that the helm was just a piece of metal. It was not sentient or sapient, but it had picked up on the environments it had been on. It carried with it the

desires and stories of everyone who had worked with it, and it was from those that its desires were born.

And, through him, they would become reality.

Arwin drew in a sharp breath and his eyes snapped open, the vision vanishing. He sat in the center of the room once more, cold sweat streaking down his back and his muscles tensed. Arwin's hand ran along the helmet, but he didn't need to hear it speak again.

He knew what he had to do. Arwin summoned Verdant Blaze to his hands, then set the already-burnt helm into the awaiting maw of the [Soul Flame]. As it started to heat, Arwin infused Verdant Blaze with the same ability.

Taking out his mask, Arwin set it at the edge of the flames. He headed over to some of the warped scraps and took a piece of the ivory metal, placing it into the fire beside the helm. His fingers drummed against the side of his leg as he waited for the metal to get hot enough to work with.

Without a bellows, it took longer than Arwin would have liked. It probably wouldn't have grown hot enough at all if he hadn't been using the enhanced powers of his [Soul Flame]. But, soon enough, the metal turned from a cherry red to a deep golden orange.

Arwin took the warped metal out first, hammering it back into a sheet. Every blow of Verdant Blaze sent up a puff of [Soul Flame], driving the impurities from the metal. Black flakes fell away from the metal and he folded it in on itself, making sure it was as pure as he could get it.

Arwin then returned the plate to the fire for long enough to let it completely re-heat. He set his hammer down and, grabbing the metal with both hands, pulled it apart into two pieces. Setting one of them to the side, Arwin used his hands to start forming the metal into a horn.

He didn't pay attention to the time as it passed and barely even paused to breath. His entire being was completely and utterly focused on executing the helmet's desires. The first horn took form and a second one followed after it. Arwin put details into them by pressing his fingernails into the molten metal, creating a spiral that ran from the tip to the base.

With the horns complete, Arwin took the heated helm and hammered it flat, removing the impurities from it before forming it once more. He formed it with his own head, using his resistance to heat created by his own [Soul Flame] to his advantage.

Arwin attached the ivory horns he'd made to the top of the helm, then added another piece of ivory scrap to the flame. Once it had heated, he set the helm aside to hammer the new piece out.

When the impurities had been removed, Arwin ripped the metal apart with his bare hands, working it into thin strips. Those too went to the side and he turned his attention to his mask.

Arwin brought it to the helmet, using his hands to press the metal together. It was a slow, arduous process. He didn't want to heat the mask so much that it lost any of its detail – for some reason, keeping it exactly as it was felt... right.

At the same time, he needed to make sure the metal was completely attached. He didn't need it falling apart when a well-placed strike hit it at the wrong angle. It wasn't long before his fingers started to ache, but Arwin was too caught up to slow down.

The tingle of the Mesh started together in the helm as he worked, but Arwin didn't let it distract him. There was only one thing he was focused on right now, and it wasn't the Mesh. It was making the helmet exactly what it wanted to be. All else took second place. His purpose was just to give the metal a voice.

When the mask was completely attached to the back of the helm, Arwin took the strips of metal and started to overlay them onto it, making the carved details pop with color. He didn't want anyone who ever saw the mask to be able to mistake it for something else.

And, with every detail he finished, the Mesh grew stronger. Its buzzing became a dull roar, swirling into Arwin's arms and dancing around the helm with such anticipation that the air felt like it was electrically charged.

Arwin worked the final strip of metal into place, smoothing it out and setting it in the flame. He took the metal out of the fire and plunged it into the water.

Steam erupted and water splashed over the edges of the barrel, splattering against the ground and hissing. Arwin waited until the roiling bubbles had calmed down before pulling the helm free. He wiped the scale away from it and the metal flaked as if it longed to free the helmet from its prison. Arwin held the finished helm up before his eyes. What stared back at him was the visage of a demon.

The dull red from the fading heat made its eyes burn with molten fury. The horns jutted out from the helmet's sides, deadly sharp and sleek. It was done, and the Mesh knew it too.

Verdant Blaze hummed at his side as the item grew stronger, having aided in forming a magical item. Arwin didn't have a chance to pay it any more attention as the Mesh's golden words traced through the air before him.

[Use Your Head] has been consumed.

[Ivory Executioner's Howl: Rare Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [Setting up] has been earned.

[Setting up] – *Awarded for forging the second item of a set.* Effects: Upgrade one of your existing skills. *This achievement will be consumed immediately.*

[Setting up] has been consumed.

For the first time, Arwin almost didn't want to see the achievement. He was far more interested in seeing what he'd just created. He'd had Set items before, but never at such a low Tier. But, no matter the tier, they were always rare – and generally powerful.

But, before he could see his item, he had a skill to upgrade.

[Awaken] (Passive)

[Soul Flame]

[Arsenal]

Decisions, decisions. I'm pretty sure all three would be significant boosts to my power, and I don't know when I'll get my next skill upgrade. But... which one is the best right now?

Chapter 69

Upgrading [Awaken] was always tempting. The skill was probably the one with the most potential out of all the ones he had, and but he just didn't fully know what an awakened item would do yet. Getting stronger in the future was important, but Arwin needed to be strong now.

[Soul Flame] had been the skill Arwin had probably used the most. He'd gained several ways to use it offensively, and the previous time he'd upgraded it had given him some pretty significant abilities. There was a good chance that upgrading it again would make it even stronger in combat.

It was a very strong candidate but upgrading [Arsenal] was equally as tempting. The only thing that gave him pause was that he had absolutely no idea what upgrading it would actually do. The skill already scaled with his Tier, so upgrading it was unlikely to let him bond with more items.

It'll probably give me something that directly relates to my items in some way or another. So, in summary, my options are upgrading future potential, a mixture of crafting and combat, or pure combat.

Arwin thought for several minutes, not wanting to rush into anything. [Awaken] wasn't the right move yet, so he mentally crossed it off the list. He needed something that would let him fight the Iron Hounds.

Both [Soul Flame] and [Arsenal] would do that, and Arwin honestly couldn't decide which one would be better. The former was probably the safer bet, as he already had several ways to use it and knew that it would come in handy no matter what.

But, in the end, curiosity ended up winning out. An upgrade to [Soul Flame] would probably be useful, but Arwin didn't think it would be useful enough to make the difference between success and failure in a really difficult fight.

[Arsenal], on the other hand, was a directly combat focused ability. Even though he was clueless as to what changing it would do, it was still the skill most likely to give him something immediately useful.

His decision made, Arwin selected the skill. The writing in the air shifted before him as the Mesh tingled within his body.

[Arsenal] – You live and die on your equipment, so you might as well make it part of yourself. Bind yourself to [3] pieces of equipment, summoning and dismissing it at will. The number of equipment you can bind to scales with your Tier, up to a total of 10. Unbinding a piece of Equipment will make this skill inactive for 1 day. You may temporarily bind yourself to 1 extra piece of equipment after holding it for an amount of time scaling with the difference between your current Tier and the Tier of the item's holder. Breaking this bond will not deactivate [Arsenal].

It took Arwin a few seconds to read the new description of [Arsenal], and then a few more to actually figure out what it meant. The original function of the skill hadn't changed at all. It still did exactly the same thing that it did before, but it now had a new addition.

A temporary bond to an item, particularly that someone else was holding. That sounded like another way to say that Arwin could functionally steal someone's weapon if he managed to get his hands on it for long enough.

I can already see how that would be useful. It's not the direct offense ability I thought it would be, and everything will depend on how long it actually takes for me to bond with something. But, if it's within reason... this could be really nasty.

Arwin wasn't quite in the mood to grin but gave himself a satisfied nod. If he came across anyone that was a significant enough threat to need to steal gear from them, it would probably be difficult to hold onto them for long enough to steal anything. There were always ways to get around difficulties, though. An extra tool to rely on with the potential to turn a fight around as drastically as this wasn't one he was going to complain about.

But now that the Mesh had loosed him from its grip, Arwin's attention was back to what it had been on originally. He peered into his newly formed helm, and the Mesh bloomed before him for the second time.

Ivory Executioner's Howl: Rare Quality

[Awoken]: This item has taken on life of its own. Forged in an apprentice's joy and quenched in his master's sorrow, this item resonates with the echoes of the past and burns with fury that may never be sated.

[Molten Gaze]: The flame of a broken promise burns within this item. After this item's wielder kills an opponent, it will ignite with magical power and release an aura that hinders the casting of magic nearby.

[Forged For One]: This item was forged specifically for Arwin Tyrr. Its abilities will not function for any other users.

[Armor of the Executioner]: This is a set item of [?] pieces. When the entire set is worn, a concealed property will be unlocked.

“Would you look at that,” Arwin said, a soft laugh slipping from his lips. The sides of his eyes prickled as he read the description and he blinked to clear them. “I guess you were right after all, Zeke. That’s the first time I’ve made anything better than Average Quality.”

Well, some of my Unique items were much better than normal Average items, but Unique isn’t on the rarity scale. It’s an item that can either be utter shit, incredible, or anything in between. Rare, on the other hand, is a promise – and it’s a step closer to truly understanding what I’m doing. My work needs to be replicable, not just one-off creations where I roll the dice and pray it turns out well.

Arwin slipped the helmet onto his head. It, unsurprisingly, fit perfectly. He could still tell he was wearing a helmet, but it was far more comfortable than it had any right being. Arwin looked around the forge, testing his field of view, but it didn’t seem to be as impaired as it had been when he’d worn the mask normally.

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like he’d made the entire Armor of the Executioner set yet. That was hardly a surprise, as sets were generally at least three pieces. This one probably needed appropriate greaves and possibly gauntlets as well to be completed.

Interestingly enough, the Executioner chest plate didn’t say it was part of a set. Does that mean I need to finish it somehow? Maybe this is actually a 2-part set and the first part just isn’t done yet. I’ve got no clue what I would do to change it, though.

Arwin reached up to his head and slid the helmet off, holding it under an arm and standing in silent contemplation for several seconds. If the set had said how many items it was, he’d have been tempted to figure out how to make the correct chestpeice.

But that wasn't how life worked. The set might have been 2 pieces, and it might have been six. There was always a chance it needed rings as well – he just didn't know, and that meant that focusing on trying to complete it would be a huge gamble.

I can work on the set after I get armor for Lillia. We don't have much time before the Wyrms are born – hell, we don't even have an exact date. The Iron Hounds need to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Arwin focused on the helm in his hands. It was in his own possession, but that didn't mean he couldn't test out the new ability he'd gotten from [Arsenal]. His fingers warmed as the Mesh tingled, and he counted down three seconds in his head before he felt a faint pop in his mind.

With a thought, the helmet vanished from Arwin's hands. He summoned it back, then placed it on his head and repeated the process. It was just as seamless as controlling any of the other items he was bound to, but this connection took longer to establish.

Fair enough. How about breaking it?

That, as it turned out, was instant. The moment Arwin tried to pull his mind away, his connection to the helm severed and it materialized on him like normal. Arwin re-bonded to it and dismissed the helm once more.

Three seconds again. That's a basis, at least. In a fight, that's a good bit, but it's not impossible. But, for now, this will be a good way to carry the helmet around without revealing it. It didn't turn out unique, so I don't have a good way to hide its stats yet.

Sending one last look around his rather pitiful looking temporary forge, Arwin stepped out into the street and headed for the tavern. It was already midday, so he'd lost a fair portion of time sinking into the helm's visions.

Thank God it didn't have any detrimental elements. That would have been absolutely infuriating. Actually, now that I think about it, I have no clue if it has detrimental elements. It's not like they're marked, so the set ability or the effects of its aura could be bad for me.

Oh well. I'm still using the damn thing. I'll figure it out soon enough. For now, I need to fulfill on my promise.

Arwin stepped into the tavern, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Reya and Anna both sat at the counter, just barely illuminated by the lantern hanging beside them. There was no sign of Rodrick, but a sizzling from the kitchen told him that Lillia was cooking something.

"Did you finish?" Reya asked as she spotted him enter, sliding off her stool.

"Yes," Arwin said. "For the time being, at least."

"Then, if you're here, I assume there might be something else we can do to help?" Anna guessed, turning to face him and taking a sip from an old wooden mug. Arwin didn't recognize it, so either Lillia had gotten a new cup at some point or it belonged to Anna.

"I'm going to be making something for Lillia, and it might take a few attempts. I don't think I'll be quite as... guided as I was this time around," Arwin said, his thoughts drifting to the visions.

The helmet definitely hadn't been magic, so he wasn't sure if it had been Stonesinger that had allowed him to get such a vivid picture of what it had wanted to be, but he wasn't too confident he'd be able to replicate his results for anything intentionally. Not yet, at least.

For the time being, the most important thing he could do would be to make Lillia the most effective set of armor as quickly as possible. They didn't know the exact date the Wyrmlings would show up, so that meant he realistically only had weeks to completely prepare a full set of armor for her as well as make himself some gauntlets.

"What can we do?" Reya asked. "Do you need materials? We can hunt."

"We already discussed how that would be a little too dangerous," Arwin said with a shake of his head. "But there are a lot of things in the forge that go faster when I've got some assistance. Do you want to help me make Lillia's armor? We can have people rotate out."

Reya gave Arwin a sharp nod. "Yeah. I'm in."

"Good," Arwin said, turning on his heel and jerking his chin toward the street. "We've got a lot of work to do and not very much time to do it. I might be too caught up to notice when you get tired, so just swap out with someone else when you do."

"I will. But... what am I supposed to do? I've never worked a forge before."

"Whatever I tell you to," Arwin replied with a flicker of a smile. "Come on. We've got some armor to forge."

Chapter 70

“So,” Reya asked, looking around the makeshift forge and shifting from foot to foot.

“Where do we start? Are you going to teach me how to forge?”

“That would be an interesting idea if we had more time,” Arwin said as he tossed his [Soul Flame] into the hearth. “Teaching basically forces you to master topics, so it’s a good way for me to improve as well. Unfortunately, I don’t think I’m qualified to teach anything.”

“What do you mean? You’re insanely good at making stuff!”

“I don’t think I am, actually.” Arwin headed over to the warped metal on the ground that had once been a suit of armor and picked it up, placing it in the hearth to heat. “My class is guiding me.”

“Isn’t that basically the same thing?”

“No,” Arwin said. “It means I’m good at following directions, and that I’m learning what to do. But, the more I work, the more I realize that actually understanding what I’m doing and working with a purpose are the real keys to actually creating something powerful.”

“So you’re not going to teach me?”

Arwin chuckled and put his hand on the metal, rotating it to try to get it to heat faster and wishing he had a bellows to intensify the [Soul Flame] faster. “If you decide you want to know more when I get better at it, then I’d be willing to share. But, until then, I’m going to be focusing on creating rather than teaching. See, I learned something when I was working with the helmet that Zeke... left me.”

Reya’s hands tightened at her sides. “What was it?”

“When I just blindly follow the guidance I get from my materials, I can make Unique objects,” Arwin said. “But Unique isn’t on the rarity scale. It’s on the side – neither a failure nor success, but an anomaly.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“It can be,” Arwin allowed. A thought struck him and he almost laughed as he realized that his theory was even more accurate than he’d initially thought. Just talking about it to Reya had already revealed another aspect that proved his point. He lifted a hand to his head and his helmet manifested itself. He took it off and handed it to Reya so she could get a closer look.

“A Rare set item?” Reya asked after a second, her eyes going wide. “Godspit. That’s incredible.”

“It is,” Arwin said with a nod. “But the thing is, I’ve made a piece of armor that has a matching name.”

“So you’ve got two matching pieces of a set already?” Reya handed the helmet back and Arwin returned it to his head before allowing it to disappear.

“No,” Arwin said. “That’s the problem. Unique items can turn out shit. They can turn out great – but no matter what, they’re Unique. You can’t have a set from them, because they’re one of a kind and bordering on random. Even though it *should* be a set item, it isn’t.”

“Because you didn’t fully understand what you were doing when you made it?”

“That’s part of it,” Arwin said with a nod. “It’s not to say that the armor is bad – it’s actually incredibly strong for our tier. It’s a tradeoff, just like everything else in life. But, if I want to make a set of armor for someone I want to keep alive...”

“A set might be a lot stronger than a collection of Unique items,” Reya finished. “I suppose it would be more manageable as well.”

“Most likely. You never know what you’re getting with a Unique item, and surprises aren’t exactly what I need right now. Getting items that I know can be trusted to work the same way in every situation is more important than one that’s technically stronger but has a chance to chew up all your energy because someone winked in your direction.”

A smile flickered across Reya’s face and she almost laughed, but neither of their spirits were quite high enough for that. Not yet.

Arwin nodded to the hearth, where his [Soul Flame] had finally gotten the piece of metal to a deep orange.

“We’ll start by beating the impurities out of this until it’s a workable piece of metal again.”

“Okay,” Reya said. “How do I help?”

If Arwin was entirely honest with himself, he hadn’t fully figured that out himself yet. He was pretty sure he could have forged everything on his own, but with the amount he was excluding Reya from the rest of the plan, it felt right to give her the opportunity to do at least something.

“I’ll let you temporarily take over whenever I need to step back and think,” Arwin replied. “For now, just watch what I’m doing.”

Reya nodded and Arwin picked the chunk of heated metal up, bringing it over to the forge. He beckoned for her to back up, then held his hands out and summoned Verdant Blaze into his grip.

“On second thought,” Arwin said, glancing over to Reya’s clothes. “You might want to go find something heavy to wear so the sparks don’t burn you.”

Reya followed Arwin’s eyes, then grimaced. “Okay. I’ll be right back. You don’t have to wait for me, though. It won’t take long.”

He nodded in response and Reya hurried out of the building while Arwin got to work. [Soul Flame] pulsed through his hammer as it rang against metal, flattening the chunk out strike by strike.

It didn’t take long for Arwin to slip into the flow. He was vaguely aware of Reya’s return some time later, but he didn’t stop immediately. She still needed to see what he was doing before she could do anything herself.

He worked for another several minutes, brushing flakes of black away from the metal before delivering another round of ringing blows to it. Eventually, the metal started to cool and Arwin returned it to the hearth.

“Pretty straightforward, right?” Arwin asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He wasn’t trying to actually make anything yet, so he didn’t need to listen to the metal. All he had to do was prepare it.

Reya nodded hesitantly. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to swing that big hammer, though.”

Arwin hefted Verdant Blaze, glancing down at it. Now that Reya had mentioned it, he wasn't so sure that the weapon would even allow her to swing it. When he'd worked with Zeke, the boy had used his old hammer.

"I'll help you," Arwin said. "You'll need to learn how to swing the hammer anyway. It's not as easy as it looks."

"I never thought it looked easy."

Arwin took the metal back out of the forge and set it on the anvil. He beckoned Reya over.

"Here. Try to hold onto this, but... not too hard. It's somewhat bonded to me, so it's possible it might not like someone else touching it."

"That doesn't sound very safe."

"Only one way to find out," Arwin said, hoisting the hammer and giving it a pointed look. "Just touch it slowly. I think it should register that I'm letting you use it and you aren't trying to steal it."

"Should?" Despite her doubt, Reya walked to stand beside Arwin. She brushed the back of a hand across the shaft of the weapon. When nothing happened, she slowly reached out and wrapped her hands around it.

"See?" Arwin asked, slightly more relieved that she hadn't gotten burned than he cared to admit. It had still been a possibility, and even if Anna could have healed a burn without too much trouble, it still would have been very unfortunate.

"Right. So what do I do?"

Arwin moved behind Reya, adjusting her grip on the hammer. “Try to lift it. See how it feels.”

Reya raised the weapon, then shifted her stance to better her stability. She let out a surprised grunt. “It’s so much lighter than I thought it would be.”

“Don’t let it get away from you,” Arwin warned. “It still hits like a bull. Start out swinging it a bit less than you think you need to. The hammer is heavy enough to do a lot of the swing for you, and we’re only trying to work the impurities out of the metal right now.”

“Okay. Do I swing now?”

“Go for it,” Arwin said, keeping a light hold on the back of the hammer. Even if it was tolerating her now, he didn’t want it to burn Reya the moment he let go.

Reya raised the hammer, then brought it down on the metal with a resounding clang. She glanced at Arwin over her shoulder and he gave her an encouraging nod.

“One down. A few hundred more to go. Keep at it.”

Reya got tired. If anything, she managed to keep at it for longer than Arwin had expected. She was half his size and had considerably less muscle, and swinging a hammer for hours on end was incredibly exhausting.

He’d fully thought that he’d have to take over before the metal was ready to start working with, but he’d been incorrect. Reya managed to completely finish working the impurities out of the Brightsteel sheet they’d been preparing, not stopping until Arwin had judged it finished.

“Well done,” Arwin said as Reya returned full control of the hammer to him.

“Thanks,” Reya said with a weary smile. “It... feels good. To be able to do something.”

“You’ll be able to do more in the future,” Arwin promised. “But, for now, this is more than enough. Thank you. It gave me some time to rest.”

“Do you even need rest?”

“Everyone needs rest,” Arwin replied. “Even me.”

Reya’s stomach grumbled and her cheeks reddened.

“Might be time to get some food,” Arwin suggested, nudging her toward the door.

“Could you send Rodrick over as well? I’ve got a favor I’d like to ask for him, and I’d imagine he probably wants to do something just as much as you did. Also, if you can get me some leather at some point, that would be really useful as well.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Reya said. She paused at the door and sent a glance back at Arwin.

“Thanks. It feels nice to be able to do something. I just wish I could do more.”

With that, she stepped out onto the street and headed off. Arwin picked up the large sheet of metal that she’d hammered out, watching the light reflect off the shimmering steel, and sighed.

I wanted a relaxing retirement, but I don't think that's going to be happening anytime soon. If I want peace, I need to be strong. This wasn't the way I wanted to be reminder that I'm really not the Hero anymore, but I'm not going to be forgetting it anytime soon.

The door creaked and Arwin turned as Rodrick stepped into the building.

“Arwin. Reya said you needed help?” Rodrick asked. “I’m not sure how much I’m going to be able to do with smith stuff, but I’ll do what I can.”

“Oh, I don’t need anything with that right now,” Arwin said. “I need something else.”

Rodrick blinked. “Really? What?”

“The Iron Hounds don’t know you beyond someone who just happened to buy gear from me,” Arwin said. “And I don’t want to spend all this time making armor only to find out I have no idea how to find them.”

“So you want me to sniff ‘em out?”

“Yeah. Starting with Tix,” Arwin said, his features going flat. “She’s involved, but I don’t know who else is.”

“I’ll find out,” Rodrick promised. “That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Just Tix.” Arwin shook his head. “Anything more is suspicious. Just figure out where Tix is and see if you can find out where she normally spends time. I don’t want you getting gutted in a back alley.”

“Got it,” Rodrick said, giving Arwin a sharp nod. “I’ll find her.”

“Just be careful,” Arwin said. “I don’t want any more of us dying. Let Anna know you’re going before you leave so she doesn’t rip my head off.”

Rodrick let out a bark of dry laughter. “Oh, don’t worry. I will. And I might not be the best warrior yet, but I’m damn good at bullshitting. I’ll have her location, hobbies, and favorite food to you in a day.”

Arwin’s hands tightened around Verdant Blaze. “Just her location will be more than enough.”

Chapter 71

After Rodrick left, Arwin got back to work. He re-heated and split the sheet of metal apart into workable pieces, then started to think on how he would form them into armor. It wasn't anything he hadn't done before, but there was one key difference.

Just like he had with Reya, he needed to make a set of armor specifically for Lillia. It would have to be lighter than the armor he'd made Reya, though. Lillia specifically wanted something that wouldn't impede her movements.

Honestly, it sounds like she should really be in some form of leather, not metal. Unfortunately, I don't know how the hell to work leather, so I'll just have to make do with what I do have.

Arwin ran his hands over the metal sheets, trying to feel if any of them had desires that [Stonesinger] would pick up on. To his disappointment, there was no such luck. It wasn't a surprise, though.

That's fine. It would be weird if I got such an intense vision every single time I tried to craft anything.

"I'll be more forthright, then," Arwin told the sheets of metal. "Do you want to be a chest plate?"

He didn't get a response. The metal seemed largely indifferent, but it definitely wanted to be *something*. It wasn't exactly a resounding round of applause, but it was the best he had to work with at the time being.

Even if I can't get Lillia the best set of armor to ever exist, even something would be better than nothing. Might as well get started with things and see where they take me. I've done all the diligence I can to hopefully make sure this is a high-quality piece, but something tells me it isn't going to turn out any better than Average.

Arwin hefted Verdant Blaze and got to work shaping the armor. Hours slipped by as he worked, making the front and back of the chest piece separately and quenching the pieces once the metalwork was complete. He couldn't finish anything yet, but he could definitely get it to the point where the only final touches would be the leather and the leather pieces and clasps.

As Arwin finished putting the last touches on the metal and looked up from his work for the first time since he'd started, he found a small stack of leather as well as a black knife resting on top of it – the knife that he'd made for Lillia.

Reya must have swung by at some point and dropped the leather he'd requested off while he was working without saying anything to disturb him. He gathered the supplies and got to cutting them into padding for the inside of the armor and straps to connect everything together.

Piece by piece, the armor came together. He worked the finishing touches in, adjusting and pinning the leather wherever appropriate. Arwin was still pretty sure that using metal pins to fasten the leather probably wasn't the right way to go about things, but it worked and he didn't know how else to do it.

When I get time, I'm going to go find another smith and see what they do for their armor.

But, for the time being, his current methods were the best that he was going to get. As Arwin grew closer to finishing, the Mesh gathered in the armor and tickled his fingertips. He

raised his hands, excitement building in his chest as the Mesh flowed and his hammer hummed as it was fed energy from a successful creation.

[Brightsteel Armor: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Brightsteel Armor: Average Quality

[Durable]: This item is harder to damage through mundane means.

[Brittle]: This item has a chance of shattering on every blow. Upon shattering, the magical power stored within the weapon will be released in an instant, causing a minor magical explosion.

Arwin's excitement deflated and his hands dropped. A curse slipped from his mouth as he stared at the offending detrimental quality that made the armor completely worthless. The last thing anyone needed was a set of armor that blew up when they got hit.

"Damn it," Arwin cursed. He really didn't have that much metal to work with, so losing an entire chest plate to something like this was a serious blow. He couldn't even stick it back into the fire and try to rework it – Brittle could end up blowing up the hearth.

I suppose I could transfer the magic out of this and into a smaller item, then scrap this armor and try again. I don't know how good constant reworking is going to be for the armor, though. At some point, I feel like the metal isn't going to be what it once was.

Arwin let himself stare at the failed chest piece for exactly one minute. Then, drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly to re-focus, Arwin set the armor down in the corner of the building.

He walked over to the remaining scrap and took some more of it, bringing it to the hearth and setting it in the [Soul Flame]. There wasn't any time to feel self-pity or annoyance at his failure. The only thing he could do was keep working until he got something that Lillia could use.

Besides, that armor wasn't any lighter than anything I normally make. Lillia specifically wanted something light, so I would have to make something else anyway. I wish I had a good way to actually select the enchantments my armor gets, but right now, that doesn't seem to be possible.

It feels like the Mesh tends to give me something along the lines of what I'm going for, but that's more inaccuracy. Just accepting what I get is a great way to get stuck only making Unique items and never being able to guarantee exactly what I need.

And thus, Arwin got back to work. There wasn't anything else he could do, and sitting around waiting certainly wasn't going to fix any problems. He set about making a second set of armor, but not in the same manner.

Arwin focused his thoughts on trying to make something lighter – something specifically for Lillia. He'd done it for Reya, although to a lesser degree of intention. He didn't just need something that would fit onto Lillia. He needed something that was made for her.

Maybe I need to adjust the design a bit more. Focus on defending vital areas, while leaving the other ones with thinner defenses. That would take some weight off the armor, even if it doesn't end up getting the enchantments I'm hoping for.

And that was Arwin did. The day swept by, turning to night and then day once more. He focused entirely on his work, rebuilding a chest piece from the ground up. He didn't stop for long enough to notice anyone coming and going, but a mug of water and a small metal plate of food showed up several times throughout his work, disappearing after he'd eaten everything.

Arwin took his time on this piece, not letting himself rush to complete it or skip by any steps. He did everything as intentionally as he could, double checking his work and making minor adjustments that probably weren't even necessary. He let his class guide his hammer, but he also tried to make a few changes of his own.

As he continued to work, a slow pain built in Arwin's stomach. He took a break, breathing heavily from the mixture of hot air and exhaustion, and wiped his brow with a frown. He was pretty sure it hadn't been that long since he'd last eaten anything magical.

Not wanting to waste all the metal from a whole chest piece, Arwin took some other metal and fashioned it into a bracelet, then used his [Soul Flame] to take the magical properties from the armor and put them onto the bracelet.

His reward was an Average Quality bracelet, but Verdant Blaze didn't even recognize its formation. It wasn't a bad bracelet, but Arwin got the sinking suspicion that Awakened weapons worked the same way that people did.

If it didn't have at least some degree of challenge in forging something, the weapon wouldn't grow stronger. It only cared about improving. Given how the Mesh worked, that really wasn't all that much of a surprise, but it was still a mild annoyance.

Arwin bit into the bracelet, making a mental note to avoid getting hit anytime in the near future. He really didn't want to find out what [Brittle] would do to him if he got smacked. The pain in his stomach receded as [The Hungering Maw] accepted his sacrifice.

Arwin's stomach relaxed and the pain abated, though it didn't leave as fast as it had before. Something told him it wouldn't be long before [The Hungering Maw] started to demand even more from him.

Heaving a sigh, Arwin lifted the armor he'd been working on and held it up to the light of the [Soul Flame]. It was certainly moving in a different direction from the previous chest piece he'd made.

It was thin and sleek, with so little metal in some portions that he was a little worried it would be *too* thin. All the vital areas had extra layers hammered in over them, giving the armor rippling waves like it was a sculpt of the ocean. It was nearly finished and was only awaiting the final touches before the Mesh could enter it.

Are my changes actually going to make this better? Or is it just arrogance that I know better than the Mesh? I feel like trying to improve myself is the right strategy. There's no way the Mesh would give me a class where I just sit and follow directions. Creating something is about doing it yourself.

But, at the same time, am I just ignoring what the metal actually wants to be?

Arwin set the armor back down and sighed. There was no answer waiting for him beyond the one that he would find when he finished the piece. He would have much preferred to have been doing this under different circumstances, but nobody could ever choose the hand the world dealt to them. The only thing anyone could ever truly have control over was the way they played their cards.

Arwin turned away from the anvil, hoping that someone had refilled his water mug again, only to find that he wasn't alone in the room. Lillia sat against the back wall, watching him work silently. His heart nearly jumped out of his throat and Arwin coughed into his fist to hide his shock.

"I didn't realize you were there."

"You really get into a flow state, don't you?" Lillia asked with a small laugh. "I've been here for at least an hour."

"Hiding?" Arwin asked hopefully.

"Not even slightly. Just walked right in and sat down." Lillia shifted and stood up, brushing the dust off her backside off as she walked over to look at what Arwin had been working on. "It's pretty."

"You should have seen the first one."

"There was another?"

“It got eaten,” Arwin said as he tapped a finger against his skin, trying to see if the effects of [Brittle] still remained. He didn’t feel particularly explosive. “The enchantments on it were wrong.”

“You can’t control them either, huh?” Lillia asked.

“Either?” Arwin blinked. “I didn’t realize you had more than just straight buffs from your class.”

“Eh. They kind of vary, but they change day to day based on the food I’ve made and the people in the tavern,” Lillia said. “I haven’t really figured out what the metrics are, though. I thought it would be directly related to how good my food was, but I’ve gotten some shit buffs when I’ve made some of my best dishes. At least, I thought they were my best. I don’t know. It feels like I’m trying to decode a message without a cypher.”

“Tell me about it,” Arwin said. “Do you at least like the direction this is going? If not, I’d rather get started again now than make another mistake.”

“It looks beautiful,” Lillia said. “As nice as a lot of the armor I wore before the explosion. Maybe nicer than some. I can see you really worked on trying to keep it lighter.”

“Not sure if it’ll work, but I’ve been trying,” Arwin said. “Did you come because you wanted to help? Or were you just watching?”

“A bit of both,” Lillia admitted.

“Well, now that you’re here, might as well try this on and let me know if it fits and if there’s anything that doesn’t sit right with you,” Arwin said, holding the armor out. “It’s not magical yet, so it shouldn’t blow you up.”

“Shouldn’t?” Lillia raised an eyebrow. “Why would armor blow me up?”

“Long story. Just put it on.”

Chapter 72

Lillia slipped the armor on, reaching for the clasps to fasten it. Her nose scrunched as she tried to contort herself to grab the clasps.

“Here,” Arwin said, stepping up beside her and tightening the clasps himself as she lifted her arm out of his way. “I suppose that might be a bit of a design flaw. It would be nice if the armor wasn’t a two-person job to put on.”

He walked to the other side and Lillia held her other arm up so he could finish securing everything. Once he finished, he took a step back and gave her a nod.

“It fits well,” Lillia said, twisting her upper body to test her range of motion. “How’d you guess my size that easily?”

“The Mesh helped,” Arwin admitted. “Does it feel too stiff?”

Lillia bent forward, reaching for her toes, then straightened back up and frowned. “I’m not sure if stiff is the right word. I mean, it’s armor. Armor is rarely going to give you one

hundred percent of the mobility you had, even if it can get a lot of it. It's a tad restrictive, but not the worst of what I've worn."

"What about weight?"

"That might be a bit of a larger problem. This is a lot better than I was expecting. It's pretty damn light, but if I add on greaves, a helm, gauntlets, and the rest, it might become a lot. My new class is really more of a caster than a warrior, and too much restriction might be more of a drawback than an aid. It's better for me not to get hit than to get hit and survive it, you know? I'm worried being weighed down too much will stop me from avoiding attacks."

"Yeah," Arwin said, rubbing his chin in thought. "You didn't manage to keep any of the strength or movement passives from your past, then?"

"The only things I kept were the shadow manipulation and my imps," Lillia said. She hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "And the darkness that seems to follow me around like a thundercloud."

"It's not so bad once you get used to it," Arwin said. "It's atmospheric – and it definitely makes it easier to sleep. Once you get your tavern open, people are going to come flocking."

"Maybe," Lillia said noncommittally. "That's not going to happen if we never get a damn chance to breathe, though. First the Iron Hounds, then the Wyrms. What next? There's always something."

"Then we'll find a way to make time in between the shitshow," Arwin said. "I'm not abandoning smithing, and the Wyrms aren't completely counterintuitive to what we want for

ourselves. I can't imagine Wyrms meat has been eaten in this area often. Being able to serve it up could bring you some customers – and I want its scales.”

“Yeah,” Lillia mused. She walked in a circle, testing out the weight of the armor like it was a new pair of shoes. “That’s true. We have to make it there without somehow getting this entire street destroyed, though.”

“Once we’re stronger, that won’t be as much of a problem. It doesn’t look like this area has anyone much beyond Journeyman tier right now,” Arwin said. “That obviously might not be the case forever, but as long as we can get to the point where we can contest people at that level, we’ll be fine.”

“Right,” Lillia said dryly, coming to a stop beside Arwin. “I mean, we could probably rush to Journeyman, but the drawbacks–”

“Aren’t worth it. We aren’t just playing the short game anymore,” Arwin said. He gently moved Lillia’s arm out of the way and started unfastening the armor. “It’s fine. There are ways we can deal with a Journeyman or two. I doubt they’ve got nearly as much gear as we do.”

“Fair point.” Lillia held her hands up and Arwin pulled the armor off her, setting it back down on the anvil. She adjusted her shirt, giving him a small nod. “Thanks.”

“Any modification requests beyond how stiff it felt?”

“I don’t know. It would be great if it was lighter, but honestly it seems fantastic even without any magic,” Lillia said after a few more seconds of thought. “There really isn’t something I feel I could fairly ask for.”

“What about unfairly?” Arwin asked.

“That would be something I’m not sure anyone can give me.” Lillia laughed and shook her head. “This is more than enough, Arwin. If anything, just make sure the greaves are on the lighter side.”

“I can do that,” Arwin said, but his eyes were still on the armor. Lillia didn’t think it could get much more flexible, but he wasn’t so sure.

What if I combine some of the elements of the scale mail and this? Couldn’t I make something that gives her a little more freedom of movement?

Arwin caught himself before he got started and completely forgot that Lillia was there. “Was there anything else you wanted? That was a lot of use.”

“No, that’s probably it.”

Lillia made no move to leave.

“Did you want something?”

“No. I was just going to sit here and keep you company. I’ve already finished cooking for the day and I don’t have much else to do right now,” Lillia said with a shrug. “Unless you wanted to work in private?”

“No, that’s fine,” Arwin said. “I’m not sure how interesting it’ll be, but I don’t mind.”

Lillia sat down against the wall, pulling her knees up to her chest and resting her chin on a palm as Arwin turned back to the anvil with her armor on it. Even with Lillia there, it didn't take him long to sink right back into his thoughts.

If I turn this solid piece into a bunch of segments from the upper chest down, I think this should be much more maneuverable. I'd have to basically take all the leatherwork apart and then cut the armor into pieces, though...

It only took Arwin a few seconds to come to a decision. He had no interest in making anything but the best product possible. If that meant he had to scrap the last few hours of work and fix it, then so be it.

He used [Scourge] to pry the bolts holding the leather in out, occasionally bringing the armor to the hearth to heat it and make the metal easier to work with. It was slow, generally annoying work, as he wanted to be able to reuse the leather after he made the modifications to the armor.

But, eventually, he got all the leather separated and laid out on top of the stack. Arwin studied the armor, thinking on what the best way to split it apart would be. Something sharp would have been great, but most of his new tools had been destroyed by the magical fire.

I don't think the knife I made Lillia is going to be too useful either. I'd probably ruin it if I used it for this, so I suppose we're doing it the old-fashioned way – with fingers.

Placing the armor into the flame, Arwin waited until it had grown to a ruddy glowing orange before activating [Scourge] and pressing his fingers into it as precisely as he could. He

made the smallest set of holes he could through the metal, working until he'd severed both the front and the back halves of the chest piece just a few inches below the breast area. Arwin took the top half of the armor out of the fire and set it to the side.

He then got some more scrap and inserted it into the flame. After letting it fully heat, Arwin took the scrap out and got to hammering it out on the anvil. In his mind, he could already start to picture the final design of the armor. He had absolutely no idea if it would actually work, but it felt fine in his mental image.

Once more, time slipped through his fingers. Arwin flattened the sheet out, removing as many impurities from it as he could, then separated it into thin bands the width of his palm and quenched and cleaned every piece once he finished it. He then sized the bands to the armor, overlaying them on top of each other like the shell of an armadillo.

He studied his design for a minute, making sure everything looked right before he got about to making pins to secure them, allowing for just enough movement for the plates to slide without letting them open too far and leave an unarmored spot.

Attaching them was slightly more problematic than he'd expected, as even the slightest mistake in his measurements meant that the bands hung at an odd angle. He had to redo his work several times, but the armor inched closer to his goal with every passing minute.

He dimly heard Lillia walking up behind him, but he was too engrossed on his work to pay attention. The Mesh fed into him, and he felt energy building at his fingertips the longer he worked.

He worked out the shimmering lights that the Mesh suggested he fix, but the original design of the armor had been his rather than from the Mesh. Arwin wasn't sure if that meant he'd gone too far and had rebelled against the metal, but it didn't feel like the metal had exactly opposed anything he'd done.

It had wanted to be armor, but it hadn't had a specific desire to be any kind of armor, so Arwin's request for it to be armor perfectly made for Lillia didn't seem to be too much of a stretch.

At least, I hope it isn't. If it is, I think I'm going to be completely lost as to what I'm supposed to do. This armor is either going to prove that the Mesh wants to guide me but still have me think for myself, or it's going to show that I have absolutely no goddamn idea what I'm doing.

Arwin turned to the leather, layering strips of it over the metal bands so they wouldn't scrape against each other. He then put in the normal padding on the chest and shoulder areas, making sure it wouldn't be too uncomfortable to wear. He added the straps and the final touches before finally setting the armor down on the anvil, finished.

The Mesh sparked, then swirled around his fingertips. Verdant Blaze hummed in approval at Arwin's side as the Mesh flooded into the newly made piece of armor.

[Flowing Ocean Armor: Rare Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Your Tier has raised by 1 rank.

“Whoa,” Lillia breathed, unable to hold her silence any longer as she stepped up beside Arwin and stared at the finished piece of armor. A ripple of blue traveled across its surface, so faint that Arwin almost missed it.

A wave of weariness wrapped around Arwin, but it didn’t stop the smile from pulling at his lips.

I leveled off making that, huh?

You know what? I think this piece might have turned out just how I wanted it to.

Chapter 73

The Mesh and its information about his tier advancing could wait – right now, the only thing that Arwin cared about was the chest piece sitting on the anvil before him. He peered at it and golden writing bloomed before his eyes.

Flowing Ocean Armor: Rare Quality

[Ebb and Flow]: This item flows like a raging river, shifting its defenses to reduce the damage of a single blow at a time. Repeated strikes in a short period of time will spread it too thin, causing it to draw high amounts of magical energy to sustain itself.

[Fragile]: This item has a high number of joints and moving components. Powerful blows have a chance of severely damaging it, dampening its magical effects until repairs can be applied.

[Forged For One]: This item was forged specifically for Lillian Los. Its abilities will not function for any other users.

[Armor of the Flowing Ocean]: This is a set item of [2] pieces. When the entire set is worn, a concealed property will be unlocked.

It possesses [1] concealed property.

“Your full name is Lillian Los?” Arwin managed.

Lillia ripped her gaze away from the armor to send a glare at him. “Why? Got something against it?”

“No, nothing like that,” Arwin said, raising his hands defensively. “Just surprised me. For some reason, I never thought...”

“I’d have a last name?” Lillia arched an eyebrow, then shook her head. “Forget it – you made this, and the first thing you take notice of is that my name is longer than you thought it was? Something’s wrong with your head.”

“Well, it didn’t turn out quite how I wanted it to,” Arwin said. “There are detrimental traits.”

“Bah. Are you kidding?” Lillia asked, picking the armor up. A faint ripple of dull blue washed through the metal like a wave trapped within it. “You’re talking about the Fragile part? Who cares? The item says it itself – you’ve got moving pieces in here. There’s no way it would be as solid as a solid block of metal. That’s the point.”

She pulled it over her head, then sent Arwin an expectant look. Suppressing a small laugh, Arwin fastened the armor onto her. When he finished, he took a step back so Lillia could test the armor out.

She twisted to the left and right, then reached down to touch her toes. Straightening back out, Lillia shook her head in mute disbelief.

“This is ridiculous. It almost feels like a second skin. It’s not stopping my movements at all,” Lillia said.

“That’s because I stopped it at the shoulders, so you aren’t getting much of your arms covered,” Arwin said. “It’s not the most defensive piece of gear I’ve ever made.”

“But it’s a set item,” Lillia pointed out, running a hand along the side of the armor. “And one you made in just a day. I don’t want to be greedy, but do you think you could make the other one as well?”

“If you’re certain you don’t want me to reforge that—”

“Don’t even think about it,” Lillia warned, thrusting a finger in Arwin’s direction. “Don’t touch it. It’s perfect.”

“Fine, fine. I won’t. I’ll see what I can do for the other item,” Arwin said. “I’m guessing the other part of the set is greaves, but I have no way to know for sure.”

“It’s a safe bet. Most 2-piece sets are armor and greaves,” Lillia said with a shrug. “Is there anything else I can do to help? Not that I think I’ve done much already, but…”

Arwin glanced around the forge. He was running a little low on scrap, but he still wasn't near out. He still had some left-over sheets and the crumpled remains of the other pieces of armor he'd made for the market.

His supplies of leather were fine as well, thanks to Reya's delivery.

"I think I'm probably good on just about everything," Arwin said. "Rodrick went out a little while ago to figure out where Tix – the woman from the Iron Hounds – was. Did he return?"

"He did. He's got the information you need, but we've been holding off on telling you to avoid distractions," Lillia said. "Do you want to talk with him?"

"Not yet," Arwin said. His hand tightened around the shaft of Verdant Blaze. "I don't know if I'd be able to keep myself here if I knew where she was. I need to get your armor finished, and then we'll head out afterward – unless you want me to try and make you gauntlets and a helm as well?"

"I think the two pieces will be more than enough," Lillia said. Her cheeks reddened faintly. "You're already doing more than I am. I don't think my ego would survive much more."

"It's not just for you," Arwin said. "It's for Zeke."

"Oh, I know." Lillia's features hardened. "I'm more than aware. That's the only reason I'm letting you make me this for free. If it were any other situation, I'd refuse to accept it until I was making enough to cover your costs and then some."

“Your help dealing with these assholes is all I’ll need,” Arwin said. “And, after that – and once we’ve dealt with the Wyrms as well – I want a damn break.”

Lillia shot Arwin a look that matched what he felt deep inside. The chances of them getting a break probably weren’t too high, but he’d be damned if he couldn’t carve out at least a week to relax and live his new life the way he wanted to.

“I’ll go make something to eat, then,” Lillia said.

“I don’t need to eat.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed to,” Lillia countered. “Do you not *want* to eat?”

“I suppose I wouldn’t object.”

“No,” Lillia agreed as she pushed the door open. “You wouldn’t.”

She stepped outside and let the door swing shut behind her. Arwin watched the doorway for a few seconds, then looked back to the [Soul Flame] in his hearth. He drummed his fingers on the hilt of Verdant Blaze, then dismissed the weapon and reached out to the Mesh.

Name: Arwin Tyrr

Class: Living Forge (Unique) (Tier: Apprentice 4)

New Skill Choice Available.

[Topple the Strong] has been consumed.

[Better Together] has been consumed.

Two of your Skill options have been upgraded.

You may select one of the following skills.

[Overdrive] – *The heat of the forge burns in your heart. Let it free. Temporarily increase your resilience and power as your muscles are infused with magical power. The duration of this effect scales with your Tier. When this effect ends, the increased strain on your muscles will hinder you for five times the amount of time you spent in Overdrive.*

[UPGRADED] [Molten Novice] (Passive) – *You have spent enough time working immersed in fire that you have begun to understand it. Become aware of the first steps in the path of Dwarven flame manipulation.*

[UPGRADED] [Quench] – *Even the greatest of fires must meet their end. Draw the heat out of a nonliving target, rapidly cooling it with magical energy.*

Arwin's brow furrowed as he studied the options floating in the air before him. The Mesh certainly didn't like making his options easy. All of the skills – again – were tempting. He could see pretty good use cases for literally every single one.

[Overdrive] would pair perfectly with **[Scourge]**, making his short-term fighting abilities even more powerful than they already were. Berserker skills were, in general, some of the strongest self-buffs due to the drawbacks that came with them.

The skill doesn't say just how extensive being 'hindered' is, but if its anything like the skills I once had, it'll be pretty brutal. I can basically count myself out of the fight until the debuff wears off.

As it currently stands, without [Scourge], I still have the benefits of my armor. I imagine those benefits will only continue to go up so long as I survive and can keep crafting stronger weapons, but having a winning move to whip out certainly wouldn't be amiss.

[Molten Novice] barely has any description at all. From what I can tell, it literally doesn't even give me anything yet. It's clearly a multi-stage ability that starts from basically nothing but could give me much better bonuses in the long haul.

That's an interesting gamble. I don't get all that many abilities to work with before the Mesh stops handing them out like candy and makes me really earn everything, so committing one of them to something that might not even work... that's a big risk. It probably wouldn't help me at all with the Iron Hounds.

Then again, it's not like I'm trying to live purely for killing them. The Iron Hounds that had a hand in what happened to Zeke will be dead soon enough.

That leaves me with [Quench]. Obviously useful for crafting but sucking all the heat out of something in a fight could be pretty effective as well. It's unfortunate it doesn't work on something living or I'd take it in a heartbeat.

Arwin tapped his foot on the ground as he examined all of the abilities. He wasn't sure if he was happy that all his options were this beneficial or annoyed that the choice was going to mean he'd have to always wonder what he'd missed out on.

And, in thinking that thought, he realized that he'd probably made his decision. Arwin let out a huff as he gave the other abilities one last look, not wanting to miss out on something that could come back to bite him later on down the line.

[Overdrive] was powerful, but it wasn't the best berserker skill he'd ever seen. As strong as it would be, he wasn't sure he wanted to completely sacrifice future strength for a boost now. Quench was also powerful, but all of his abilities were already leaning toward fire.

While diversifying his strength would be useful, the Mesh expected people to focus in on a motif as they grew stronger. It didn't force anything, but having a good vision of exactly what he wanted to be was imperative.

Granted, I'm a smith. Part of smithing is quenching the shit you make, and relying on a scuffed old barrel is hardly ideal. But... it's not like there are any smiths in the world better than the dwarves.

Their gear was some of the best I've ever seen, and the more I learn, the more I realize I probably haven't seen all that much at all. Even if it doesn't give me anything now, I think the potential of [Molten Novice] is just too high to pass up on.

His mind set, Arwin chose his skill. The Mesh shimmered, then swirled into new glittering letters.

Your core skills have been chosen.

Arwin waved it away. That was nothing of surprise. He'd gotten his freebies. From what he remembered as the Hero, his levels from here on out would provide a variety of things, but they wouldn't always be skills anymore. Level 5 would let him choose a skill to specialize in, and advancing his Tier to Journeyman would give him his first class advancement. After that, every 5 levels would provide skill related boons while the other ones were – well, whatever he managed to wring out of the Mesh.

Arwin pulled up [Arsenal]. As he'd expected, the skill's limit had raised from 3 pieces of equipment to 4. He summoned his helmet, releasing it from the temporary bond, and established a proper bond with it before banishing it once more.

He then took a second to study the new skill he'd gotten, but as he had expected, the passive didn't seem to be doing anything. Not yet, at least.

That's fine with me. I've got some greaves to forge.

And, after that, I have some people to kill.

Chapter 74

Lillia came back with food just as Arwin got ready to start working again. She rapped on the door after she'd already entered and Arwin turned, a clump of melted metal in his hands just inches from the awaiting hearth.

“That was fast,” Arwin said.

“I made something quick because I figured you’d be busy and not want to get interrupted after you got started. It pisses me off when I get halfway through a meal and then have to stop to do something else.”

“Has that happened a lot?” Arwin asked, sucking the [Soul Flame] out of the hearth and setting the metal down. He really didn’t need the food, but Lillia had made a plate of fried rice that smelled absolutely delicious.

“Surprisingly, yes.”

“Who’s bothering you?” Arwin asked as he accepted the plate from her with a grateful nod. He dug into the food while waiting for her to respond.

“Oh, it’s not someone,” Lillia admitted reluctantly. “It’s more that I’ve set fire to the kitchen once or twice. Kind of hard to keep cooking while everything is burning.”

Arwin’s eyes widened and he almost choked mid-bite. “Recently?”

“Look, I’m used to a much hotter environment, okay?” Lilla said defensively. “It’s not my fault there’s so much damn wood everywhere. My old home was all stone. Can’t set fires there unless you really want to. But here? Sure, there’s some stone. But that doesn’t help when the ceiling is half wood and everything between you and it is just as hungry for fire as your customers are for food.”

“I suppose that’s a fair point,” Arwin admitted through a mouthful of rice. “I didn’t really think about that. Were the houses you lived in that different from human ones? When you

pointed out that we were similar, I think I kind of just assumed that your cities were the same as well.”

“How did you get this far without ever knowing? I know we’ve fought in some of my cities before.”

“I never paid that much attention to the décor. I was much more concerned with killing you, unfortunately. The only thing I really focused on was my immediate party and finding you as soon as possible. Did you really pay that much attention to human cities?”

It was a second before Lillia responded. “I... did notice that they burned rather easily, now that you mention it.”

Arwin grunted, then shoveled more rice into his mouth and swallowed before speaking again. “So you weren’t any better.”

Lillia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Our cities weren’t that similar, but they were less... fragile, I guess? You use wood in so much, and you have trees and plants scattered around. Even your people tend to be softer than monsters. Monsters don’t breed as fast as humans do, but they’re also considerably stronger on average.”

“So I found,” Arwin said. “But... no trees? Was it just stone and nothing else?”

“What? No. Don’t get me wrong – some of our cities are beautiful.” Lillia’s gaze drifted as she sank into memory. “Carvings, statues, all kinds of art. We just kept it harder for things to get destroyed. For color, a lot of places would have this beautiful moss.”

“Moss?” It was Arwin’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “The fuzzy green stuff?”

“Nothing like that rot you’re talking about. The moss I’m talking about is soft and fuzzy. It absorbs magic and glows with this soft, welcoming light. It’s hard to describe. You’d only really be able to appreciate it if you saw it with your own eyes.”

“Huh,” Arwin said. “I guess I’ll keep an eye out for it. I don’t recall much of it from the battlefields, but I’ll admit that my focus was on other things at the time.”

“I doubt you’ll see it anytime soon,” Lillia said with a sad smile. “The only locations the moss grows are in monster cities, and there aren’t any of those in the area.”

Arwin finished off the last of the rice, scraping everything off the plate and into his mouth before lowering it. “That’s unfortunate. It would have been nice to see what you were talking about.”

“Not while the war is going on. You’re a human,” Lillia pointed out. “Great way to get yourself killed.”

“Maybe I could open a human themed blacksmith.”

Lillia rolled her eyes and took the plate back from Arwin. “Right. Sure. I’ll let you get back to work, then. I’m still looking forward to those greaves. If you can actually finish the set, I don’t even know what I would say.”

“Probably thank you.”

“Oh, get off it.” Lillia pushed the door open, then paused and glanced back at him. “Good luck, though. And don’t stew on your own for too long. It’s not good for your health.”

Arwin gave her a small nod. “Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

Lillia headed out onto the street, letting the door swing shut behind her. Arwin sat there, listening to it creak back and forth until it finally settled down. He shook his head to clear it, then summoned [Soul Flame] to his hands and tossed it into the hearth.

The mental break had been nice – and likely needed. He hadn’t realized quite how muddled his head was getting until after he’d finished eating, but he was ready to work again. Picking up the piece of warped metal and setting it into the fire, Arwin settled in to wait for it to grow hot enough to work with.

Arwin’s hammer rang against metal, and [Soul Fire] washed off from every strike, illuminating the partially finished greaves before him. After his conversation with Lillia, he hadn’t stopped working aside from when the heat got so high that he to stop and take a drink from the mug of water that seemed to refill itself whenever he turned his back on it.

The greaves were coming along well. Arwin and the metal had an understanding. It still didn’t have any real preference as to what it wanted to be, but it was more than happy to let him guide a larger portion of the process.

Arwin made the greaves in a similar manner to how he made the moving plates on Lillia's chest armor. By adding segmented plates and pinning them at the joints, he was able to make the armor surprisingly flexible.

It still wouldn't bend too well to the sides, but if someone's leg was trying to bend in that direction in the first place, Arwin was pretty sure they'd have bigger problems.

Making the armor out of so many pieces definitely didn't do any wonders for the amount of time it took him to finish it. Normally, Arwin was fairly confident that he could have completed the work in a day or two.

But, while he wasn't exactly sure how much time had passed, he was pretty sure he'd seen night fall through the door at least three times. His efforts hadn't been wasted, though. The Mesh tingled with every modification he made and sang as he quenched and cleaned the metal.

The Mesh pricked his fingertips every time he pressed a bolt into place and melted it with the heat of his [Soul Fire], and it sang as he inserted leather from the pile that seemed to refill itself just as much as his water did.

His work hadn't gone without trouble – there was a large pile of burnt leather and damaged metal that Arwin had tossed to the side. The metal hadn't agreed with his desires and was no good for the current project, but it had taken him nearly three hours of working it to realize.

As for the leather – well, he'd learned the hard way that there was only so long he could stick armor with leather already pinned onto it into the [Soul Flame]. That had been a mistake

that cost him nearly two hours of re-working and reforging to make sure the armor wasn't so much as stained from the mistake, but now he was nearly done.

He tapped at the metal with his hammer, limiting the energy that emerged from Verdant Blaze to make sure he didn't do more damage than he wanted to as he smoothed out the last few imperfections.

The next step was inscribing the metal with his nail. It wasn't exactly necessary, but making it completely plain didn't feel right, especially since he'd done similar work to the chest piece. If it was going to be part of a set, it had to look the part.

Arwin reached back, not even looking. His fingers found the water mug and he brought it to his lips to take a long drink from it. By this point, he knew exactly where it was. As always, it had been refilled. He set it back down, his eyes fixed on the greaves.

Will this be the set item I need? I don't even want to know how much time I spent making these greaves. Definitely one of my longest builds, and not even because it's that much fancier. That's just the amount of effort this set needed.

He wasn't sure if he'd done everything correctly. Now that the greaves were nearly done, there were so many things that Arwin already felt like he could have done better. The inscriptions he was carving into the metal felt like they weren't quite smooth enough, and some of the plates felt like they were just bit too large or small.

There was no point sitting around and endlessly trying to change the armor, though. What was done was done. And, as he put the final inscriptions into the metal and the Mesh's buzz grew

stronger, it struck Arwin that he probably didn't have a choice in the matter. Verdant Blaze shuddered at his side, small arcs of [Soul Flame] crackling off it like electricity and scorching the ground.

Golden letters swirled forth and Arwin pulled his hands back, able to do nothing but watch.

The Mesh had acknowledged his item.

[Flowing Ocean Greaves: Rare Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [Unified] has been earned.

[Unified] – *Awarded for forging your first complete set.* Effects: Your set's concealed property has been [UPGRADED]. *This achievement has been consumed upon creation of your first set.*

"I did it," Arwin muttered, barely able to believe his own words. Sure, he'd been pretty sure his theory of finding a balance between his desires and the metal's desires had been correct, but actually seeing it work was a whole different thing. He waved the Mesh away and peering down at the greaves.

Flowing Ocean Greaves: Rare Quality

[Ebb and Flow]: This item flows like a raging river, shifting its defenses to reduce the damage of a single blow at a time. Repeated strikes in a short period of time will spread it too thin, causing it to draw high amounts of magical energy to sustain itself.

[Fragile]: This item has a high number of joints and moving components. Powerful blows have a chance of severely damaging it, dampening its magical effects until repairs can be applied.

[Forged For One]: This item was forged specifically for Lillian Los. Its abilities will not function for any other users.

[Armor of the Flowing Ocean]: This is a set item of [2] pieces. When [Unknown] circumstances have been met, a concealed property will be unlocked.

It possesses [1] [UPGRADED] concealed property.

Arwin's eye twitched. "You've got to be shitting me."

He'd made the set even better than he'd planned – but not without cost. He now had absolutely no idea what it would do. But, whatever it was, it was better than what it had originally done.

Not all that useful if it doesn't actually activate, but screw it. I've got a set, and it's got the potential to be even stronger than it was meant to be.

"I hope Lillia likes surprises," Arwin said, scooping the greaves up and turning to head back for the tavern.

The wait was over.

Lillia had her equipment, and he didn't have the patience or time to spare to make anything else.

The Iron Hounds responsible for Zeke's death had been living on borrowed time, and Arwin wasn't willing to lend them a single second more.

Chapter 75

"Godspit." Lillia's voice came from behind Arwin as he examined the greaves, and he spun. She was frozen just past the doorway, frozen halfway through bending over to pick up his mug of water. She was still wearing the upper half of Flowing Ocean Armor. "You did it."

"Turned out pretty good, I'd say," Arwin said, holding the greaves out so Lillia could get a better look at them. "They're not quite as light as I would have hoped, but it's not like I had much to work with. If I'd had a different metal, then I probably could have done better – but then they wouldn't match the other piece of the set."

Lillia hefted the greaves, her brow furrowing. "Didn't it say that the concealed property would be revealed when I put everything on?"

"I got an achievement for making a set and the damn thing got changed," Arwin said through a huff. "It should be stronger than whatever it was before. Unfortunately, I've got no idea how we're meant to trigger the new effect."

Lillia set the mug down and put the greaves on, fastening the straps to tighten them around her legs. It only took her a few minutes to get them situated. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, then dropped into a fighting stance.

“Even without the concealed property, these are amazing,” Lillia said, straightening back out and shaking a leg off. “They’re obviously heavier than just pants, but nowhere near as bad as I thought they’d be. How are you getting so good at this so quickly? I’m getting jealous.”

“Are you kidding?” Arwin asked. “Have you tried your own food?”

“That’s hardly comparable. It’s not like my food keeps people alive.”

“If we’re speaking strictly technically, the only person your food doesn’t keep alive is me.”

Lillia let out a mildly amused huff. “Very funny. Sure, technically. It just feels like you’re powering ahead with your class. Most of my Hearthkeeper abilities are still pretty limited. I can’t grind out magical energy like you can.”

“Because you need more people to visit?”

“Partially,” Lillia said, wagging a hand in the air. “It’s more of a long-term thing. I basically need people’s average stay quality to be high, and I get better rewards for longer stays. It’s not something I can do at once, but it’s more like a mental rating that everyone has of the tavern. It moves slowly and steadily, not suddenly.”

“Interesting. That’s really different from my class,” Arwin said. “Living Forge almost forces me to move quickly. I wonder why they didn’t give you a faster way to advance.”

“Maybe because it would be too difficult for an inn to expand at the rate that you do,” Lillia said after a few seconds of thought. “The stronger we get, the more power we need to

sustain ourselves. You can always make more powerful items to eat, but I can't force people into my inn."

"That's a fair point," Arwin said. "I can see how it would be frustrating, though. Once the Iron Hounds and the Wyrms have been properly dealt with, then maybe we can take some time to really focus on rebuilding our buildings."

"I think I'd like that, and Gods know we need it," Lillia muttered. "When I say I'd kill for some time to just live happily, I'm not exaggerating."

"That's good." Arwin held a hand toward the hearth and the [Soul Flame] leapt from it, swirling into his palm and sinking into his body. "Because we might be just about to do that. Do you have any last modification requests for your armor, or do you need a weapon? Because, if not, I don't want to wait any longer."

"You don't need to rest first?" Lillia asked. "It's been days since you last properly slept."

Arwin considered her question for a moment. He was pretty sure that he should have felt tired, but his body and his mind were in disagreement. There was no way he was going to be getting even the slightest amount of rest while Tix was still walking around.

"I don't think that's an option. Don't worry – I'm not too tired to fight. If anything, I think I'm going to get worse the longer I push this off. It's a festering wound, and the only way to deal with it is to cut it out."

“In that case, let’s go tell the others,” Lillia said. “Do you have a plan of some sort? Or were you planning on barging in and swinging your hammer until everyone responsible was dead?”

“A mixture of the two. We don’t need to kill the entire guild – in fact, I’d much rather avoid that. Chances are, most of them are innocent,” Arwin admitted as he followed her out into the street and back over to the tavern.

“So you plan to question Tix, then?” Lillia guessed, ducking through the doorway into the darkness of her tavern. All the others were sitting at the counter, and they turned as Arwin and Lillia entered.

“Yeah,” Arwin replied. “Hopefully Rodrick’s information is still up to date.”

“It is. I’ve been keeping tabs on her. Discreetly, of course,” Rodrick said, giving Arwin a nod of greeting. His gaze caught on the armor covering Lillia’s form and his eyebrows crept upwards. “Well, damn. That’s a pretty set of gear. You might want to cover it if you don’t want the entire city tracking you down.”

“I’ll have a cloak,” Lillia said, looking down at the gear. “I just didn’t want to cover it yet. It almost feels like a shame to have to hide something so beautiful.”

“It’ll be even more beautiful when it gets put to work doing what it was made for,” Reya said grimly.. “Are you going to kill those bastards now?”

“The ones that deserve it, yes,” Arwin said.

“You don’t need rest?” Reya asked. “It’s been over a week since you started working.”

Arwin stared at Reya in disbelief. He knew a few days had passed, but a whole week was far beyond his estimations. “You’re kidding. That long?”

“That long,” Reya confirmed. “It might be dangerous to fight while you’re exhausted.”

“It’s fine. I’m really not. I should be, but I’m not. I don’t think my body is going to let me rest until this shit is dealt with.”

“You know what? I can’t blame you,” Reya said. “Just... don’t die.”

“Maybe you can show Arwin some of what you made?” Lillia offered.

“Oh, yeah. Hold on.” Reya slipped off her chair and headed into the kitchen.

“Made?” Arwin asked, but Reya had already returned with a small mug in her hands. It was difficult to make much out in the dim light, but it looked like it was full of a ruddy amber liquid. “What is this?”

“Apple juice. Lillia got mad that I was pacing around the tavern and disturbing the vibes, so she made me help her cook,” Reya said. “It wasn’t bad.”

Arwin took a sip from the mug, then downed the rest of it. “Thank you. That’s pretty good. Maybe you could join Lillia as a cook at some point.”

Reya snorted. “I’d really rather not. It was fun spending time with her, but I don’t think cooking is my calling.”

“Fair enough,” Arwin said. He set the mug on the counter, then looked to Rodrick. “You said you were keeping tabs on Tix?”

“Vague ones. I didn’t want to give anything away, and I’m not exactly a master spy,” Rodrick said with a half-shrug. “I do know a bit about her location, though. I drew up some information since I figured you and Lillia would probably be doing this as a duo mission.”

“That may be for the best. If things go poorly, I don’t want anyone else getting caught up in it,” Arwin said. He didn’t miss the dissatisfaction on Reya’s face and added, “this is the last time, though. In the future, so long as we’re in the same guild, we’re doing it together. I just need to make sure we’re all ready for it.”

“Sometimes I wonder what it is that a wanderer did to get himself ready for this,” Anna said, her voice soft. “But I think I’m willing to wait for the answer.”

“And you’ll get it, if you really want to know – and assuming I survive this. If I don’t, you can ask Reya. I’ve already told her most of it,” Arwin said with a sigh. “Just make sure you want to know. Some stones are better off left unturned.”

“We’ll deal with it when the time comes,” Anna said. “For now, I just want to see the Iron Hounds pay.”

“As do I,” Arwin said. “Rodrick, where can we find Tix right now?”

Rodrick pulled a folded-up square of parchment out of his pocket and waved for them to follow him. “Outside. It’s too hard to see detail in here.”

Arwin and Lillia tailed after Rodrick and he opened up the piece of paper, revealing a roughly drawn map of what Arwin assumed to be the city. Several buildings were circled and had numbers beside them. Beneath the map, each number had nearly a paragraph of description.

“This is everything I found out about Tix,” Rodrick said, handing the map to Lillia. “From what I found in the last week or so, she tends to frequent a few different places. The restaurant – Brigsby’s Kitchen – is her favorite. She goes almost every other day. That’s where she’ll be right about now, but that area is pretty crowded.”

Rodrick traced a street beside the restaurant with his finger, ending at a large building that he’d circled. “This is the path she takes back to the Iron Hounds guild house, which is this building over here. She usually takes about three hours at the restaurant, and she should have headed over to it about an hour and a half ago.”

He moved his finger over to one of the buildings along the street that he’d labeled with a small star and tapped on it. “If you wait in the alleyways, you might be able to run out and tackle her into the building. This particular part of the street is dark, and it’s already on the later side. Lillia’s got that shadow magic of hers – that might be enough to snag her before anyone notices. But, just in case you wanted to try something else, I’ve got some other plans lined out over here.”

Arwin stared at Rodrick. He claimed to just know a bit about her location, but it sounded more like he’d stalked her every move for the past week and written every single thing he’d learned down.

Not a master spy my ass.

“This is... extensive,” Lillia said. “How’d you manage to get this much information on Tix?”

“Oh, it was pretty easy. The Iron Hounds are recruiting right now, so I went to the guild building and pretended to apply. It didn’t take me long to figure out they like going to Brigsby’s, so I went there and hung around until Tix showed up. It was pretty easy to time how long she spent there, and I talked to the waiter, who told me that Tix was a regular. Most of what I did was just talking to people and sitting around, really.”

“Right,” Arwin said slowly. He looked back down to the map. “You said we’ve got an hour and a half before she leaves?”

“Roughly. It’s not like I can read her mind. I’d play it safe and make sure you’ve got at least half an hour of leeway in either direction.”

“So – what, the plan is to shove her into the room and then make her tell us who she worked with?” Lillia asked.

“Pretty much. Maybe you guard the door to make sure nobody comes in?” Arwin asked. “How populated is this street, Rodrick?”

“Not particularly, but there are a few other buildings. If you make too much noise, someone might overhear you. Either way, you’ll have to be pretty fast.”

“I can do that,” Arwin said. “Especially if Lillia makes sure we don’t get interrupted. Tix looked like a warrior, but I didn’t get the feeling she was so strong that I couldn’t handle her.”

“Is the street dark?” Lillia asked.

“At the time you’ll be there? Yeah. There are lanterns lining it, though.”

“I can put those out and shroud the entrance of the house so people instinctively avoid it,” Lillia said. “Then I’ll wait outside and make sure nobody comes in. If it sounds like you’re having trouble, I’ll come in and back you up.”

“That works,” Arwin said, folding the map up. “Thank you, Rodrick. You put in a lot of work.”

“It really wasn’t that hard. If anything, it feels like it wasn’t enough.”

“It will be,” Arwin said as he put the map into his pocket, his features grim. “Let’s go have a talk with Tix.”

Chapter 76

For once, time seemed to crawl for Arwin. He and Lillia had found the house that Rodrick indicated on his map without too much difficulty, but waiting for Tix to actually show up was agony.

He sat inside the house while Lillia lurked in the alleys just beyond it, watching for Tix. There was no way to know exactly when she would show up, and Arwin was pretty sure that his face would raise at least a little suspicion if she spotted him.

If they wanted to properly get the jump on Tix, they needed her inside. She was a warrior, so Arwin doubted that he'd have long to take her out if he wanted to make sure she couldn't call for help.

After some discussion with Lillia, they'd come up with a strategy that Arwin felt was about as reliable as they were going to get. There was no way to keep Tix from calling for help – even if he could kill her in a single blow, there was no point.

Arwin didn't just need Tix dead. He needed answers, and that meant she had to be able to speak. And, if she could speak, she'd have a chance to cry out for help. There was only one way they could realistically think of that would keep Tix from calling out the moment she came under attack.

She needs to think she's in control. Tix was definitely a warrior of some sort. If she's convinced that I can't put up a fight or I'm not strong enough to defeat her, she's unlikely to go running for help. Her reputation would be ruined.

I can't rely on that for long, but it'll be enough. It has to be.

Unfortunately, before any plans could come into fruition, Arwin still had to wait for Tix to actually show up. The fact that he couldn't even see Lillia was making things worse. He knew she was just outside, waiting for an unsuspecting Tix to pass by, but that didn't make him any less tense.

Seconds felt like minutes as they ground by. He could have sworn the hours had passed thrice over already, but still the house was silent. Arwin's hands were clammy – not out of fear, but out of anticipation. The temptation to summon Verdant Blaze was strong, but he resisted it.

Arwin didn't call on any of his weapons or armor. He needed to look exactly the same as Tix had first seen him. Anything else could completely ruin their plan. If all went well, she'd deduce that Arwin had been the one with the shadow magic and wouldn't even know there was a second person with him.

But, until Lillia ran into Tix, there was absolutely nothing Arwin could do other than stew in his thoughts and wait. He was pretty sure she should have passed by now.

Maybe Rodrick's estimates were a little off, or she swapped something up today. I'm not sure if–

A startled curse from outside the building was the only warning Arwin got. He nearly tripped over himself as a woman stumbled through the door, propelled forward by a tendril of shadow that started to dissipate even as she spun, a sword flying free of its sheath.

Arwin slammed the door shut, his body moving before his mind had even processed that their plan had started in true.

“You!” Tix exclaimed, the tip of her blade dipping slightly in surprise. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You know what my problem is,” Arwin growled. “What the hell did you do to my smith?”

“Your smith? I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never even met the guy.”

“That’s a lie,” Arwin said, letting anger enter his voice as his lips pulled back. It wasn’t difficult to fake the rage, considering almost all of it was completely genuine. “He told me you met. A few days later, his forge goes up in a ball of fire – and you’re the only one that met him.”

“Look – what was your name again?”

“Arwin.”

“Right. Look, Arwin. I never met your smith. It looks like you’re in grief, so I’ll let you off this once. Get out of my way, or I’m going to cut you down where you stand.”

Arwin shook his head. “You’re lying. Again. I know the Iron Hounds are the ones that destroyed the smithy, Tix. If you don’t talk to me here and now, then I’m going to take the information to someone that will.”

Tix’s eyes narrowed. For several seconds, the two of them stood in silence. Then Tix heaved a sigh, shaking her head in disappointment as the tip of her sword raised again.

“Idiot. You had to go and say that, didn’t you? I was trying to give you a way out, moron. Do you think I like going around murdering people? I can’t let you leave after that. Jessen would have my head.”

Jessen? One of my targets, perhaps? It sounds like he’s higher up in the guild than Tix is.

“You’re fooling yourself if you thought I’d let you leave here alive after killing one of my friends,” Arwin growled. “Tell me why you did it.”

“Idiot. I’m not telling you anything,” Tix said with a scoff. “Gods, I didn’t think you were such an idiot when we met. I should have known when you sold me the damn armor for so much less than what it was worth. That’s on you, kid. Just like your smith friend’s life.”

She lunged forward, her body blurring as she used some form of skill to accelerate herself. The sword flitted for Arwin’s neck, aiming to dispatch him in a single blow. Arwin had to admit that Tix was fast.

There was no doubt that the woman was a competent warrior, but she wasn’t faster than the speed of thought. [Arsenal] activated and all of Arwin’s armor slammed onto his body an instant before the sword could connect. He shifted his stance just enough to make sure the blade would connect with his shoulder instead of his neck.

A resounding clang rang out and Tix staggered back her sword vibrating in her hand. The shoulder guards were one of the most reinforced sections on Arwin’s armor thanks to the crystals infused into them, and it was evident that Tix didn’t have nearly enough strength to break through it.

Tix’s eyes widened as she looked into the carved metal of Arwin’s helm. Her mouth opened, but Arwin didn’t give her time to speak. He lunged forward, Verdant Blaze materializing in his grip, and he brought the hammer down for Tix’s blade.

She shifted despite her shock, dodging the blow instead of trying to block it. The way she moved was enough to tell Arwin that she’d fought hammer users before. Trying to block his blows was a great way to get pulverized.

“Impossible. You’re dead!” Tix hissed, even as she thrust her sword for a gap in Arwin’s armor. He blocked the blow with the haft of the hammer, then brought it down for her shoulders. Tix was forced to jump back, and Arwin positioned himself so that his back was to the door.

Based on the way Tix was fighting, she was probably somewhere in the high Apprentice Tier. She knew what she was doing, but she wasn’t at the point where she should overpower Arwin through either skill or ability.

Of course, she hadn’t quite figured that out yet.

“Not me,” Arwin said, his knuckles whitening as his grip tightened. [Soul Flame] ignited at the head of Verdant Blaze, illuminating the darkness with its hungry light. “Who worked with you, Tix? Who destroyed my smithy that night?”

“I heard you forging in it,” Tix said, taking a step back. “You can’t be alive. There’s no way a smith could survive that.”

“The smith didn’t,” Arwin said, advancing on Tix. “You killed him. He burned to death in that building, Tix. Just like you wanted.”

“Then how are you here?” Tix demanded, lunging at Arwin again in an attempt to get past his guard. He activated [Scourge] and twisted out of the way, slamming his hand down on her wrist and breaking it with a snap.

The sword flew from Tix’s hand, clattering against the ground. Arwin’s other hand slammed over her mouth, muffling the scream before it could escape her lips. The anger in Arwin’s chest burned brighter with every passing second.

“Answer the damn question,” Arwin growled, barely even able to form words. “Who—”

Tix bit down on his palm. Arwin snarled in pain, yanking his hand back and dropping her. She lunged for her sword, grabbing it with her good hand. Tix’s bite was a lot stronger than it should have been – an ordinary human’s bite wouldn’t have been able to get through [Indomitable Bulwark], so she must have had some body enhancing buffs active.

“I don’t care how you came back to life. I’m sending you back to the grave,” Tix snarled. Ghostly white energy swirled across the edge of her blade and she lunged, her entire body blurring to the point where Arwin completely lost track of her.

The only thing that saved him was his instinct born from years of battle. His hands shot up, protecting his neck, and Tix’s sword carved into the back of his forearms, splattering blood across the ground.

By the time Arwin lowered his hands, she’d vanished again. Arwin spun, jumping to the side. A screech rang out as her sword bit into the side of his armor. Energy poured out of Arwin as the armor activated, sending a whip of [Soul Flame] streaking through the air.

Arwin didn’t see it connect, but he heard Tix hiss in pain. He didn’t have any time to gauge how effective the injury had been, though. Another blow carved across his back, digging deep into his armor but failing to penetrate it.

“Just die already!” Tix’s voice demanded – and a flicker of ironic amusement struck Arwin. She was trying to be just as quiet as he was. They both thought they were the hunter and the other the prey.

There was only one way to find out who was right.

Arwin couldn't tell where Tix was going to come from, but she'd already tried attacking him from behind several times. Her buff made her considerably faster than anything he could hit, so there was only one option left to him.

He spun, raising his hands once more. As he'd predicted, Tix's blade slammed into his forearms deep enough to strike bone – but not enough to cut through it. And, in the brief instant that Tix was standing still to execute the strike, Arwin used [Arsenal] to banish his helmet and yanked his hands up, taking the sword in his forearms with it.

Tix's grip on the blade was too great to pull the blade free of her hands, but he caught her by enough surprise to move it up just a few inches and worsen the wound in his arms. Tix didn't try to resist, and it wasn't a surprise.

When an opponent helped you injure them, there wasn't a reason to oppose it. After all, moving the sword even closer to your own throat wasn't a move that would benefit anyone – other than Arwin.

With a roar and before Tix could pull the sword back to strike at him again, Arwin bit down on the blade. There was a brief moment of resistance as the item desperately tried to hold its form.

It was more than anything else had ever given him, and it was just long enough for Tix to voice a surprised, "What the fu–"

The blade shattered. Power pumped through Arwin's body and his fist shot out, slamming into the side of Tix's head. She tumbled back, the fragments of the blade clattering down as she rolled, slamming into the stone wall with a thud.

Arwin dropped his hands, ignoring the blood that dripped down them and onto the ground as he closed the distance between Tix. She tried to stumble to her feet, but the dazed look in her eyes told Arwin that she'd hit her head against the wall.

His hand shot out, wrapping around her neck as he activated [Scourge] and lifted Tix into the air. Pain pumped through his arms from the deep wounds, but it didn't even come close to distracting him from the ache in his heart.

"Who worked with you?" Arwin demanded, his helmet re-forming around his face as Tix nose-to-nose with the mask. "Tell me their goddamn names, Tix."

"How?" Tix wheezed, trying and failing to draw in air. Even if she wanted to call for help now, Arwin's tight grip wouldn't let her. "What are you? How can you be alive?"

"Last chance," Arwin said. "Names, Tix. I don't care if it's every person in your guild or just two of them. I want to know names, and I want to know why."

"Gods, I'll tell you! Just let go of me! I'm going to suffocate," Tix begged, pulling fruitlessly at his blood-slicked hand. With the power of [Scourge] strengthening his hand and no blade to cut him with, there was nothing she could do but comply.

Arwin loosened his hold by just enough to let Tix speak.

“Then speak.”

Chapter 77

Lillia stood by the door, her shadows wrapped around herself and the building like a massive cloak. Just like Rodrick had said, the street wasn't particularly populated. It must have been less than a minute since she'd yanked Tix into the building, but it felt like a century.

After a brief exchange, there had been only silence. If Tix had won, Lillia was pretty sure the woman would have tried to leave by now, so logically, Arwin should have been fine. Unfortunately, logic did nothing for the scenarios that flashed through her mind.

A passerby headed across the street, glancing over his shoulder as he passed the spot of darkness in the already ill-lit street. He shook his head and accelerated, quickly turning a corner. There was something built deep into the human psyche that kept the smart ones from peering too closely into the dark, and it was working in Lillia's favor.

What is Arwin doing in there? I can't even hear anything. If he can't get the information from Tix, we're never really going to be able to take out everyone that killed Zeke unless we destroy the entirety of the Iron Hounds.

Shit. I should have offered to help interrogate her when she went down. My imps could have scared the shit out of her until she spoke. I'm not sure Arwin is going to be able to do anything –

The door creaked, but it didn't open all the way. Lillia glanced over her shoulder at the mostly empty street, then back to the building. That was pretty clearly an invitation to enter, and Tix shouldn't have known that there were two of them, so it had to be from Arwin.

Ah. He probably couldn't get the information from her after all. That's fine. I don't think many humans can stand their ground if I pull out a few Lesser Imps and make some shit up about eating them alive for eternity.

Lillia slipped through the door, intensifying the shadows around her even further to make sure nobody could peer into the building. She then turned, ready to play her, part, and her heart locked in place.

Two charcoal red eyes burned in the dark, gripping her entire body with such intensity that it threatened to knock the breath from her lungs. They illuminated the air around a heavily armored figure, glowing with just enough intensity to cast shadows through the dark.

Before she could stop herself, Lillia took a step back. Blood ran from the figure's arms and dripped down from their fingers, pattering to the ground and breaking the silence. It took Lillia a moment to realize that the visage of death standing before her was Arwin. But, even with that knowledge, the burning aura pouring off him continued to bind her chest with iron bands.

"Arwin?" Lillia asked. "Are you—"

"Four," Arwin said. His voice sounded muted and distant from behind the scowling mask that obscured his face.

"Four?"

“There were four of them,” Arwin said, drawing in a deep breath. His hands clenched into fists, causing the flow of blood trickling down his arms to intensify. “Now there are three.”

Lillia looked past Arwin, her eyes decoding the darkness. Evidently, Arwin hadn't needed any help getting information from Tix. She lay in a crumpled heap in the corner of the building, dead.

“Did you...”

“Torture her?” Arwin asked, his voice taut. “No. I will not become a monster. She died a quick death. It was not a pretty death, but it was a clean one. Cleaner than the one that she gave Zeke.”

Lillia recognized the note in Arwin's words from the tightness that never seemed to leave her own chest. Another might have mistaken the tightness in his words and the syllables he spat a sign of anger, but they would have been wrong.

It was loss. Bitter, jagged loss. The kind that could only come from seeing the people one cared about fall before them, over and over again. Zeke had been a kind boy, but it wasn't just his death that rested on their chests.

Lillia pushed through the aura rolling off Arwin. As strong as it was, this wasn't the first time she'd dealt with this unique flavor of pain. It was the culmination of every single person that had been ripped from their grasp prematurely. A wound that had never gotten the chance to heal over; ripped open once more.

She stepped forward, taking Arwin's bloodied hands in her own. Blood slicked her palms, but she was so used to it that she barely even noticed. "Let go of that skill, Arwin. We got what we needed."

Arwin didn't respond, but his hands tightened around hers.

"One step at a time," Lillia said softly. "Who were the other three?"

"Erik, Jessen, and Yul."

"Did you find out more?" Lillia asked. "What their roles were? Why they ordered you killed in the first place?"

The burning coals that were Arwin's eyes faded into the dark, returning to normal mask holes and revealing his eyes behind them. The questions didn't truly matter – they were just something for Arwin to focus on and ground himself again. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Jessen is the guild leader. He didn't directly order the death, but everything that happened was because of his orders. Jessen is at Journeyman 3. Erik is the second in command. He's not very strong, but Jessen trusts him. Tix doesn't – didn't – like him. He's the one that ordered me killed. Yul is a Journeyman 1 mage. He's the one that destroyed the smithy."

More of Arwin's normal tone returned with every word until he had control of himself once more.

“I don’t think we can go for them today,” Lillia said, looking to Arwin’s arms. “We need to get you to Anna.”

“That may be wise,” Arwin said. “I’ve lost a good bit of blood. Tix was stronger than I thought she was.”

Lillia drew a hand up through the air, pulling her fingers in toward her palm. The shadows at her feet expanded as two Lesser Imps rose up from the darkness and hurried over to Tix’s body.

“We don’t need to leave a corpse to notify the others what’s going on,” Lillia said. “It should be some time before anyone figures out what happened to her. That’ll be long enough for us to take the others out.”

“Yeah,” Arwin said. His armor vanished, leaving him in his plain clothes once more. “We might need your shadows to get back home. If anyone sees me like this, I’m going to look pretty suspicious.”

“I can do that,” Lillia said, guiding Arwin toward the door even as muted the crunch of bone echoed in the darkness behind them.

“Godspit, what did you do to your arms?” Anna asked, rushing over to Arwin as soon as he entered the tavern. She pressed her hands to his wounds, sending gentle golden light pouring out and into him.

Reya and Rodrick stood to the side, watching with concern and trepidation as they waited to hear the results of the night mission.

Arwin let out a sigh of relief as the wounds shrank, stitching themselves shut before completely vanishing. Anna kept her hands on him for a few seconds longer before letting the power fade.

“There. I can’t replenish all the blood you lost, but you’re a pretty big bastard. You should be fine. Is…”

“Tix is dead,” Arwin said, flexing his fingers and giving Anna a nod. “And I got the names of everyone else involved. It wasn’t as bad as we feared. There are three more people that have to die.”

“The guild leader?” Rodrick guessed.

“That’s one of them,” Arwin said. “How did you know?”

“There were rumors of him being really obsessed with getting stronger quickly. He basically shot up in power overnight,” Rodrick replied. “The Iron Hounds didn’t even exist a month ago, but now he’s somehow a Journeyman and considered one of the better guilds in the city. That kind of meteoric growth and being a nice guy tend to not go hand in hand.”

“We don’t know the extent of his involvement yet,” Arwin said. “But he was at least partially responsible. The person with the most blame is Erik, the second in command of the guild. He’s the one that ordered the smithy to be destroyed.”

“Then the last one was the one that actually destroyed it?” Anna guessed.

Arwin nodded. “Yes. His name is Yul. Once the three of them are dead, Zeke can rest. Perhaps we’ll do the rest of the city a favor as well and purge it from some of the scum running around in it.”

“I’ll look into them,” Rodrick said. “I already know of Jessen and Erik. I haven’t heard of Yul, but I don’t imagine it should be too difficult to track him down.”

“Just be careful,” Arwin said. “Now that Tix is dead, it won’t be long before people start getting suspicious. We have one, maybe two days to take out the rest of them.”

“On your own?” Reya asked doubtfully. “You barely beat Tix.”

“I had to fight her alone,” Arwin said. “We were focusing on stealth for this kill because we needed information. That’s no longer the case.”

“What, you’re going to barge into their guildhall?” Reya asked. “There’s no way that’ll work again.”

“Probably not,” Arwin agreed. “Jessen will come last. Yul and Erik should be easier. Erik isn’t strong and Yul is a caster. He’s going to be horrible against anyone that can get up close and personal. We can take them both out pretty easily.”

“What about Jessen?” Anna asked. “He’s a Journeyman.”

“Anyone who rises through the ranks quickly is either an idiot or desperate,” Arwin said. “He’s trading his future power for a boost now. The only logical reason to do that is because you don’t have another choice. That’s why he’ll come last. I don’t know what’s got him cornered.”

“So what’s the plan? What are we doing?” Reya asked. “You sound like you’re going to need help this time around.”

“Help... might go a long way,” Arwin admitted reluctantly. “I just want you out of harms way. You don’t have the armor or defenses that I do. But, if we could have people all out gathering information tomorrow, it would go a long way.”

“I’m pretty sneaky. I can do that no problem,” Reya said.

“I am not,” Lillia said. “It’s easy to keep people away from me, but a patch of darkness strolling around is about as subtle as a war drum.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not particularly stealthy myself,” Arwin said. He leaned against the counter and let his gaze pass over everyone in the room. “No risks. Lillia and I will handle the fighting. You all just help with figuring out where everyone is. Is that fine?”

A round of determined nods answered his question and Arwin gave them a grim, tight-lipped smile.

“By tomorrow night, we’re crossing Yul and Erik off the list.”

Chapter 78

Despite his weary body, Arwin didn't sleep that night. He did his best, but he once again found himself sitting next to Lillia on her bed, enveloped in a cloak of darkness as true rest evaded both of them.

"This is turning into a bad habit, don't you think?" Lillia asked as they waited for the night to pass.

"Certainly not a healthy one. You'd think I'd be exhausted by now, but my body just won't accept it. It just kicks me back into awareness the moment I even start thinking about sleep."

"It's not just about Zeke, you know," Lillia said. "You're pinning everything on the Iron Hounds."

Arwin let out a muffled bark of laughter, unable to control himself but still doing his best to avoid waking anyone up. "I know. I never said it was right. The Adventurer's Guild is beyond me right now. I'm not strong enough to handle them. But the Iron Hounds – them, I can deal with."

"And yet, they aren't the same," Lillia said. "You can't treat one wound by healing another."

"You think I don't know that?" Arwin asked. He leaned back against the wall and craned his head back to stare at the ceiling – or rather, in the direction of the ceiling. It wasn't like he could make anything out in the blanket of night enveloping him. "Nothing I can do can ever bring anyone back, but doing anything feels better than doing nothing."

“Certainly not arguing that,” Lillia said. “I didn’t really have a direction I was taking that, if I’m being honest. I don’t have advice. If I’d been the one in the room with Tix, she’d have met the exact same fate she met at your hands. Maybe a worse one.”

“If that would have done anything to bring someone back, I would have done it,” Arwin said. “But I’ll settle for stopping the Iron Hounds from ever doing this again. It’s to protect other people.”

At least, that’s what I’m going to tell myself. Even if they never planned to kill another innocent, I don’t think I’d just let things go. Maybe I was never suited to be the Hero of Mankind at all. I’m not nearly forgiving enough.

Arwin and Lillia fell silent. There was nothing left to be said, and they were both lost within the maze of their own thoughts. The morning would come when it came, but it probably wouldn’t come anywhere near soon enough.

But, eventually, the night came to pass. And, when the morning did roll around, everyone was ready. Lillia and Arwin emerged into the tavern to find the others all waiting for them, determined expressions on their faces.

“I’ve mapped out a plan,” Rodrick said. “One that should utilize all of us as effectively as possible. We’re all going to split up and focus on watching a different person.”

“All of us?” Arwin asked, his thoughts drifting back to the overly complex map that Rodrick had drawn for locating Tix. There was no way the man was just a failed adventurer. He

knew way too much about hunting people down, and Arwin wasn't sure if he was glad to have Rodrick on his side or concerned as to why Rodrick knew all this.

“No.” Rodrick shook his head. “I should correct that. Anna and I will be watching Yul and Erik, respectively. Reya is going to be the intermediary, because she can't be seen in public due to all the enemies she seems to have. She'll be running around on the rooftops, looking for signs that Anna and I give her. She'll then deliver that information to you and Lillia, who can close in on the targets.”

“Right,” Arwin said. “So what do we do in the meantime?”

“You'll be lying in wait in an area roughly between Anna and myself,” Rodrick replied. “We're going to want to move quickly, but we have to move at the right time. Not only do we need to kill two different people, we need to do it without people figuring out who did it. That means they have to go down while they're close to each other, but not so close that they can help.”

“And you're confident that situation is going to show up?” Arwin asked doubtfully.

“Why would they be close but not together?”

“It would happen when they're heading back to their guild hall,” Anna answered for Rodrick. Most people eat meals at roughly the same time, but unless Yul and Erik are close friends, it's unlikely they're eating it together. As long as the timeframe for their meals isn't too far off, we should be able to get them one after the other.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch, but I see where you’re headed with this,” Arwin said. “How do we keep the rest of the Iron Hounds from seeing this happen, though? If we do something that close to their guild hall, they’ll almost have someone that’ll notice the sounds of the commotion.”

“I’ve accounted for that,” Rodrick said, a grim smile passing over his lips. “But I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

The wind rustled the hood of Reya’s cloak and nipped at her eyes. She stood at the edge of a roof, looking down at the city below her. It wasn’t exactly the tallest building in the area, but she wasn’t a huge fan of heights, so it was the highest she was willing to climb.

Day had already turned to late evening. Reya’s legs were sore from running around the whole time, relaying information from Rodrick and Anna to Arwin and Lillia, but her work wasn’t done yet.

Rodrick had been right. Arwin hadn’t liked the idea at all, but he’d eventually come around. The plan was just too good, and Arwin didn’t have any good ways to turn it down. They all wanted the same thing, and she was done sitting around and watching other people do it for her.

I just need to keep myself from getting killed in the process. Just like Rodrick said, Yul and Erik have pretty close schedules. They’re somewhere around ten to twenty five minutes off of each other, which means I need a distraction that lasts for at least thirty minutes.

It's a damn good thing that Rodrick helped me come up with some different potential distractions for different times. He definitely knows what he's doing. I wonder if he was a master thief or something before. Maybe he was the guy that planned the heists, but his whole crew got caught and so now he's going around adventuring.

As fun as that thought was to play out, Reya brought it to a halt. She had more than a job to do tonight. She had a point to prove – and she was in just the right spot to do it. The Iron Hounds' guild hall was only about five minutes to her north, but she couldn't head over quite yet.

Reya considered dropping from the roof to the ground below. It probably would have been a pretty intimidating move for anyone that may have been watching, but she settled for saving her kneecaps and climbing down normally instead.

Once she got down – in one piece, without any cracked bones from overeager jumping – she pulled her hood back and strode up to an old door in the side of a stone building. It wasn't anything particularly special, but Reya recalled this particular door.

She'd been at it not all that long ago. And, while she didn't remember exactly who was behind it, she was pretty sure they remembered her. Reya rapped on the wood several times, then took a step back to wait.

A second passed. Reya got impatient and knocked again.

The door swung open, revealing a rat-faced man with thinning brows and pinched features. “What in the – wait. You!”

“Hullo,” Reya said, slapping the man full across the face before turning and sprinting in the other direction.

“It’s the damn thief!” the man screamed, recovering from his shock with remarkable speed and darting out after her. “Nate, get the others and get your asses out here!”

Reya didn’t wait to see if the other criminals responded to the man’s calls. She still couldn’t quite recall his name, but it didn’t matter. What did matter is that she was faster than him.

She took care to avoid getting too far ahead, always giving her pursuer just enough time to see her back disappearing around a bend. Entirely unbeknownst to him, she ran him in a full circle, coming back out in the street just as a dozen other men poured out from the building, half of them drunk.

Reya blew a kiss to them, then jumped back as the rat-faced man lunged at her. His hands whistled through the air, catching nothing, and Reya took off once more.

“Get the little shit!” the man squealed, scrambling back upright and taking off with his horde at his feet.

Got them.

Reya skidded down an alley, then scrambled up a wall. She sat on top of it, waiting for the fastest of her pursuers to turn down the alley she’d run into before dropping on the other side. Curses rang out as the men climbed the wall behind her. Reya didn’t wait around for them. She was already almost to where she needed to be.

Almost as if on cue, Anna dashed out of the shadows, a cloak over her head and breathing heavily. She dug through her pockets and thrust a key on a necklace at Reya.

“Here,” Anna said between pants. “You make running fast look much easier than it actually is. I got them. If Rodrick didn’t plan the path for me, I would have been screwed. You sure you can stay ahead of these guys?”

“Me? Easily,” Reya said with a scoff. She took the key and returned it to her necklace. “I’m not that fast, but these idiots are slow – in the feet *and* in the head. Get out of here so they don’t keep thinking you’re me.”

Reya nodded, then ripped the cloak off and bundled it up in her arms as she strode off. Only a few seconds later, Reya heard the sounds of her pursuit gaining on her. She waited around a little longer, letting them catch one more glimpse of her before she was off once more.

It didn’t take her long to run into the other half of the plan. Another group of men headed down the alley straight in Reya’s direction, their eyes widening in shock as they spotted her right in front of them.

“There she is!” One of them yelled.

Reya jumped onto the side of the nearest building, climbing onto it and racing into the night in the direction of the Iron Hounds’ base – two different groups of thieves hot in pursuit. If she’d been much farther from the guild house, it would have been nearly impossible to pull off.

Fortunately, Reya had absolutely no shortage of enemies in the city, so it hadn’t been hard to find two groups in roughly the same area. Reya lowered herself to the ground on the

street right across from the Iron Hounds' guild house right as the first of the groups turned the corner.

“No more running,” the rat-faced man snarled, pointing a short sword that he must have borrowed from one of his colleagues at Reya. “You die here, you thieving little shit.”

“You're thieves too!” Reya protested. “I don't see the problem.”

“You stole from us! That's the damn problem!”

Reya didn't get a chance to respond. The other group sprinted out from the alley behind her, and she turned toward them with a wide, practiced smile. The men skidded to a stop, spotting the other group behind Reya.

“Get them!” Reya yelled, not giving either group time to process what they'd seen. And, on cue, a rock flew from an alleyway, striking one of the men in the second group in the head. He stumbled, letting out a slew of curses as blood started to trickle down his scalp.

It didn't take both of the groups long to come to the exact same conclusion – that the opposing group had sided with Reya. If they'd stopped to actually say anything, the entire plan would have fallen apart in seconds.

Unfortunately for them, the victor of a street brawl was generally the one that struck first. So, as one, the two groups charged each other, all seeking the head of the woman who stood in their center.

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Reya waited until they were upon her before making a mad dash to escape. She used [Imprison] on the fastest of the bandits, ducking under his frozen attack and throwing her cloak up behind her to buy another few seconds.

This wasn't the first time she'd run from an angry crowd, but it definitely was the first time she'd run from one that she'd intentionally made. Reya ducked and dodged to the best of her ability, but even that wasn't enough to avoid anything.

A blade cut across her cheek and another scraped along her back, cutting through her robes and colliding with the armor that Arwin' had made her. The armor shimmered and magical energy poured into it.

Reya squeezed her eyes shut a moment before a brilliant flash lit the night. Surprised yells rose up, but it was too late. Reya used the distraction to slip away, sprinting into the alleyway.

It was too late to stop the brawl, though. The fight had started in earnest, and as long as they didn't know where Reya was, it would continue for at least a little while. It wouldn't be long before the Iron Hounds came looking to figure out what in the world was going on outside their guild hall.

Reya slipped into the darkness, where Rodrick stepped out of an alley to meet her, a stone in each of his hands.

“Nice work,” Rodrick said. “You didn't get hurt too badly, did you?”

“Just a cut on the face,” Reya replied, wiping the blood from her cheek. The wound was a little deeper than she’d initially thought, but it wasn’t anything too serious – though it would probably scar if Anna didn’t take care of it.

“Good,” Rodrick said as the clamor of battle intensified behind them. “That’s our role, then. Let’s go meet back up with Anna and see if we need to bail Arwin and Lillia out.”

“I thought the plan was to let them handle things on their own because it was too dangerous?”

“I made the plan, so I get to change it,” Rodrick replied. “Arwin is a better fighter than I am, but he’s terrible at relying on people for anything that’s important. Lillia is the same, even though she’s not as vocal about it. With any luck, we won’t have to do anything at all. But I’d rather be overprepared than underprepared.”

“Me too,” Reya said with a nod. “I’ll be right behind you.”

They headed into the night, and Reya hoped that Arwin and Lillia’s side of the plan had been having just as much success as hers did.

“How are we supposed to know what Yul looks like?” Lillia asked as they stood in the darkness of the alleyway, listening to the fight start to break out in the distance. “What if someone else is heading down the path that he chose?”

“We’ll just have trust that Rodrick’s information is correct,” Arwin replied. “But we can always ask. Just stick to the plan the moment we confirm who this is.”

“You’re kidding,” Lillia said, but Arwin didn’t have time to reply. Hurried steps echoed down the street in their direction. Arwin didn’t have to step out to meet them. He’d already positioned himself with his back turned, while Lillia had kept to the shadows to conceal her demonic appearance.

Arwin craned his neck as if in surprise as a middle aged, balding man strode down the alley in the direction of the guild hall, his expression taut.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on?” Arwin asked, lacing his tone with concern as he studied the man. He really didn’t look like anything special. His robes were those of a mage that preferred to avoid heavy armor, and the only weapon he carried was a dagger. Just another adventurer.

“No, but I’m headed to find out,” the man replied. “Who are you with? Another new recruit?”

“Me? I was actually heading over to apply when I heard the commotion,” Arwin said. “I heard you lot were looking for smiths.”

“Oh, right. We are. Good thing I found you before the shitstorm made it this far,” the bald man said. He snapped his fingers impatiently. “Follow me. I’ll get you to the guild hall and then go deal with the idiots outside.”

“Sure thing,” Arwin said. “I’m Arwin, by the way.”

“Pleasure. I’m Yul.”

Arwin nodded a greeting, and Yul turned to head back toward the guild hall.

Arwin’s hammer slammed into his hands and he swung without an instant of hesitation. By some sheer stroke of luck, Yul managed to notice something was awry. He flung himself to the ground, but it wasn’t enough to completely avoid the blow.

Verdant Blaze shattered his shoulder with a loud crunch, sending him spinning. Yul let out a pained snarl as rolled to his feet, right arm hanging useless at his side. The left arm crackled as flame bloomed between his fingers, swirling together into a hissing and popping ball.

Explosion magic. If I didn’t know for sure before, I do now. I just wish I killed the bastard with the first blow.

“Idiot. Who are you, really? Actually, I don’t care. I’ll let Jessen figure that out himself,” Yul snarled as he poured power into the spell, holding it in front of him. It was a clever strategy for a mage with immense destructive ability. By keeping the spell between himself and Arwin, he basically ensured that Arwin couldn’t close the gap without getting hit.

But, the longer he waited in attempt to find a hole in Yul’s defenses, the stronger the spell would grow. Arwin had seen the strategy used before to devastating success, and the best counter to it was generally someone else with range. But, there was one problem. Yul didn’t have the whole strategy prepared. Mages *never* fought alone.

The shadows snapped forth – not at Yul, but at Arwin. At the same time, his armor slammed into place. A tendril struck the back of Arwin’s legs with a loud thud, sending him stumbling forward.

Kinetic energy poured into Arwin as the greaves, having already been largely filled with kinetic energy earlier in the alley, were topped up. [Awe] activated and Arwin’s body blurred forward as he activated [Scourge], sending the power into his legs.

He couldn’t even try to control himself at the speed he was moving. His head didn’t run as fast or as strong as his legs did, but Arwin didn’t need to control himself. Mages of nearly any sort were deadly, especially on the battlefield.

Their magic could control fights more than almost any other class, and their destructive power was second to none. But, almost every single mage shared a very common weakness – the same weakness that Anna had.

Arwin blurred. He slammed into Yul, throwing the man to the ground. The spell that had been forming in Yul’s hands went wide, hurtling past Arwin and striking a building behind him. A massive explosion ripped through the air as a ball of fire rolled into the air behind him, but Arwin barely even took notice of it.

His hammer fell. There was a sickening crunch, and then there was no more. Arwin’s eyes ignited like molten coal as his helmet activated, releasing a wave of oppressive aura around him. He lifted his hammer, staring down at the body at his feet. Yul wasn’t the first mage he’d killed. They almost always went down in the same way.

“It’s easy to forget just how weak you are when you wield that much power,” Lillia said as she walked up beside Arwin. “That was... sad, honestly. I wanted more. A fight. Something. He did so much fucking damage, and this is it?”

Arwin dismissed his equipment, and the blood that had covered the hammer’s head splattered to the ground beside Yul’s body.

“I suppose it’s apt,” Arwin said. “Disappointing, but even a Journeyman mage is still a mage if he doesn’t know what he’s doing. Yul seemed... worse than he should have been. Even for a mage, standing around in the face of a threat is arrogant. The strategy he used only works when you’ve got someone else guarding your flank. That’s the mistake of a novice who has no clue what they’re doing, not a mage that made it to Journeyman.”

“I just wish he begged for his life. Something to give me some damn satisfaction,” Lillia said, clenching her hands. She delivered a powerful kick into Yul’s body. Arwin put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

“What happened to the speeches you were giving me yesterday?”

“They’re easier to give when you were standing outside and didn’t see anything,” Lillia snapped. “The bastard got off light. He—”

“Is dead,” Arwin finished, his grip tightening on Lillia’s shoulder. A huge part of him wanted to join her in raining blows down on the dead man, but she’d been there to keep him stable, and now it was his turn. “And now there are two. This isn’t for us. It’s for Zeke – and for anyone like him in the future.”

Lillia ground her teeth, then gave him a jerky nod. “Right. Lead on. Yul was the tough kill, and he went down like a worthless little worm. Let’s get rid of Erik and go home. Should I deal with the body?”

“As much as I’d love to say no so we could let Jessen realize exactly what’s coming for him, you probably should,” Arwin said. “It’s probably going to be relatively obvious already, but there’s no need to help our enemies figure out who we are.”

Lillia clenched a fist and two Lesser Imps rose up from the darkness, crowding in around the corpse and starting to devour it.

“They’ll handle it,” Lillia said. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way,” Arwin replied. “I take it you remember the direction Anna said Erik would be coming from?”

“Yeah,” Lillia said, setting off into the dark with Arwin at her side. “It should be a little while until Erik makes it since he was farther. We don’t know anything about him, so hopefully he isn’t too difficult to spot. The fight is getting bigger behind us, so the guild might have gotten involved.”

“Good. That’ll buy us all the time we need,” Arwin said, but he couldn’t shake a building unease in his stomach. Yul was dead – of that, there was no doubt. Their plan had gone exactly how he’d wanted it to, but the man had truly been far too shit of a fighter to be a Journeyman. Something was going on, and Arwin didn’t like not knowing what it was.

Chapter 80

Arwin and Lillia strode down the alley at a brisk pace. According to Rodrick's guess, they should have had around ten or fifteen minutes before Erik showed up. The fighting behind them had grown a little, but it was already starting to fade into the distance behind them.

Reya had done a great job creating a distraction. And, judging by the fact that it was still going, Arwin was pretty sure she'd gotten out of it. That took a large weight off his chest. He knew she wasn't a child, but the idea of her getting killed while they were avenging someone else made him sick.

I can't protect everyone. Bah. Doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that. It doesn't change shit.

"Don't you think we should have run into Erik by now?" Lillia asked from the shadows beside Arwin. "It's been almost all the time that Rodrick said it should take him, and we're getting a little far from the guild."

"Maybe he ended up staying at the restaurant for longer?" Arwin guessed. "It's just across the street, and even though the fight is kind of far, that explosion was fairly loud. Maybe it spooked him."

"What, you think he's hiding in there?" Lillia asked doubtfully. "The second in command of a guild, hiding like a complete coward when an explosion goes off in his own hall? Ridiculous."

Arwin shrugged. "I don't have any better ideas. Do you see him?"

"No," Lillia admitted. "I suppose all we can do is wait here for a little. Walking into the restaurant would be way too obvious."

"Probably. Let's just sit in the alley and wait for someone who sticks their head out and looks a little more concerned about the explosion than anyone else. There's always the chance that Erik managed to avoid us through the usage of a movement ability or something. He might have sprinted for the explosion the moment he heard it."

"Yeah, you could be right. I suppose that, for now, we just wait."

And that was what they did. Minutes turned to five, and five turned to ten. Arwin wished the windows of the restaurant were larger, but he had no such luck. There was no way to get near it without being completely oblivious or sitting down for dinner. And, given the fact that there had just been an explosion, he doubted that trying to grab a bite to eat would be seen as very logical behavior.

He was just starting to think that they really had missed Erik when the door to the restaurant creaked open and a pudgy man stuck his head out, squinting into the distance. All the sounds of the fight had finally petered off, likely contained by the Iron Hounds.

The man glanced around the street, then scurried off in the opposite direction of the guild. Arwin and Lillia exchanged a glance.

"There's no way," Lillia said.

“Who else? It’s the only lead we’ve got,” Arwin muttered, already setting off in pursuit.

Erik – assuming Arwin’s assumption was correct – was painfully easy to follow. He was completely unaware of his surroundings, despite his constant stops to look around and check to see if anyone was on his tail. He looked so obviously guilty of something that Arwin would have suspected him of just about any crime in the vicinity.

Arwin and Lillia caught up to him in less than a minute, using her magically enhanced darkness to walk right up to him along the side of the street. Erik shifted from checking to see if anyone was following him to listening intently.

Is he trying to see if the fight is already over? What a damn coward. I want to just kill him here, but I need to make sure this is actually the right guy. I’m not going to murder some random paranoid guy because he didn’t want to get caught up in a fight.

Arwin glanced at Lillia, then nodded to Erik. She shrugged, indicating that she’d stay back and be ready to support him if a fight started.

“Hey there,” Arwin said, raising a hand in greeting as he stepped into the alley. Erik leapt nearly a foot into the air, spinning toward him.

“Who are you?” Erik demanded. “Where did you come from?”

“Running from the fight over there,” Arwin said, nodding in the direction Erik was heading. “I was heading over to apply to the Iron Hounds, but a bunch of thieves got into a huge scuffle and a mage started blowing shit up so I got out of there before I got my head taken off by accident.”

Arwin was pretty sure he'd done a fairly convincing job in his speech, but Erik didn't even look slightly assured by it.

“Well, you should be on your way,” Erik said, flicking his hand irritably. “I have business to attend to, and I have no desire to speak to anyone that approaches me in a dark alley.”

Honestly, probably a pretty good life motto.

“I don't blame you. I'll be out of your hair, then. I was just wondering if you happened to know where the guild leader was – or anyone in power, really. I got wind that the Iron Hounds were in search of a smith and would pay well.”

“Well, come back to the guild tomorrow. We're obviously not going to be taking applicants while there's a blasted fight going on right outside it.”

“Oh you're part of the guild?” Arwin asked, his eyes lighting up. “Could you point me in the right direction?”

“No. I've got no idea. I'm just a scholar. A recommendation from me isn't going to do anything, so don't even bother asking for it.”

Arwin resisted the urge to blink. He'd been pretty confident that – no. He studied the man for a second, and the longer he looked at him, the more confident he became that this wasn't a scholar.

There were no ink stains on his hands, and his clothes were all far too neat and well cared for. Arwin hadn't known many scholars, but they'd almost always been obsessed with their work – and they definitely didn't earn enough to dress like the man before him.

He's lying. Is that enough for me to completely take a bet with someone's life, though? He could just be a scared member of the guild. The only way I know for sure who this guy is if someone else identifies him or if he tells me himself – and if he lied about his class, he definitely isn't going to tell me his name.

“I see,” Arwin said. “One last question and then I'll be out of your hair, I promise.”

“Gods, you're persistent. What is it?”

“What does the name Ifrit mean to you?” Arwin asked, watching the man's face closely. He might have been willing to lie, but he was a damn shit liar. And, as soon as the words left Arwin's lips, he saw the flicker of recognition pass through the man's features. “Ah. Hello, Erik.”

Arwin lunged, his armor slamming into place around him. His hammer materialized in his hands and he brought it down for Erik's head. The man let out a terrified scream and raised his hands as if they would somehow stop a massive hammer from crushing him like a overripe berry – and a resounding clang echoed through the street.

A powerful force slammed into Arwin's arms, flinging Verdant Blaze from his grip. He stumbled backward, dismissing the hammer with [Arsenal] before it could land on someone by accident.

Standing before Erik was a tall man, a dark beard covering the bottom half of his face that matched the pitch black armor covering his body. It vaguely resembled the carapace of a beetle – glossy and smooth, curling up to jutting points at his shoulders.

The man lowered his sword, and the Mesh tingled at Arwin's eyes as he tried and failed to study it. The weapon was definitely magic, but it the man either chose not to or was unable to completely hide its nature.

Did he use an ability to block me there? Because, if not – holy shit. This guy is disgustingly strong. He definitely isn't an Apprentice Tier. The Guild Leader, then?

“Who are you?” the man asked, tilting his head to the side and narrowing his eyes. “And why are you trying to kill my second in command?”

Arwin held the man's gaze, not giving away an inch, but he prepared his legs to activate [Scourge] and sprint in the other direction. He wasn't stupid enough to think he could handle a Journeyman Tier that actually knew what they were doing.

“You'd be Jessen, then,” Arwin said.

“It seems you have the advantage over me. I have no idea who you are.”

And that's exactly how I want it to stay. If you find out who we are, you come after the tavern next. What the hell is Jessen doing all the way out here? It makes no sense. There's no way he cares this much about some random coward. Unless he's pretending to be some honorable figure rather than the murderer he is?

“I think I’d like to keep it that way,” Arwin said, fighting to keep his gaze on Jessen. If the man didn’t recognize his mask, then it was very likely that Erik had been acting on orders but had never passed details along. And, if that was the case, the only way everyone had a chance to get out of this alive would be if Erik didn’t.

“Then it seems we have a problem,” Jessen said. His voice shifted, turning to a syrup-laden drawl. “I can’t let anyone go around trying to murder my people in cold blood.”

Arwin’s teeth grit as he fought to keep his anger under control. Claiming that *he* was the one going around heartlessly murdering people when Jessen had been the one to kill Zeke was like grinding nails on chalkboard in Arwin’s ears.

His mind raced as he tried to find a way that would let him get to Erik and escape before Jessen stopped him, but nothing came to mind. He’d already felt how much more power Jessen had than he did. Even with [Scourge], Arwin would only be able to put up a fight for a few blows before he lost.

Which means I need to play his game if I want a chance of coming out on top of this.

“That’s the angle you’re going to take?” Arwin asked, his features twisting in disgust as he dismissed his helm. “Your men murdered an innocent and destroyed my smithy, and you claim that I’m the one that’s cold blooded?”

“An innocent?” Jessen tilted his head to the side. “I gave no such orders.”

“Your idiots destroyed the smithy while a child was in it,” Arwin spat. “Burned him alive. So go ahead. Give me your cold-hearted speech. Every word that leaves your lips might as well be poison.”

Jessen’s eyes narrowed in anger. Arwin wasn’t sure if it was directed at his words or him, and he didn’t particularly care. Jessen hadn’t denied ordering the destruction of his smithy – and that meant Jessen was responsible. He, like the others, would die.

“Who?” Jessen asked. “Who did it?”

“What, are you going to punish them?” Arwin asked with a bark of laughter. “A slap on the wrist, maybe?”

“Who?” Jessen roared, slamming his sword into the wall beside him. Stone crumbled away, cascading to the ground at his feet.

“Tix.” Arwin held three fingers up, then lowered one of them. “She’s dead.” He lowered a second finger and nodded toward the direction of the guild hall. “Yul. Also dead.” Arwin was left with just his middle finger standing, and he turned his gaze to Erik. “And the coward.”

And you, Jessen. But, if you’re going to be pretending to be some righteous asshole, I’ll play along. Let’s see if you murder your own man for me.

“Dead?” Jessen’s expression flickered, then turned flat. “I see. A smith has killed two of my men?”

“My only regret is that I couldn’t kill them a second time,” Arwin said honestly. “And the fat one is next.”

Jessen pressed his lips together and let a sigh slide out from between them. “Ah. I can’t let you do that. I’m afraid I have need of Erik.”

Of course you do.

A smug grin passed over Erik’s features.

“Would you settle for his arms and legs?” Jessen asked.

Erik’s smile froze and fell away, and a pit formed in the center of Arwin’s chest. He recognized the type of man that Jessen was.

He’s the kind of guy that honestly thinks that he can trade lives like currency. He genuinely believes that this is a reasonable trade, and he doesn’t care in the slightest about his subordinate at all.

Making a deal with him is the same as putting your hand in a bear trap and waiting for it to go off – and I don’t know if I’ve got any other options.

Chapter 81

“His limbs,” Jessen repeated when Arwin gave no response. “Would that be sufficient?”

“Why are you even offering that?” Arwin asked, taken aback despite himself. “I thought you were going to—”

“Protect him?” Jessen’s smile twisted into the sneer of a snake. “I said I needed him, but I don’t need him moving. You seem like a competent man, and it would be a shame to kill you when we could work together instead. After all, if our grievances are settled, there is no reason for us to fight.”

“Guild Leader, I—”

“Be silent, lest we decide your tongue a more appropriate payment,” Jessen snapped. “The limbs or not, Smith?”

He said he needed this cowardly asshole. Why would Jessen offer me his limbs in payment? There’s a trick to this. I know how people like this work. I’ve seen it before. He’s going to try to use one of his rules to turn this against me without going against his fake moral code. So what is –

Ah.

“No,” Arwin said with a shake of his head. “I don’t believe it would.”

“I will not let you kill him,” Jessen said flatly, but there was a spark of acknowledgement in his eyes. “If you seek Erik’s head, then I will be forced to kill you no matter how beneficial our future partnership could ever hope to be.”

“Not that either,” Arwin said, becoming more confident with every word that he spoke. “I think an equal trade for the life you stole would be the lives that remain.”

At least until I get strong enough to kill Jessen – but he's not making this offer because he genuinely thinks we could ever be friends. He wants something from me, and he was hoping to force me to bargain for it.

Jessen tilted his head to the side. "Explain."

"I killed two of your people," Arwin said. "Except they were worthless, pathetic excuses for life who killed a child. In return for us ceasing our pursuit of Erik, you will not attempt to retaliate against us or our street in any way, shape, or form."

A smile crawled across Jessen's lips, and a shiver ran down Arwin's spine. His guess had been right. Jessen had been planning to whatever he did to Erik to at least some of his friends.

"I knew you were interesting," Jessen said. "Very well. I recognize when I have an interesting opponent. I accept your terms until we next meet. I do not believe either of us will be able to help ourselves after that."

"No," Arwin agreed, barely able to keep the disgust from his voice. "We won't."

I'll be damned if you think I'm letting either you or Erik live through this. You want to play games? Fine. I've played against much worse than you.

"You fancy your guild something powerful, don't you?" Arwin asked abruptly. "You're proud of what you've made?"

Jessen tilted his head to the side, surprised by the change of topic. He recovered quickly and a cocky smile played across his lips. "Yes. I do. I've brought them far. It's pleasant to meet

someone who understands just how difficult it can be. Perhaps your guild will grow as strong as mine one day.”

False sincerity dripped from every word that came out of Jessen’s mouth.

“I doubt it,” Arwin said. “We’re far weaker, and I’m okay with that. We never would have challenged you if one of our own hadn’t been killed.”

“His death will eat at me forever. My sincerest apologies for the terrible tragedy. I am glad that we have come to an agreement on a resolution.”

“I’d like to give an offer of my appreciation for your mercy in this decision,” Arwin said. “An item we procured from a dungeon available only to us. Even though we’re far weaker than even your worst member, I believe it may be of interest to you.”

Jessen’s brow furrowed as he tried to figure out what Arwin’s angle was. Arrogance won out over suspicion and his smile grew wider. There were few things that cocky bastards like him liked more than someone bowing down to their supposed superiority.

“We accept,” Jessen said. The cocky grin on Erik’s face grew even wider and his back straightened as he found his spine in the strength of his master.

Arwin stepped reached to his side and rested his hand on an ivory white dagger in his pouch, not quite pulling it fully out yet. He used [Arsenal], temporarily bonding himself to the blade.

“I hope this is sufficient apology for the trouble I’ve caused,” Arwin said. “Erik, I don’t believe this item is worthy of your master, so I’ll hand it to you instead. I hope you accept my sincerest feelings.”

He procured the dagger, moving with measured movements that weren’t fast enough to be misconstrued as an attack, and flicked the blade without giving Erek or Jessen time to see the Mesh’s description of the weapon. It traced through the air in a tight arc. Jessen’s eyes traced the blade, but he made no move to intercept it.

It was amusing. In general, humans tended to be creatures of habit. Whenever they could, they slept in the same beds, ate at the same tables, and shat in the same rooms. And, when someone threw something to them – even if it was sharp – they tried to catch it.

Erik extended his hands, likely moving before his brain had even registered, and caught the dagger out of the air. Having been thrown blade first, the weapon cut a thin line into his palm and he fumbled to keep hold of it.

“Idiot,” Erik snapped. “Why are you throwing it? Are you trying to kill me?”

“I believe I had already promised to avoid that,” Arwin said. “I’m not stupid enough to break my promise to Jessen. Your own incompetence, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter.”

Erik opened his mouth, but his words were replaced with a surprised hiss. He shook the hand that had gotten cut off. His eyes went wide and he let out a cry of pain, dancing around and shaking the entire arm.

“What the hell is this?” Erik yelled, dropping the dagger and letting it clatter to the ground. His yelps turned to a pained scream. He ripped at his shirt, fingers digging at skin like there was a colony of ants burrowing within it.

Jessen watched on, his face flat, as Erik’s cries grew louder. He thrashed around on the ground and kicked, screaming desperately for help. Neither Arwin nor Jessen said a word.

Erik clutched at his chest one final time, his back arching in agony, and collapsed.

“I believed you when you said that your guild was stronger than mine. It seems that he has brought you shame in failing to prove your words true.” Arwin locked eyes with Jessen. “His death will eat at me forever. My sincerest apologies for the terrible tragedy.”

Jessen knelt, picking up the bone dagger by the handle with two fingers before rising once more. He didn’t let his gaze drift from Arwin’s the entire time.

“I have found that I no longer desire this gift,” Jessen said. The smug cockiness had vanished from his voice and left behind only ice. “You may have it back.”

“I refuse,” Arwin said promptly. “A gift given to one who has accepted it is not one that I would ever be willing to take back. It would bring me too much shame. I am just sorry that your man was not powerful enough to handle it properly. One of its usages has been wasted.”

He could have pulled the dagger back to himself with [Arsenal], but that would have been taking back the gift and could give Jessen an opportunity to try something against him or his people. Arwin didn’t plan to leave any such windows open. There was no reason to. The blade was exactly where he wanted it to be. After what he’d just done to Erik, Arwin was certain that

Jessen wouldn't settle for killing him with any weapon other than the bone dagger – the very one that was still bound to him with [Arsenal].

Jessen nodded slowly. He put the dagger away and his lips pulled back in a predatory smile. “Well played, Smith. You have turned my own words against me. Very well. I look forward to our next meeting. It will not go so well for you.”

Jessen strode into the darkness, and Arwin made no move to follow him. Several seconds passed before Lillia stepped out, a concerned frown on her face.

“Godspit, Arwin,” Lillia murmured. “That was...”

“Incredibly risky,” Arwin said as he drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly in an attempt to calm his adrenaline-shot nerves. “He's more than just fishy. Bastard is the whole damn ocean. He's not going to forget this.”

“How strong is he if he managed to knock your hammer out of your hand?” Lillia asked. “That's... terrifying.”

“I wasn't using [Scourge] at the time,” Arwin replied, shaking his head. “But it doesn't change the fact that he's powerful. That's the first real Journeyman adventurer we've run into, and he feels like he's at the upper end of it. If anything, that just makes me wonder why the hell the rest of his guild is so shit.”

“Something tells me we'll find out,” Lilla said. “I'm not done with him.”

“Neither am I,” Arwin said. “But we got Erik. Now the only one left is Jessen. I wish we could have gotten him too, but if we drew weapons on him tonight, we were dead.”

“Almost certainly. Doesn’t make me happy about it,” Lillia said. “But I’ll sleep better knowing that Erik is rotting in the bottom of the Underlands.”

“As will I. Jessen is going to be a dangerous enemy, but his time will come.”

Lillia let out an explosive breath. “You’re right. I just can’t help but wonder what Zeke would think. There’s still one more person left to kill.”

“I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but I suspect he’d be happier that none of us had died than he would be if we avenged him and lost half the group.”

The last of the tension left Lillia’s body and she slumped. “Yeah. I don’t think any of us would want anything else. I suppose we did buy ourselves some time.”

“And most of the people responsible for Zeke’s death are facing judgement. For a group of Apprentice Tiers, I don’t think we can complain. Let’s go find the others. I need to tell them about Jessen.”

Guards meandered past Arwin as he headed down the street alongside Lillia, who kept to the shadows alongside him. He wasn’t even so sure she had to. Even though the guards were moving toward the Iron Hounds’ guild house, none of them looked all that concerned. If anything, it seemed like they were dragging their feet to avoid getting there too soon.

Sad. They're hoping the guild will handle the fighting for them. The guards here really are all talk and no show, but I suppose that worked to our advantage this time around. It's still pathetic.

Arwin turned a corner, then came to a stop. Rodrick, Reya, and Anna all stood at the exit of an alley.

“How did things go?” Rodrick asked as Arwin approached them. “You weren’t in the area where you were supposed to be. Did Erik deviate from his trip home?”

“Yeah,” Arwin said. He glanced toward where Lillia hid in the darkness, but he couldn’t make any of her features out. “It’s... well, I’ll tell you all when we get back to the tavern.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Reya said. She wiped some dirt from her cheek with the back of a hand. “Where’s Lillia?”

“She’s right over there, in the darkness. She’s just keeping out of sight,” Arwin said, nodding to the patch of shadows at the edge of the alley. “Don’t worry. Neither of us were hurt. I assume you’re all fine as well?”

“Nothing but a minor injury,” Reya replied.

They all set off. The city was strangely silent despite all the chaos that had swallowed it just a few minutes ago. Arwin wasn’t sure if it was because nobody cared or if it was because they just all assumed the problem had been handled.

Either way, he appreciated it. He didn't quite feel like speaking anymore yet. They arrived at the tavern and headed inside. Lillia emerged from her patch of darkness, still barely visible as she made her way over to the lantern near the counter and lit it.

Everyone other than Lillia lowered themselves into the mismatched stools lined up before the counter.

"It's done, then?" Reya asked. "All that's left is Jessen?"

Arwin wasn't so sure he knew the answer to that question himself. He used [Arsenal], summoning his helmet and lifting it off his head. Arwin set it on the counter, running his thumb along the curling horns jutting out of its top.

"Yes, but we can't go after Jessen now. He's much stronger than I thought."

"What?" Reya exclaimed. "How do you know? I thought—"

"Jessen showed up to save Erik. He was powerful. If we'd fought him, we'd have died," Lillia said, walking to stand beside Arwin and Reya.

"How'd he know we were going to go after Erik?" Rodrick asked, his brow furrowing. "Nobody should have been able to figure out what we were planning. I wasn't spotted, was I?"

"I don't think it was you," Arwin said with a shake of his head. "Relax. Everyone did their jobs perfectly. We were just up against an opponent who we aren't prepared to face. I didn't think Jessen would be as dangerous as he was."

“So... what now?” Reya asked, her voice quavering as her hands balled at her sides. “If you survived, did Jessen figure out who you are? Do we have to leave the street? And how did you kill Erik if this guy was so strong?”

“Jessen knows, but he’ll stay away from us,” Arwin said. “And technically, I didn’t kill Erik. He killed himself. I just threw him a dagger.”

Reya’s brow creased in confusion. Realization set in and her frown turned to a cold smile. “The bone dagger?”

“Only has two charges left, unfortunately,” Arwin confirmed. “It was gifted to the Iron Hounds. It’s just unfortunate that they lost a man in the process.”

“What about Jessen, then? When can we kill him? I bet we could take him if all of us—”

“No. Relax, Reya. There’s something more important than throwing our lives away in revenge.” Arwin shook his head. “And that’s surviving to see it through. Zeke was murdered, but do you really think he wants us to follow him into the afterlife?”

Reya’s face crumpled. “But...”

“I know it’s painful,” Arwin said, softening his voice. “But you need to remember something. You can’t win every fight in the same way. There are times when your opponent is too powerful to just fling yourself against. A just cause does not win a battle.”

“How do you know Jessen isn’t lying?” Anna asked. “He has no honor.”

“Because he doesn’t just want to kill us,” Arwin replied, a vision of Jessen’s hungry eyes flashing through his mind. “He wants to win, and we can use that against him. Jessen won’t send anyone to bother us. He wants us to get as strong as possible and to challenge him again.”

“Why?” Reya asked. “That doesn’t make sense. He could just come after us now and we’d all die, wouldn’t we?”

“He could. But he won’t because he’s an arrogant bastard,” Arwin replied. “And we’ll use that against him. He doesn’t see us as a real threat, and we’ll kill him one day because of it. Until then, he’s going to suffer knowing that he got outplayed by a mere Apprentice Tier.”

“I understand. It really doesn’t feel fair that he gets to keep living while Zeke doesn’t, but I understand,” Reya muttered, staring down at her hands.

“The only fairness in life is what our strength allows us to create,” Arwin said. “We won this round, Reya. Tix, Yul, and Erik are dead. They’re the ones that orchestrated Zeke’s death. And, more importantly, we’re alive. And, as long as we’re alive, we can grow stronger. Jessen’s guild is larger and more powerful than ours, and yet his men lost to us. His arrogance won’t let that stand. That’s why he didn’t kill us. It would be cementing his defeat in stone.”

Reya was silent for a few seconds. Then she let out a slow breath and raised her eyes to meet Arwin’s. “Then we need to get stronger so we can get around to killing him as soon as we can.”

“You can count on it. We’re just going to do this the right way. I think Jessen will avoid us until we come for him again, but if you ever do see him again, just turn around and leave.

Don't say a word. All he'll be able to do is fume and wait until the day comes where he meets justice," Arwin said with a grim smile. "It might not be today. It might not be this week, or even this month – but they've got an open tab with us, and they're going to pay it with interest."

Chapter 82

For the first time in many nights, Arwin slept. The embrace of sleep that had avoided him for so long finally welcomed him back, though it didn't let him return with grace.

Dreams dug into his mind like the fangs of a Wyrn. Possibilities of what could have been intermixed with the truth of what had been. His words to Reya may have been true, but he wasn't so sure he believed them himself.

Three of Zeke's killers were dead. Their death had brought no solace. Jessen still lived, and Arwin still didn't have a way to kill him. The hunger in Jessen's eyes – he wanted to crush it.

His resting mind taunted him with the powers that had once been his to command. Just a scant few months ago, Arwin could have killed him with no more difficulty than crushing a Lesser Imp.

And yet, a scant few months ago, Arwin was alone. He would have had no reason to kill Jessen. He would have had nothing to lose. A guardian with nothing to protect aside from the distant memory of an ideal that he'd clutched onto ever since he'd arrived in this world.

The only people that he'd truly desired to save were already dead.

A strand of amusement passed through Arwin's dreams like a swirl of paint through water. In losing his powers, he'd finally found rediscovered a reason to have them. The haunting dreams started to falter. They shrank before the growing determination that took hold in his mind.

Revenge would be had, but not at the cost of their lives. Zeke was gone. More death would not let him rest easier. The only thing that could ever give his loss meaning was life. Jessen had to be stopped to keep others from meeting the same fate, but Arwin wasn't strong enough to protect everyone.

And, for the first time, he was truly fine with that. Arwin didn't have to be strong enough to protect everyone. He just had to be strong enough to protect the people around him.

Only once he could do that would Arwin allow himself to desire more. His eyes drifted open and the dreams shattered before the light of day. Sunlight filtered through the dirty window of Arwin's room and onto his pillow.

Arwin's face felt warm. The temptation to lie in bed and let the world pass him by tried to pull at him, but its call fell on deaf ears. There was too much to do. He rose and strode out of the room. Stairs creaked beneath his weight as he headed down to the tavern.

Lillia poked her head out of the kitchen. The light from the lantern just barely illuminated her form.

"You slept?"

"For once," Arwin said. "You?"

“For once,” Lillia said, a note of amusement tinging her voice. “What now? We throw ourselves into finding a way to kill Jessen?”

“It’s tempting,” Arwin admitted. He would have loved to do just that. It was definitely what Jessen expected. Another vision of Jessen’s eyes passed through his mind, and a grin pulled at Arwin’s lips. “But no. That’s not what we’re doing.”

“What? Why not?” Lillia asked.

“Because there’s only one way to beat someone like this,” Arwin replied. “And it isn’t by playing their game. You got a read on him, didn’t you? Jessen wants us to try him again. He thinks we’ll come knocking at his door with some scheme.”

“Is that not what we were going to do?” Lillia her hands off on her clothes. They left small streaks of flour behind like the stripes of a tiger. “You can’t mean we’re just going to ignore him.”

“We try to do anything to undermine Jessen directly, and we lose,” Arwin said. “He’s too powerful to take in a direct fight. The moment we try to do anything against him is when he’ll show up with a new game to play.”

“Probably,” Lillia said, crossing her arms and leaning against the doorframe. “You’re saying we drive him insane by just... forgetting about him?”

“By living as if he isn’t even there,” Arwin corrected. “We don’t forget. But Jessen is going to go insane trying to figure out how we’re planning to take him out. He wants to crush us for what we did. I’d wager a bet that he’s also convinced we feel the same toward him.”

“We do.”

“We do.” Arwin nodded. “Which is why he’ll be confident we’re trying something. He’ll spend resources and energy trying to find out what it is. The longer it takes, the more confused and worried he’ll get. He won’t approach us, though. That would be another defeat.”

“You think he’s just going to lose his shit because we do nothing?” Lillia asked doubtfully.

“I think it’ll make him squirm. And, even if it doesn’t, we’ll still be stronger. Jessen will be able to do nothing but watch as we become powerful. He loses the moment he so much as says a word to us.”

A grin crawled across Lillia’s face and she nodded. “I think I see what you’re getting at. We win either way. He won’t be able to handle the fact that we’re just ignoring him. While we focus on ourselves, he focuses on us.”

“Right. Even if he does just ignore us, I’m confident we’ll grow powerful faster than he will. We’ve already seen the path to take and learned what steps to avoid. He hasn’t. Both paths lead to victory.”

“If you’re going to go with this, you’ll need to explain it to the others,” Lillia said. “Reya isn’t going to take it well. She still wants to act.”

“I’ll speak with her,” Arwin said. “It’s not an easy request to make. A large part of me wants to just sprint at Jessen and rip him apart with my bare hands, even though I know that’s going to end with getting myself killed. Reya isn’t stupid. She’ll come around.”

“Then I’ll let Rodrick and Anna know. Are you heading out?”

“Yes. I need to occupy myself. The best way to do that will be trying to return to normal. I’m going to start rebuilding the smithy.”

“You’re not choosing a new building?”

“No. I’m not going to let Jessen take the smithy from me. That’s the spot I chose, and that’s the spot I’ll keep.”

“That’s understandable. I don’t think I’d be willing to swap buildings for the tavern either,” Lillia said. She pushed away from the doorframe and gave Arwin a small smile. “I’ll send Reya your way when she wakes up. Just remember you don’t have to bear all the weight of this on your own.”

“I know. Thank you, Lillia.”

Lillia nodded and turned back to the kitchen. She her work to do, and Arwin had his. He headed out of the tavern. Bright sunlight fell down on him the instant he stepped out of the door. It took his eyes a moment to adjust.

The longer I spend in the dark, the more comfortable I get in it. I wonder if that speaks more to me or the tavern.

Arwin blinked the brightness away and headed off down the street. He came to a stop at the edge of the burnt block that had once been his smithy. A certain sense of irony struck him.

Everything was covered in a layer of ash, black as night. He'd left the darkness of the tavern only to find even more of it outside in the light.

Even though the wind had carried a lot of the ash away, there were still small piles against the remains of the walls and strewn across the ground. It felt like there was no end to it.

I suppose there won't be until I get started. Can't get anywhere without taking the first steps, even if you're taking them for the second time.

Arwin knelt by the ash and scooped it up. He walked over to the ditch behind the smithy. To his surprise, he couldn't see the bodies of the Brothers Six in it. He tilted his head to the side, the pile of ash in his palms starting to blow away in the wind.

Eh. Who cares what happened to them. Maybe a large stray animal got hungry.

He glanced at the ash. There were probably better ways to dispose of it than dumping it into a hole. Then again, Arwin was pretty sure that ash was good for the dirt. It was a fertilizer. Maybe they could start a garden for Lillia.

Arwin let the handful fall. It twisted and swirled through the air on its way down like it was trying to paint a picture. As to what the picture was, Arwin was unsure. He got the feeling he'd figure it out in time.

Chapter 83

Arwin's world was soot and blackened brick. His fingernails were packed with dirt and his fingers ached from working pieces of broken stone out of the rubble. Power trickled through his body as he activated [Scourge] and slung a burnt beam over his shoulder.

He walked down a path strewn with small pieces of rubble and specs of ash. His feet remembered the path back to the ditch better than his mind did. Arriving at the edge, Arwin threw the piece of wood into a growing pile at the ditch's bottom.

It landed vertically, impaling the pile of soot and rock like the sword of a long-forgotten king that awaited a hero to draw it free. Arwin trudged back to the site of his smithy and picked up the largest stone he could find.

He brought it back over to the ditch and tossed it. The rock landed on the brittle piece of protruding wood, shattering it and sending splinters everywhere. Arwin nodded to himself and turned to return.

The last few hours had been productive. He'd drained most of the power he had using [Scourge] to lug chunks away from the smithy. The majority of the ground had been cleared away and all that remained were a few last stragglers.

Arwin wiped his brow. His hand left behind a black streak of dirt that mixed with the rivulets of sweat running down his face and stinging his eyes. Cursing under his breath, Arwin wiped at his face with his shirt. That only succeeded in smearing everything around and annoying him even further.

He gave up and let his hands drop. There were still more rocks to move. He could clean himself up after he finished his work for the day. If he'd had more energy, it would have only taken another hour at most. He wasn't so lucky.

Even though Arwin had been rationing his energy, there was only so much power in his body. [Scourge] was a power-hungry ability that didn't lend itself well to usage over long periods of time. He'd been using it to break up all the damaged stone into manageable chunks and carry them for hours. Now there was nothing but his own dwindling strength left.

Arwin crouched beside a stone that had fallen at an angle and wedged itself into the ground. He dug his fingers into the dirt beside it. It pressed against the beds of his fingernails and the sharp rock dug into his palms as he heaved.

Dirt shifted and he pulled the stone free with a groan. Arwin pulled it against his chest and gritted his teeth. The rock didn't seem happy with its relocation. It fought to slip free of his grasp with every ponderous step he took. Arwin finally reached the ditch and let his weary hands relax. The stone thudded down the side and collided with another rock at the bottom, shattering into a dozen pieces.

Heaving a sigh, Arwin headed back to the smithy. He picked out his next target – half of a large slab that he suspected had once been part of his former hearth – and mentally prepared himself to pick up another piece.

As he went to pick it up, he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. Arwin raised his gaze. Standing across the street from him was a figure made blurry by the sweat and dirt nipping at Arwin's eyes.

He wiped his face with the inside of his shirt and stood up. It didn't make sense for Jessen to have broken his word already. Arwin had been confident he'd gotten a good read on the man.

His attempts to wipe his eyes were largely ineffective, but they still did enough to let him make out more detail. The man across from him wore the clothes of a beggar. Dirt and grime stained his entire body and had worked its way so deeply into his white beard that it almost looked brown. He held a ratty old mug in one hand and supported himself with the other.

“Can I help you?” Arwin asked.

The other man swayed in place. His eyes shifted from Arwin to the mug in his hand and then back again. He seemingly lost an internal battle and lifted the mug to his lips to take a long drink from it.

Belching, the man lowered the mug and wiped his mouth with the back of a sleeve. A second of silence passed before he spoke with the sheer confidence that only a fool or a drunkard could muster. “No.”

“This isn't a show. Feel free to move on,” Arwin said. He wasn't all too keen on letting someone stand around behind him. Appearances could be deceiving – and even a drunkard could run him through if he wasn't paying attention.

“What, do you own the street?” The man hiccupped and took another sip from his mug. “I ain't doing anything. No need to be prickly. You and I don't seem so different from how I see it.”

Arwin looked down at his hands. It was hard to argue with the drunkard's observation. His palms told the story of a man who still hadn't figured out that bathing was an activity that was meant to be done more than once a year.

"I suppose I can't argue too much with that," Arwin admitted. He picked out a large rock with a flat top and sat down on it. A point the man may have had, but Arwin didn't want to find a different point going through his back. "If you're going to stand around, you may as well sit. I assume you want something."

The drunkard chuckled. He stumbled over to Arwin. Several times he tripped over his feet and took several stumbling steps forward. By some miracle, he managed to make it over to another large stone without tripping and breaking his neck.

"Why you digging through the ash?" the man asked as he sat. His momentum took him just a little too far. All his efforts in arriving to the stone safely were wasted as he pitched back. His legs flew up as he slid off the stone and landed on the ground back-first with a loud thump. For a second, the man's legs remained pointed straight into the air. Then they flopped down over the rock and he lifted his mug. He'd managed to avoid spilling it on the way down.

"You okay?" Arwin asked, trying to keep the amusement from his tone.

"Was just 'sittin. There's nothing in the ruins worth taking. You're just wasting your time."

"I'm not looking to take anything."

“Then what are you bothering with?” the man gestured vaguely with his mug. “There are other buildings here.”

“There are,” Arwin agreed. “But I like this one.”

“How? There’s nothing left to like.” The man chuckled to himself and raised the mug over his head, pouring the last of his drink out like the world’s most pathetic waterfall. The majority of it missed his mouth and landed on his face. He let out a slew of waterlogged curses.

“It’s not about how much is left. It’s about what you do with it,” Arwin said. He braced his arms against his knees and leaned forward to rest. “It’ll be worth it once everything is rebuilt. It’ll be *my* smithy, not just a building I confiscated.”

“Until someone blows it up again.”

Arwin ran a hand through the thin layer of soot remaining on the ground and rubbed it between his fingers. It wasn’t like he could get any more stained.

“It’s an interesting thought, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Is it better to have had something and lose it or to never have had it at all?”

“Can’t get hurt if you don’t have anything to lose.”

“Can’t live if you don’t have anything to live for,” Arwin countered.

“Sure. Keep telling yourself that as you pick through the remains of your life,” the drunkard said with a chuckle. He pushed himself upright and teetered unsteadily on the top of his rock. “Care for any more ash with that ash?”

Arwin didn't take the bait. It was obvious the man was trying to goad him into a fight. It wasn't going to work. He stood in the remains of his old smithy and the dreams of his next. There was nothing he could do to take back the past. That didn't mean he was going to let it destroy his future.

“Can you really say that if you don't even have anything to lose?” Arwin asked.

Amber light poked into Arwin's eyes as the sun started to dip behind Milten's skyline. It cast the city in burnt oranges and yellows. Light shimmered off the cracks in the stones that were unmarred by soot, reminding Arwin that he still had more to do before the day was done.

He braced his hands against his knees and rose to his feet. Some of his energy had returned. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to finish what he'd started.

“I've got all I need,” the drunkard said. He shook his empty tankard at Arwin, then paused and glanced inside it.

“If you're sure,” Arwin said noncommittally. “I'm not going to tell you how to live your life. I might suggest you get another refill from Lillia, though.”

“What makes you think I get my drinks anywhere here?”

“She mentioned a raggedy bloke that got drinks from her. It wasn’t hard to make the connection.” Arwin crouched beside a rock, still facing the nameless drunkard, and activated [Scourge]. He lifted it into the air and trudged over to the ditch to dispose of it. The drunkard made no move to follow Arwin, but he was still there when he returned.

“Aren’t you worried that you’ll lose more?”

“Perhaps I will, but I’ll do everything in my power to protect it. I can’t predict the future and I can’t change the past. All I can do is live in a way that hopefully does right by everyone – both living and dead.”

Arwin picked up another rock and set off to the ditch.

When he got back, the drunkard was gone. Arwin only paused for long enough to make sure the man wasn’t hiding somewhere and waiting to stab him. The man had seemed far more curious than aggressive, but that wasn’t a reason to skip out on precautions.

It looked like he had well and truly left. Arwin considered heading to Lillia’s tavern to look for him but dismissed the idea. The conversation had ended. Arwin hadn’t even gotten the man’s name.

Ah, well. I imagine I’ll see him around again. I’m pretty sure that’s literally the only other person on this street. He’s probably filling back up on booze with Lillia right now. With how sloshed he already was, it probably won’t be long until he’s passed out in an alleyway somewhere.

Arwin turned his attention back to the smithy. The grace of the sun was fading fast. Orange had turned to a vibrant gossamer pink intertwined with streaks of red in the final show of daylight before the night could claim the sky.

I'm finishing this before I go to bed tonight.

Chapter 84

Arwin's labor concluded well into the night. It had taken longer than he'd thought. That didn't bother him at all. The final piece of debris rolled down the ditch and thudded into the pile at its bottom.

Its arrival was the only sound in the deep cloak of the night around Arwin. The street was far away enough from the rest of the city that there had been no noise on the street aside from his work.

Soot had worked itself into every spot that it could have. His clothes were stained pitch black and ruined. But, as Arwin looked back at the now-clear plot of land, he was satisfied. It was with slight irony that Arwin found the night had turned everything just as black as it had been when it had been covered by soot.

He wasn't going to be able to appreciate the fruits of his labors until the sun rose in the morning and banished the night to whence it came. A cool breeze rolled across Arwin's tired shoulders like a caress. Goosebumps raced down his spine and he shivered.

The smithy stood on the precipice between life and death. What it had once been was gone and it would never be recovered. And yet, even though none of the brick remained, the dream still stood.

It wasn't quite tangible. It wasn't something that Arwin could have described through word or pen stroke. It wasn't even something that he was certain he could feel. The now-empty plot of land was a breath of held air in the lungs of a city that didn't care.

The only people that knew of what had happened were the ones on this street and the ones that had made it this way – but that would change. Arwin swore it to himself. There would be a time when this street would be known to all and the Iron Hounds were nothing but a passing memory burning away in the fire that they had started.

I won't let this happen again. I'm sorry I can't do more for you, Zeke. I wish I could. I wish I could have saved everyone I wish I could have been the one that was in the smithy when the Iron Hounds destroyed it.

I wasn't. I can't change any of that. All I can do is remember the people that got me here. I will push on for all of them.

Rest well, Zeke.

The past was what the future was built upon. It could not be forgotten, but dwelling upon it would do nothing for the future. Arwin turned from the smithy. His footsteps accompanied him through the night on the way back to the tavern.

Lillia was still awake when he arrived. She took one look at Arwin before jerking her thumb over her shoulder toward the small bathroom.

“You look like you went swimming in the pits of the Ninth Underland. I’ve already got some water drawn up for you. Don’t even think about heading upstairs like that.”

“Thank you,” Arwin said. He didn’t need to be told twice. A bath, even if it was in ice cold water, sounded like the most heavenly thing in the world.

He retreated to the bathroom to wash off. The dirt had been set so deeply into his skin that it took him nearly an hour before he even started to feel clean again. He’d stained the water in the tub pitch black by the time he was done.

His clothes, unfortunately, were done. There would be no washing them out. Lillia had been kind enough to lay out an extra set of clothes and a rag on a small peg beside the tub. Arwin dried himself off and pulled everything on before stepping back into the common room.

Lillia sat at the counter with a loaf of bread on a plate before her. She nudged the stool beside her out with a foot and Arwin took the unspoken invitation to sit down.

“Finished clearing out the smithy?”

“Yeah. Your other customer swung by as well.”

Lillia broke a piece of the bread off and handed it to Arwin. She slid over a small bowl of liquid. He squinted through the darkness as he tried to make out what it was. It was fruitless – the

only way he could even tell something was in it was by the sound the bowl made when she moved it.

“Which one?” Lillia asked.

“You don’t have that many, do you? The one that drinks.”

“Oh, him. He never says much. Didn’t think he was the talkative type. What did he want?” Lillia broke a piece of her loaf off and dipped it into the bowl before taking a bite.

“Nothing bad, I hope.”

“I’m not sure he wanted anything. We just talked for a little and then he left.” Arwin copied Lillia. He had no idea what the liquid was, but it certainly tasted fantastic along with the bread. “Did you make this?”

“The bread, yes. Reya bought the oil. I don’t know how to make it yet.”

“It’s good.”

“Thanks.”

They ate quietly until they’d polished off the rest of the loaf and wiped the bowl clean. Even then, neither of them spoke. There was something comfortable about sitting in the dark and enjoying the silence. Words weren’t always needed to speak.

Eventually, Lillia picked the bowl up and rose to her feet. “Are we going back to the dungeon soon? I’m running low on supplies – and money.”

“Yeah. I need money to repair the smithy,” Arwin said. “And I’m going to go back to the market soon enough to sell my gear. I think tomorrow should be fine. We’ll have to ask Anna and Rodrick to see if they’ve got anything else planned.”

“They don’t. They want to head back in as well.”

Arwin wasn’t surprised. He wanted to get stronger just as much as the others did. The Wyrms still had to be dealt with and the dungeon was the best way to handle all most of their problems at once.

“Then tomorrow it is,” Arwin confirmed. He rose from his chair and pushed it back over to the counter. For the second time, silence set in.

This time, it wasn’t quite as comfortable as the last. Arwin found himself at a want and a loss for words. He coughed softly into his fist.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah,” Lillia said. “Tomorrow.”

He headed up the stairs and to his room. All the work he’d put into tearing apart the remains of the smithy had completely drained him. Letting out a heavy sigh, Arwin flopped into bed. The grip of sleep wrapped around his chest and drew him in the moment his head hit the pillow.

Arwin awoke to something clammy and sharp digging into his wrist. His eyes snapped open and he bolted upright. Whatever had been holding onto him had let go. It was still pitch-black outside and his room was no better.

Did I imagine it? I could have sworn –

Two orbs glittered in the dark at the foot of Arwin's bed. He nearly called Verdant Blaze to his hands before the clouds shifted behind him and let a tiny sliver of moonlight through. A Lesser Imp stood before Arwin.

There would have been a time where Arwin's next move would have been to paste the monster where it stood. He probably would have then gone to find whoever was responsible for the area's security and given them a thorough scolding for letting a monster breach their defenses so easily.

Instead, Arwin rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. Even if he'd been in a particularly jumpy mood, he wasn't going to attack this particular imp. It was hard for anyone to look intimidating when they were wearing a frilly maid outfit.

"Is something wrong?"

The imp didn't respond. It struck Arwin that he'd never actually seen one of them speak. Perhaps all the jagged teeth made it impossible to do so without accidentally biting their tongue off.

Arwin was pretty sure that the imp hadn't just come to socialize – and he certainly hoped that it wasn't just watching him sleep. He may not have hated them like he once had, but that didn't mean he wanted them staring him down.

The imp reached out and grabbed at Arwin's wrist again to give it a small tug. It was trying to lead him somewhere. His brow furrowed and Arwin slipped out of bed. He was pretty sure the monster would have been acting much more urgently if something serious was wrong.

You know, I've never actually seen Lillia let them roam around on their own before.

Arwin let the imp guide him out of the room and into the hall. He prepared to activate [Arsenal] at a moment's notice if he needed to. The imp continued toward the stairs and Arwin slowed his gait to match the monster. It didn't look or sound like anything was out of place.

He followed it down and stepped into the common room of the tavern. Nothing felt off here either. Arwin squinted at the doorway in case someone was lurking around outside.

Maybe the drunkard came back and is going to get pissy that nobody is awake to serve him?

The imp pulled Arwin away from the door. With that theory nixed, he could do nothing but follow it into the kitchen and down the hall. The darkness grew thicker the closer they got, and it wasn't long before Arwin was completely blind. He would have been completely lost if it wasn't for the imp guiding him.

It led him into what Arwin recalled to be Lillia's room and came to a stop a few steps later. Then it let go of his hand. He opened his mouth to ask what it was doing and caught himself at the last second.

Lillia was probably asleep. They'd had enough difficulty getting rest in recent nights. The last thing he wanted to do was interrupt hers.

And I'm not all that thrilled about mine being interrupted either. What the hell was that imp doing?

It wasn't like Lillia could be missing or in danger. The thick darkness surrounding everything told him that she was somewhere in the room beside him. He went to leave the room when a muted mumble stopped him.

For a second, he thought that Lillia had said something to him. Then, a moment later, he realized that she was speaking in her sleep. Arwin did his best to avoid listening to anything she said. It would have been a breach of privacy – but he couldn't avoid hearing the pain in her words. Hay crinkled as Lillia rolled over in her bed.

She rolled again a second later. The imp tugged at Arwin's hand again, taking him by such surprise that he nearly jumped a foot into the air. He caught himself before he could make any noise and squinted. It was pointless. Making anything out in the dark was impossible. Lilla let out a distressed groan. The imp pulled at Arwin's hand once more.

It brought me here because it's worried about her.

"Lillia?" Arwin whispered.

There was no response. She was so deep in her dreams that she couldn't hear him. She muttered something under her breath again. This time, despite his attempts not to, Arwin caught it.

The word wasn't one he knew. It was in a different language, but Arwin had heard enough yells in the fights he'd had against Lillia's armies to recognize certain intonations of the language. She was saying a name.

Lillia rolled over in her bed again and muttered more names to herself. Arwin didn't recognize any of them but wasn't hard to guess who they were. They were the people that she'd lost in the war.

Losing Zeke hit her just as hard as it hit me. I thought she was recovering as fast as I was, but she's been the one supporting me this whole time. It's hard to heal when you're thinking about someone else.

Arwin edged forward until his foot touched the edge of Lillia's bed. He sat down beside it.

"Lillia?" he whispered.

The hay rustled as she rolled over again and groaned. Arwin reached out carefully, trying to find her arm. His hand brushed against her shoulder. Before he could gently shake her awake, her pained breathing started to relax.

Pained whispers dropped to a murmur. Lilla shifted once more, moving closer to Arwin until his arm was draped across her back. Then there was silence broken only by soft breaths. Arwin relaxed and settled into a more comfortable position to wait out the night by her side.

She'd been there to support him when his mind had refused to let him rest.

Now it was his turn.

Chapter 85

Arwin was unsure as to how much time had passed. It was impossible to get a good feel for the night's passing in Lillia's room. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours, or he could have been there for days.

He wasn't quite sleeping but he was far from awake. It was a state of suspended animation that was just a step away from meditation and a step ahead of sitting around and staring at the ceiling as he waited for the sun to rise.

The warmth of Lilla's body pressed against his side and back. She hadn't made a single noise beyond gentle breath since he'd arrived. The only thing that accompanied him in the darkness other than her presence were his own thoughts.

Those, however, felt like they would never end. The last time Arwin had been in Lillia's room, she'd been awake beside him. Knowing that she was present had been enough to keep his mind from drifting too far.

But now Lillia slept. Even though she was beside him, there was nothing to keep him focused on the present. Visions flew unbidden past his eyes and played out in the darkness beyond sight.

They meshed together into a chaotic tapestry. The canvas of broken battlefields, painted red with the brush of the dead and dying – the Brothers Six, reduced to one – the last fight with Lillia, where the men and women that had fought by his side died nameless and faceless.

Over and over, the visions came. Memories that had been buried since his late teens and scenes from just days ago came as one. They flitted and danced past his mind before he could properly grasp them. There seemed to be no sense to their order or purpose to their arrival, but they always seemed to end with Lillia. Arwin shoved them back and tried to turn his mind to other directions. But still, she lingered on in his thoughts.

It was ironic. The Adventurer's Guild would have likely achieved their goals if he and Lillia hadn't both managed to arrive at Milten. Without Reya, Arwin suspected he would have died.

Lillia would have been unlikely to find anyone to get food from her tavern and would have met a similar fate. And, even if they'd both survived the initial days, neither of them ever would have had proof of the Guild's actions.

I'd likely have returned to them at some point in the future to determine what had happened. There would have been no proof that the conspiracy ran so deep that the entire guild was a sham.

I still don't know what caused that explosion. I don't know what Sunset is or how I got it, and I don't know how Lillia and I both managed to end up at Milten. That's too much of a coincidence for me believe it to be one.

I wonder... is it possible that Sunset or the gem was a coverup? A way for someone working against the guilds to get us into a new environment while revealing that the guild was manipulating us?

If that's true, there's no way to verify it unless I manage to find a way to trace Sunset or get a lead on that black gem. Problems for when I'm strong enough to deal with them.

Arwin squinted into the darkness. It was pointless. There was no amount of adjusting that normal human eyes could do to see in the pitch black that surrounded him. He hadn't seen or felt the imp since it had brought him here. Part of him wondered if it was just standing in the darkness and staring at him with its wide, watery eyes and glistening fangs. The bigger part just didn't care.

Lillia stirred before Arwin's thoughts could carry him onto their next wave. The pattern of her breathing changed over the course of a few seconds, but she didn't fully shift from her spot.

"Arwin? How long were you here?" Lillia's voice was a muted whisper that carved through the pitch black, notes of drowsiness mixing with confusion upon her words.

"I'm not sure," Arwin admitted honestly. "You were troubled. One of your imps brought me."

“They did?” Lillia asked. The weariness pulled back from her tone and Arwin felt her move beside him. He couldn’t tell what she was doing, but based on her tone, he suspected she was probably wiping her eyes or covering a yawn. “Did... you hear anything?”

“Names,” Arwin replied. “But not ones that meant anything to me. I suspect the same is not true to you.”

“I think it was nightmares. They’ve already started to fade. I can barely remember what they were about,” Lillia said. She made no move to rise from her spot, and Arwin left his arm where it was. “It’s been some time since I last had one. I’d thought I was over it.”

“I’m not sure over it is ever a set of words that will be used to describe us,” Arwin said with a quiet laugh. “Come to peace, perhaps. But over it? Never.”

“Is that what you’ve done? Come to peace?”

Arwin considered Lillia’s question for a second. He wasn’t so sure he knew the answer. The past couldn’t be changed no matter how much he wanted to change it. No matter how much he wanted to set it alight, the flames would only burn the future.

“I’m getting there,” Arwin said. “Are you still feeling up to enter the dungeon today? We all need to be at our best if we’re going to be fighting.”

Lillia remained silent. Any answer given quickly to a question such as that was liable to be impulsive, and she was too experienced to make a mistake like that. Several seconds passed before she moved to sit up. She leaned against him as she rose, keeping her side pressed against his for support.

“I’ll be fine,” Lillia said. “Somehow, I think I actually got a pretty decent night of rest. I don’t feel nearly as tired as I think I should. I figure you’re to thank for that.” Her voice trailed away for a second. Before Arwin could say anything, she spoke again. “Just so you know, that’s more than a little embarrassing to admit.”

“Even if you were doing your best tomato impression, it’s not like I’d be able to see. I wouldn’t have known if you didn’t tell me.”

“I know. I just wanted to make sure you knew that I had to suffer to say that.”

Arwin let out a snort of laughter before he could stop himself. “In that case, I guess I have to thank you for your sacrifice.”

“Exactly.” Arwin felt her nod. “As you should.”

They didn’t speak again for a few seconds, but it wasn’t for a lack of want. There were a lot of things that Arwin wanted to say. None of them seemed able to manifest themselves beyond a flitting thought that died before it could reach his lips.

“Arwin?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to lose anyone else.” Lillia swallowed and her shoulders stiffened as she forced the next sentence through her lips, spitting the words out before they could find anywhere to hide. “I’m scared. I was so resigned to trading everything for living. I didn’t have anything

else left to give, so I had nothing to fear. Then things changed. There's so much I care about now, and I don't want to lose any more of it."

Arwin wished he had something to say that was more than just mere words. He wished he'd been gifted with a silver tongue or blessed by a stroke of inspiration that would let him comfort Lillia.

There wasn't a single thing that he could say that would properly encapsulate his own feelings. No combination of words, no matter how well spoken, felt like it could ever even come close to even scratching the surface. His arm drifted up of its own accord and wrapped around Lillia's shoulders. She leaned against his chest and he pulled her into an embrace.

"I know," Arwin said.

There was nothing else to be said. The dark swallowed the world until all that remained were the two of them. He let his head lower until it rested against Lillia's. Her heartbeat was just faint enough for him to pick up against his skin and her hair tickled his nose.

A sense of strange comfort enveloped Arwin. His brow crinkled as he tried to place the emotion. It was akin to walking down the road to peace if it were paved with bricks made of desire. A dull sense of loss gnawed at his stomach, even as his face warmed.

He searched deeper within himself in pursuit of what the emotion was, a growing sense of concern welling within his chest. Entering any form of battle without knowing oneself was a direct path to the doors of the afterlife.

And yet, the harder he searched, the less he could understand. Nothing quite lined up to where it should have. None of the emotions swirling within him felt like they should have been connected with each other.

He opened his mouth to voice his concerns, but the words stubbornly lined up at the back of his throat, digging their heels in and refusing to step foot outside his mouth.

The back of Arwin's neck tingled and his heart clenched as the dam that he'd been picking away at finally cracked. Realization poured through the gap, shattering what remained of the crumbling dam in an enormous, crashing wave as he finally realized why his thoughts had been drifting back to one particular person so frequently.

I think I'm falling for Lillia.

Chapter 86

Even if Arwin wanted to take back his realization, it was too late to avoid notice of Lillia's body pressed against his and the faint scent of honey and freshly baked bread that lingered in her hair.

This isn't right. I need to put a stop to it. I can't allow myself to feel anything like this for the demon –

Arwin's mind couldn't even finish the thought that it had started to form. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but he couldn't see the woman in his arms as the demon queen anymore. She was just Lillia. The only person who could ever even come close to understanding his pain. The one that had been there to help him through it.

Shit.

The right thing to do was to pull away. He should have gently bid Lillia goodnight – or good day, whichever it happened to be – and have been on his way. He should have returned to his room and centered himself and crushed these feelings until nothing remained but the vague memory of the mistake he could have made.

The right thing to do was to leave her there, devoid of support when she had given it to him.

Is that really the right thing to do?

Arwin wasn't sure. And, as it so turned out, he didn't particularly care. There was nothing to be done about his feelings. They weren't going to go anywhere today. They didn't need to. A feeling understood was a feeling controlled.

Either way, it didn't matter what he felt. The world could have been crashing down around him and it would have changed nothing. Lillia needed him right now. Arwin refused to move a muscle until that was no longer the case. Everything else could be dealt with later.

He didn't know how long the two of them sat there, side by side, but the sound of the stairs creaking in the distance finally broke the silence as somebody headed down into the common room of the tavern.

Lillia's shoulders tensed. She hesitated for a second before she released Arwin and pulled away. Part of him cursed the sound, and another part felt like it couldn't have come soon enough. He let his arm fall away from her shoulders as she stood.

“Thank you,” Lillia said softly. “I’m sorry for unloading on you like that. I guess I wasn’t nearly as in control of my emotions as I thought I was.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I suspect I would have done the same if you hadn’t been there to help me through it.”

“Probably,” Lillia said, a note of amusement flickering through her voice. “Come on. Let’s go out and meet the others.”

Her hand found his in the darkness and she led him into the kitchen. The faint orange glow of candlelight from the lanterns illuminated the outline of her body before him. Even though Arwin could already see where he was going, Lillia made no move to release his hand. She paused as they drew up to the doorway leading out of the kitchen and into the common room.

“Lillia?”

“It’s nothing. Forget about it,” Lillia said with a shake of her head. Her hand tightened around his for a moment before she let go. “I’m ready to handle the dungeon so long as you are.”

Arwin thought for a second. If he hadn’t managed to untangle his thoughts, it may have been a risk. That wasn’t the case any longer. He knew what the problem was, even if he wished that he didn’t.

But as long as he knew, it could be handled. It could be controlled. Emotion was only a danger when it was an unknown. Anything that he already knew about could be accounted for and dealt with.

“I’m ready as well,” Arwin said.

The two of them stepped into the common room. Anna and Rodrick were both sitting at the counter, speaking in hushed tones. Rodrick was clad in his armor, and the way that he and Anna were swinging their feet impatiently told Arwin that they were eager to set out as well. Reya didn’t seem like she’d woken up quite yet, but that was just fine.

“Morning,” Rodrick said. “We setting out soon? I really want to stick my sword in something.”

Anna arched an eyebrow at Rodrick. He reddened and coughed into his fist, pointedly ignoring her.

“Yeah, whenever Reya is ready. I’m going to check on the smithy first to see what it looks like in the daylight so I can remind myself what I’m working toward.”

That’ll give me a little bit to gather my thoughts while I’m alone.

I think Rodrick is right, though. I thought I was done with all this shit, but I really want to hit something with my hammer.

In the back of his mind, a twinge of approval sputtered to life like a candle being lit. Somewhere, hidden within wherever [Arsenal] put his equipment when he wasn’t using it, Verdant Blaze reached out to him. It didn’t care if it was striking metal or flesh. It was all the same. Until as something gave way beneath it, the weapon would hunger.

That must be [Awoken] starting to build up enough energy to actually have an effect. It must be something of a sliding scale rather than either alive or inanimate. Though... I'm not sure if I'd consider Verdant Blaze alive. It more feels like it's taken on a strong desire to be used, much like most materials I've interacted with.

“You doing okay?” Rodrick asked.

He looked over his shoulder, realizing that he'd been standing in the doorway without moving for several seconds. “Yeah. I'm fine. My thoughts were just drifting. Nothing to worry about.”

Rodrick shrugged and Arwin headed out of the doorway to make his way toward the spot where the smithy had once stood. He was rewarded with the sight of a day's work well done. While there was still a thin layer of soot on the ground, almost all of it had been removed. No stones remained to stall any construction. The plot of land laid in wait for a new smithy to be made upon it.

Arwin stood, his arms crossed behind his back, and looked upon his work. He'd always known that every building on the street would probably eventually have to be prepared if they wanted to bring any large amount of foot traffic to the area. Nobody wanted to go into an alley where it looked like they'd get run through.

He just hadn't thought it would be happening this soon. Arwin made to turn back to the tavern, but something lying in a tiny pile of dirt flashed as the sunlight caught it. A frown crossed Arwin's face.

A piece of metal I missed?

Arwin headed over to the shimmer on the ground and knelt beside it. A thin circular disk was rested on the dirt, covered with a thin layer of soot. The sun had caught on a tiny, exposed part of it.

He wiped the soot away with a thumb, revealing a glistening green color underneath. It was the scale that he'd taken from the Wyrms. Arwin tilted his head to the side. He could have sworn that the scale hadn't been there when he'd been working yesterday, but there was always a chance he hadn't seen it because of how dark it had been.

After a moment longer of studying it, Arwin tucked the scale into a pocket. It was nice to know that it hadn't been lost in the flame. Wyrms scales definitely weren't just ordinary material. He had no idea what he'd use it for yet, but he suspected it would turn out to be useful when the time came around.

He walked back to the tavern. If he spent any longer standing around the smithy, he'd want to start building something. That wasn't something he could do until he had money to fund said building – and the one way he was going to get that money was waiting for him on a key hanging from Reya's neck.

Everyone had convened in the common room by the time Arwin returned. Reya and Lillia were both clad in their armor. Rodrick had a cloak wrapped around himself to stop anyone from seeing the magical properties of his gear. Arwin didn't even bother asking if everyone was ready. Their appearances told the story so their mouths didn't have to.

“Let’s go,” Arwin said.

They piled in behind him and the group set out for the dungeon. The trip out of the city went smoothly. Now that they were all clad in relatively respectable gear, they just looked like any other group of adventurers and the guards didn’t so much as glance at them twice.

They didn’t have any trouble on their way over to the dungeon either. It was a warm, sunny day and there wasn’t a single cloud to interrupt the endless expanse of clear blue sky above them.

That luck came to a close when they drew up to the valley that the dungeon rested at. Three cloaked men stood at the entrance of the dungeon, kneeling around it. One of them was positioned so that Arwin could make out his features.

And, to Arwin’s displeasure, he recognized the man’s face.

It was Jin, one of the members of the thieves’ guild that had been after Reya. His eyes narrowed. The men hadn’t noticed them yet, but it would only be a moment before –

Jin glanced up. His eyes widened as he spotted the group standing above him and he hissed a warning to his compatriots. The three of them rose as one, all turning to face the newcomers.

“You,” Jin said, his voice riding the line between shock and accusation.

“Who are these buggers?” Rodrick asked as he rested a hand on his sword. “Nobody up to any good strolls around wearing a cloak like that.”

“You’re wearing a cloak like that,” Anna pointed out.

“Thieves’ guild,” Arwin said brusquely “Not friends.”

“What are you doing here?” Jin demanded. “How are you—”

He cut himself off, but it was too late. Arwin’s eyes narrowed. “How am I what? I believe there was an agreement between our guilds, Jin. You lot stay away from the dungeon and I stay away from your street. What’s going on?”

“You’re ‘supposed to be dead,” one of the other men said, taking a step back. “I knew it. That damn street is haunted, Jin. He’s a ghost, and he’s back for revenge.”

“He’s not a damn ghost. He’s casting a shadow, idiot,” Jin said. He spat on the ground and shook his head. “Forget it. We were just leaving.”

“Hold on,” Arwin said, his voice growing cold. “Why is it you thought I was dead?”

“It was hard to miss your smithy going up like a ball of flame,” Jin replied. His answer came a little too quickly for Arwin’s tastes.

“Was it?” Arwin asked. “Because if someone’s place blows up, I usually try to figure out what happened before I assume they got cooked inside it. I think you’re lying to me, Jin. Are you lying to me?”

“Of course not. Why would I—” Jin whipped his hand toward Arwin mid-sentence. Arwin activated [Arsenal] and his armor slammed into place around him. Metal rang against metal as a

thick needle struck him near the temple, but it failed to penetrate his helm and spun off to the side harmlessly before thunking into the ground at his feet.

“Gods damn it,” Jin cursed.

“Well, that answers that question.” Verdant Blaze took form in Arwin’s hands. “And now you’re definitely not leaving.”

Chapter 87

The thief on Jin’s left – a tall, thin man with a pair of daggers at his side – clapped his hands together. Glistening blue light gathered around his fingertips and pooled at his palms. It swirled into a vortex, starting to form into a jagged bolt.

Arwin didn’t wait for him to finish casting the spell. He sprinted forward, his steps thundering against the ground as he propelled himself forward. He leapt into the air with a roar. The thieves would be less likely to direct attacks toward the others as long as their attention was on him.

The mage’s eyes widened and he flung his spell at Arwin while trying to scramble to safety. He was a decent shot, but it was hard to aim whilst retreating. The bolt of ice scraped past Arwin’s shoulder. The gem in the center of his armor let out a dim hum and turned a faint icy blue and a resonant hum rose up from it.

Arwin slammed down on the ground before Jin and swung Verdant Blaze. He aimed the weapon at the man’s shoulder. He needed answers, not corpses. Not yet, at least.

Jin dropped to the ground to avoid the attack and whipped his leg out in an attempt to sweep Arwin off his feet. [Scourge] pumped through Arwin's legs a moment before the blow connected. The thief let out a grunt of pain as his leg failed to so much as budge his target.

The third thief ran for Arwin, but his whole body shimmered blue mid-step. He locked in place and a rock flew through the air. It arced perfectly down before striking him square between the eyes.

Frosty air bit at Arwin's skin. He jumped to the side instinctively as a rain of jagged ice plummeted from a dull blue sphere of energy that had formed in the air above him. The ice pounded into the ground where he'd been standing. A few shards scraped against his armor and one cut a thin furrow down his arm, but none managed to inflict significant damage. More energy shimmered in the gem at the center of his armor and a second note joined the first.

The mage's face paled as Arwin's gaze snapped over to him. Jin tried to lunge at Arwin, but Arwin thrust a foot forward, planting it square in the center of his chest and throwing the thief back across the ground.

With the same move, Arwin reared back, activated [Scourge], and hurled his hammer. Verdant Blaze was far from an aerodynamic weapon. It really wasn't meant for throwing. Unfortunately for the mage, aerodynamics weren't all that relevant when someone was only just a little bit out of striking distance.

Verdant Blaze screamed through the air and slammed into the man. Dozens of loud cracks merged together into a single sound as the man's body was crushed. He ragdolled across the ground, dead before he hit it.

Energy ignited around Arwin's head and the eyes of his helm lit with a *whoomp* as it activated from the kill. A wave of energy rolled off his body and made his hair stand on end.

"Only an idiot throws their weapon," Jin snarled. He leapt at Arwin and drove a spike toward an unarmored spot near his armpit.

Arwin didn't grace him with a response. Verdant Blaze did the speaking for him. The weapon reformed in his hands and Jin practically threw himself straight into it. It drove into his stomach, knocking the air from his lungs in a pained cough.

He turned to meet the other thief, but there was no need. The man laid dead at Rodrick and Lillia's feet in a growing pool of blood spreading from a large sword wound across his chest.

Jin drew several metal needles and held them in a loose grip. His eyes darted from Arwin to the others and he swallowed heavily. Even an idiot could have told that the fight was hopeless.

"What are you hiding?" Arwin asked. His words warped as they left the helm, twisted by the vibrating energy pouring off it. "I have absolutely no reservations in killing all of you right here, Jin. Answer my damn question."

"Why should I?" Jin demanded. His teeth gritted as he looked back to the body of his dead comrade. "You've already killed Yegin."

"I assume that was the mage – but to be honest, I don't care. You attacked first. And something tells me that you aren't doing it at random. Give me the information I want or I'll get it from someone else."

“Fuck you,” Jin spat. His hand blurred – and the wave of blue energy slammed down on top of him, locking him in place before the needle could fly from his fingertips. It wasn’t directed at Arwin, but at someone behind him.

Arwin didn’t wait to see who. He stepped forward, his hammer blurring even as Jin shot back into motion. His needle rang off Arwin’s shoulder plate. Jin’s eyes only had an instant to widen in shock before Verdant Blaze slammed into him.

Jin’s limbs flailed as his body tumbled across the ground. He skidded to a stop as Arwin’s eyes flared with even more energy. Verdant Blaze hummed in Arwin’s hands, sending a deep hunger worming into his head. It wanted more. Arwin wasn’t so sure that was a good thing.

He released Verdant Blaze, letting the hammer dissipate and spilling the blood covering its head to the ground at his feet. The only people left in the area were his own. He hadn’t seen any other thieves in the area, so he was quite certain there weren’t any witnesses. Arwin let his armor fade away.

“Wouldn’t it have been best if we could have kept one to question?” Anna asked. She approached Jin’s body and grimaced. “I can’t heal this. There needs to be enough left to put back together.”

“It would have been nice,” Arwin said. He walked up beside Anna and knelt to root through Jin’s pockets. “But mercy is for the strong. I’ve been reminded more than enough that I can’t afford it. I’m not going to risk one of you getting injured just to make things easier. Any questioning we did probably wouldn’t have been all that enlightening.”

“Why not?” Reya asked.

“Because it’s unlikely the thieves’ guild had anything to do with the attack. Not directly, at least,” Lillia said. “They would have tried something before. They probably sold our location to Tix or the guild. That would explain why Jin thought Arwin should be dead.”

“Maybe we should pay them another visit,” Arwin mused. “Even if they didn’t do anything directly, they might know more. At the very least, I want to keep them off our street. If they think I’m dead, they might try something again.”

“Are you going to show them... well, this?” Anna nodded vaguely to the scene around them. “It might start a huge fight. I doubt any guild is going to overlook us killing three of their men.”

“Us?” Arwin blinked at Anna in wide-eyed disbelief. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Anna. I’m just a smith accompanied by a tavern keeper with no patrons, a weak thief, a healer, and a warrior who seems to be better at spying than fighting. How could we have possibly dealt with three trained members of a guild?”

“You can’t seriously be planning to play that card,” Rodrick said. “Wait, did you say I sucked at fighting?”

“No, just that you’re better at spying. You said the sucking part yourself,” Arwin replied with a snort. He failed to find anything of interest on Jin’s body other than a pouch of twenty gold. He tucked it into his pocket and stood. “We’ll deal with the thieves later. I agree with

Lillia. I don't think they acted directly against us. We'll need to confirm, of course, but I don't want to overplay our hands again."

"The dungeon, then?" Reya raised a hand to her neck and ran her thumb along the key that hung suspended from it. "It's not like those guys put up that much of a fight."

"I think it might be more that Arwin put up *too* much of a fight," Anna said under her breath. "Apprentice Tier my ass. I don't understand how you're supposed to have a crafting class when you hit harder than a runaway horse."

"Turns out, when you've got good gear, you can start punching a bit above your weight class," Arwin said. He sent a nod to Reya. "And it helps to have someone that can freeze people so they can't dodge my attacks."

"Just remember it isn't going to work as well on anyone stronger," Reya warned. "There's only so much I can do until I get stronger."

"Then we're fortunate to be doing just that," Arwin said. "We've got a very convenient disposal system for these corpses, though. Dungeons are always hungry. Let's just move them quickly so nobody shows up while we're dragging bodies around."

"I highly doubt the thieves' guild will send anyone looking for them too soon anyway," Rodrick said as he knelt to grab one of the thieves by their ankles. "Any big guild is usually remarkably slow on acting on missing people – especially ones that aren't all that important. We should be fine."

"None of them were important, were they?" Lillia asked, picking up another one.

Reya shook her head. “Jin was an enforcer, and I don’t recognize the others. Enforcers are maybe halfway up the guild in standing from what I recall. He was basically just a guard that got paid extra to handle things discreetly.”

“Good. Then we’ve got more than enough time to head into the dungeon and get out before anyone even thinks to come looking for us.” Arwin picked up Jin and walked over to the entrance of the dungeon, dragging the thief’s body along the ground behind him.

“Do you think we’ll be able to get all the way to the bottom this time around?” Rodrick asked.

Arwin let out a bark of laughter. “I think that might be a little bit optimistic. It’s still a Journeyman level dungeon. We’re a group of Apprentice Tiers. I think we can get pretty deep in. Maybe halfway, maybe more. I don’t think we should think about it as trying to get as deep as possible. It should be how far we can get without getting killed in the process. We want a challenge, not to get killed.”

“Fair enough,” Rodrick said. “Let’s do it, then.”

Reya sent a questioning look to Arwin. His armor shimmered back on around his body and he gave her a curt nod.

“Take us in, Reya.”

Chapter 88

Jin and the other unfortunate thieves were left in a pile in the first room of the dungeon for something to come along and snack on. The first few rooms of the dungeon were so

inconsequential that Arwin's group barely even stopped on their way through them. Several more goblins, a strange blob of jelly that got splattered to paste by Verdant Blaze before it could even try attacking, all fell before them.

Even the orc, which had once been a significant threat, barely even managed to put up a fight. Reya froze the monster in place as it noticed their arrival into its room and Rodrick dispatched it a second later, delivering an empowered blow to the monster's throat.

None of the monsters had been carrying anything that Arwin could use to work with and Lillia wasn't keen on cooking with humanoid flesh after finding out that nobody was willing to eat it.

Even though they'd yet to get anything worthwhile, the progress from their first few dungeon runs was stark. They'd barely spent any energy getting this deep. Rodrick had mentioned about trying to go all the way to the end when they'd entered. At the time, Arwin hadn't thought it even worth worrying about.

But now, as they continued on, Arwin was starting to wonder if that was actually as far-reaching as he'd initially thought. He hadn't so much as had to use a single ability or scrap of energy so far.

He pushed those thoughts to the back of his head and forced himself to follow his own advice. Worrying about what would happen in the future was just going to put the present at risk. The end of the dungeon would come if it came.

“Everyone ready?” Arwin asked, stopping at the end of the hallway that led out of the third room and at the entrance to the fourth. Two flickering orbs of purple torchlight guarded the door before him.

“Big bugger,” Rodrick said. He spun his sword at his side. “I’m ready to let you do all the work and then take the kill for myself.”

Arwin rolled his eyes. “You don’t have to sound so excited about it.”

“I like free stuff,” Rodrick said. “I’ve got your back, though.”

Reya held her hands before her, ready to call on her powers at a moment’s notice. Lillia stood beside her. Shadows coiled at her feet in anticipation. Arwin didn’t bother asking if they were ready. He didn’t need to.

He pushed the door open. The dungeon had changed the room once again – but not as much as some others. Translucent green crystals jutted out of the walls and protruded from the ceiling, sharpened to jagged points.

A hunched creature sat in the corner of the room. The back of its spine pressed against taut grey skin. It was vaguely humanoid and its clawed hands were full of gems that had been ripped up from the ground around it. Cracks and grinding crunches came from the monster’s mouth as its jaws worked.

It turned as Arwin stepped into the room, revealing sunken grey eyes and large floppy ears. A flat nose flared on its face as it sniffed the air and rose to its feet, staggering, and let out a high-pitched growl. Gems fell from its mouth and tinkled against the floor.

[Chiopire Screecher – Journeyman 5]

Even though Arwin had never seen this particular monster, it only took one look at its large ears and its name to determine exactly what it was the monster did. The Chiopire drew in a deep breath and its stomach ballooned.

Arwin dashed forward, dismissing Verdant Blaze so he could close the distance sooner. He wasn't fast enough. The Chiopire's ears folded in on themselves and a deafening screech ripped through the room.

His eardrums burst. Arwin staggered and lost his balance mid-step. He managed to catch himself before he fell to the ground by planting his feet and skidding to a stop, but the world swirled and danced around him unsteadily.

The only thing he could hear was a deafening echo of silence. Warm blood dripped down the sides of his face. Twisting and dancing in his vision, the Chiopire turned toward Arwin and bared a mouth full of large, heavy molars. Two fangs snapped out of its top lip and it darted toward him.

Arwin tried to brace himself enough that he could bring Verdant Blaze to bear and meet the monster's charge, but his body was too unstable. He wasn't going to be able to swing the hammer and keep his balance.

Instead, he threw his weight forward. The Chiopire twisted and tried to avoid the unexpected attack, but it was moving too quickly. Arwin's shoulder slammed into the monster and he drove it to the ground, pinning it beneath his weight.

Its claws scraped against his armor and searched for purchase in his armor. Arwin delivered a [Scourge] empowered headbutt to the monster's chest. Bone cracked beneath his helm and the horns dug deep through grey flesh. The Chiopire's claws finally found a gap near the bottom of Arwin's plate and dug into his hips.

[Indomitable Bulwark] kept his leg from being severed on the spot, but hot blood coursed out of his body in a deluge. The Chiopire desperately tried to deepen the wound, but Arwin slammed his fist into the monster's shoulder.

He'd been aiming for its head, but with the world spinning as it was, he was lucky to have hit it at all. More bone shattered beneath him and the Chiopire screamed in pain. It tried to draw in a breath to screech again, but the cracked bones in its sternum ripped into its skin and proved to be too much to overcome.

A wave of blue energy slammed into the monster and it locked in place. Rodrick's sword carved through the air and connected with the middle of the Chiopire's head. The glowing energy surrounding the weapon carved straight through it and the monster went limp beneath Arwin. His helmet hummed with energy as its aura activated.

Someone shoved Arwin's shoulder. He turned to see Anna yelling something, her brow furrowed in intense concentration. He couldn't make out any of the words she was saying. She gave the horns on his helm a frustrated tug and Arwin dismissed it.

Warm energy washed over Arwin's body and, with two gentle pops, his hearing returned. The damage to his hip knitted itself shut before Anna lifted her hand.

“Thanks.” Arwin rose from the corpse at his feet. Rodrick leaned against Anna, two streaks of blood running down his own head as he swayed in place. Anna sent golden energy flowing into him.

“I could barely use my magic with that helmet’s aura screwing with me,” Anna, speaking much louder than normal. She shuddered. “If you ever have it active and need healing, make sure to turn it off.”

“Is it really that effective?” Arwin raised his voice so Anna could hear him, but it still took her a second to try and read the words from his lips before she nodded.

“It’s nasty,” Anna confirmed. “I could have brute forced it, but it would have been really difficult and taken a lot more energy than it normally should. It felt like my bones were getting vibrated and the ground was trying to swallow me. It’s hard to describe, but it isn’t a fun feeling to push through.”

“Noted,” Arwin said.

“That was a loud ass monster,” Rodrick said as he sheathed his sword. “Thank whatever god was watching over me. If I’d had my enhanced hearing active, I think my head would have popped. Is everyone else okay?”

“Just a little deaf for the moment,” Anna said. “I think I was far back enough that I avoided the worst of the attack.”

“Did you at least manage to get some good energy from healing us?” Arwin asked.

“Yeah. I might have gotten more if I ran in earlier, but I can’t heal my own wounds yet and I didn’t want to get ripped in half.”

“A wise decision. I prefer you alive,” Arwin said. “Reya, Lillia? You both okay?”

“We’re both fine,” Lillia said. “I would have tried to attack with my shadows, but I was worried I’d hit you in the process. I didn’t want to make things worse.”

“It’s fine. It turned out okay.” Arwin wiped the blood away from his face before summoning his helm back, inert. The aura seemed to disappear whenever he sent it back to wherever it was that [Arsenal] kept his equipment. “Anyone get anything good?”

“I went up a Tier and got an Achievement that got consumed at the same time to upgrade one of my skill choices,” Reya said absently as her eyes flitted through the air before her. “I’m Apprentice 2 now, and I got an upgraded skill called Shackle Break. It lets me shatter any magic that is negatively affecting myself or an ally, but it’s got the typical drawback of having more trouble breaking moves from people at higher Tiers.”

“An ability that removes oppression? Those are normally just for healers or self-buffs,” Anna said, blinking in surprise. “That’s quite the odd class you got there.”

“It falls in the realm of battlefield supports,” Rodrick said before Arwin could answer. “That’s my suspicion, at least. Probably an aggressive one. That’s why Reya got it from a combination of sparing the first lizard and trying to kill herself on the Wurm. Mix of anti-combat and suppression techniques that aid your allies.”

That's pretty close to what I was going to say. I thought Rodrick didn't know that much about this kind of thing. He seemed like a bit of a goofy, well-meaning idiot when we first met. That doesn't really match up with the intelligence he's shown in recent days.

Something tells me Rodrick and Anna left the Adventurer's Guild for more reasons than what they said.

“It sounds like a good choice,” Arwin said. He studied the body of the monster at his feet. There wasn't much use he was going to get out of it, but the crystals were another story. He headed around the room, collecting them. Lillia procured a large tarp bag for him to store his findings in, then slung it over her shoulder.

“Do we go deeper?” Anna asked.

“I'd say so,” Arwin said, studying himself for a second. The Chiropire hadn't damaged his armor and, while he'd lost some blood, he still had a lot of magical energy to work with. If it hadn't been for the monster's screech, it probably wouldn't have landed a blow on him at all.

And besides – the crystals weren't enough. They were a decent reward and he could work with them, but he wanted more if he could get away with it. Returning to the surface now felt too early.

“Just be careful. We're definitely over halfway into the dungeon by now,” Lillia warned. “The things from here on out will be strong.”

“Good,” Rodrick said. “We need the experience fighting. I think I’m probably not too far from reaching the next level in my Tier as well. Maybe one or two more fights like that. Hopefully I can get another Achievement on the way.”

Nobody else voiced any concerns, so Arwin nodded and gestured to a thin hall leading into the dark sandwiched between large growths of jutting crystals. “Let’s go deeper, then. Keep your eyes and ears peeled. I don’t know what we’ve got ahead of us but considering that’s the second time we’ve seen crystals in this dungeon, it’s likely we’re going to see more rooms like this one.”

“Dungeons stop changing the deeper you get in them?” Reya asked.

“Generally, yes,” Arwin said. “It’s easy to modify the outer layers, but from what I understand, the deeper you get, the more set in stone dungeons become. They’re not exactly living creatures, but they’re not inanimate either. It’s easier to cut your fingernails than it is to swap out an organ.”

“Makes sense,” Reya said. “So that means the monsters down here are going to be ones that probably like crystals?”

“Most likely,” Arwin said as he squeezed through the gap between the crystals and started into the hallway, the others following behind him. “And, with any luck, they’ll also be made out of something that I can forge with.”

Chapter 89

The hallway leading to the next room greeted them with the scent of the sea and stale breath. Familiar green crystals ran along the path at their feet, jutting out and seemingly doing their best to stick themselves right in front of their ankles whenever they took a step.

Water dripped from the ceiling in a rhythmic pattern and plinked against pools of water around them. Moisture covered the walls and gave life to moss that hid in the cracks and corners of the stone.

The hall grew wider until there was just barely enough room for two people to walk side by side but they remained in a single file line anyway. Standing shoulder to shoulder would have forced them to squeeze and the crystals likely would have poked them every few steps. The scent of fish and salt intensified the deeper they headed.

“If the smell gets any worse, I think I might throw up,” Reya said nasally, pinching her nose shut and grimacing. “Where are we headed, the ocean’s ass crack?”

“You’ve been near the ocean?” Arwin asked, glancing back at Reya in surprise. “Is Milten near a large body of water?”

“Yeah,” Rodrick said. “It’s at the edge of the continent, at the farthest reaches of Lian. Honestly, it’s only part of the kingdom by name. Have you seen the governor’s mansion? Judging by its size, I’d reckon he hasn’t paid taxes to Lian in quite some time. Milten is just too far out and small to bother giving a shit about.”

Well, I guess that means my assumption of where Milten was happened to be pretty accurate. Did that explosion really throw me this far? How in the world did I survive the landing?

More questions, and still no answers. Arwin shook his head and dismissed his thoughts. There wasn't any room for that inside a dungeon. He could deal with his worries when there weren't monsters waiting to rip his heart out through his chest.

His nose scrunched in distaste as he drew in a breath. Reya was right – it smelled horrendous. A stain of rot had marred the already disgusting fishy scent, somehow making it even worse than it had been before.

When the hallway finally turned a corner and stopped at the opening of a large room, Arwin wasn't sure if he was relieved or disgusted. The scent was definitely coming from within it. Glowing green moss reflected off a pool of murky water at the back of the domed cave and illuminated the sparse crystals jutting out of the walls and shimmering beneath the small lake's surface.

“What are the chances we're up against some slippery piece of shit that's waiting underwater?” Rodrick whispered.

“Depends. Are you a betting man?” Arwin asked.

Rodrick grunted. “I'll take that as one hundred percent. Nobody offers up a bet they don't think they're going to win.”

“Good choice,” Arwin said. “Everyone ready?”

“As ready as we’re going to get,” Anna said. “I’m standing back here. I don’t fancy the idea of tentacles.”

“What makes you think there will be tentacles?” Arwin asked.

“It smells like shit and there’s water. It’s going to be tentacles.”

Arwin shrugged. He stepped into the room, keeping Verdant Blaze ready at his side and prepared to activate [Scourge] at a moment’s notice. The steady drip of water rang in his ears as he walked closer to the lake.

Both his armor and greaves still had energy stored within them. The gem in the center of his chest piece had stopped humming but dim blue magic still sparkled within it. His greaves hummed with energy from the fight with the Chiropire, but he’d need to tank another strong hit or two before they activated.

The room was still silent. An outline in the wall at the edge of the lake marked what Arwin suspected to be a closed passageway. That was unfortunate. They’d probably have to find a way to open it. There wouldn’t be any way to sneak past the room.

That’s fine. Not a good idea to leave enemies behind you anyway. I just wish whatever is in this room would just come out already. I really don’t want to get any closer to the water and get pulled in.

Arwin coughed into his fist. It echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls, and faded away. The only response the room gave him was silence. Evidently, the monster here wasn’t planning on giving up its advantage.

“Lillia?” Arwin called.

“Yeah?”

“Think you could start stabbing the water? I’m not walking up to it.”

“Can you do that?” Reya asked, peering into the room but not taking a step past the entrance.

“I don’t see why not.” Lillia walked past Reya. The shadows rose at her feet and stretched across the room, crawling across the walls, and approached the lake.

“It just seems... I don’t know. Cheap is the wrong word. I never really thought about it, I guess. Some part of me felt like dungeon monsters wouldn’t just sit around and let you stab them.”

Rodrick entered the room and stood a few feet behind Arwin. He glanced around the walls and ceiling. When he found nothing that Arwin had missed, he turned his attention and sword to the lake.

“I highly doubt it’ll sit around if I manage to stab it,” Lillia said. The shadows rose up over the water, sharpening into points and looming above it like several large snakes. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Arwin replied. “Just get to safety if you manage to hit it. Even if you miss, I figure it’s going to pop out pretty pissed that we’ve messed with its house.”

The others all nodded. After waiting one more second to make sure that nobody had any last second things to say, Lillia brought her hand down. The ropery shadows dropped, slicing into the dark water.

The lake bubbled. A furious roar burst forth from within it and Lillia beat a hasty retreat to the back of the room as a dome formed in the water. It rose up into a pillar before bursting. Water sloughed away from a lumbering body.

If the smell in the room had been foul before, now it was indescribable – and the water hadn't even completely revealed the monster yet.

Metal clanged against stone as a foot clad in rusted, barnacle-covered greaves slammed onto the ground. The monster wore a matching chest piece. A huge hole in the center of its chest where the metal had splintered and shattered marked a defeat in a battle ages past.

Scraps of flesh hung from the monster's rotting, ten-foot-tall form. It was humanoid – it could have even been human if it wasn't for its imposing size. Translucent green crystals jutted out of its body from random spots like cancerous growths. Arwin was grateful that a helm covered its face to keep what he could already tell to be horrid breath from wafting across the room.

[Rot Giantling – Journeyman 5]

A loud, scraping shriek carved through the air as the monster dragged itself fully out of the water and its sword caught on the ground, carving a thin furrow through the stone. The

weapon was nearly as tall as Arwin. It looked far too big to be swung around by something as decayed as the Rot Giantling, but it seemed that nobody had informed the monster yet.

“It’s an undead,” Arwin warned. “Forget going for killing blows. We want to cripple it until we figure out how to make it stay down. I don’t suppose anyone has any blessed attacks?”

Nobody responded. If any of them did, it probably would have been Anna, but healers generally didn’t get offensive options like that until their later Tiers. The Rot Giantling let out a teeth-rattling roar and two dim green lights erupted behind the eyes of its helmet.

“How in the Nine Underlands do I cripple something like that?” Rodrick asked, his voice wavering slightly.

“Just follow my lead,” Arwin replied. The Rot Giantling took a lumbering step toward him and raised its arm, bringing the huge sword hurtling through the air toward Arwin. He darted out of the way, then closed the distance between them brought his hammer hurtling for the monster’s knee.

It struck the giantling’s greave dead on with a resounding clang. Arwin staggered back as a vibration raced down the haft of his hammer, leaving nothing but a dent in the armor. The giantling swung its hand at Arwin, forcing him to use [Scourge] to empower his jump back to safety.

No point using [Soul Flame] in my attacks right now. I need all my magical energy for [Scourge] and I don’t think fire is going to do very much damage to something like this. Soul-empowered or not, I just need brute force right now.

Large or not, the giantling was fast – or perhaps it could just cover a lot of ground quickly because of its size. That said, it was still a little bit slower than Arwin moving under his own powers, much less with the aid of [Scourge].

“Just stay away from its arms,” Arwin called. The giantling stepped toward him again and twisted its body, swinging the sword like a bat in an attempt to cut Arwin in half.

He ducked the attack. Wind screamed above his head and he straightened, taking a step forward and swinging Verdant Blaze once more. It struck the same spot on the giantling’s knee. Energy swirled within the hammer and coursed into the giantling as [Shieldbreaker] triggered.

A surprised roar escaped the giantling’s mouth and it kicked at Arwin. He dodged out of the way and scrambled back as the giant brought its foot down where he’d been standing, shaking the room with a resounding crash.

Rodrick darted forward as the giantling swung at Arwin again. His sword ignited with glowing yellow energy and he thrust it for a gap in the monster’s armor. It scraped against a plate of old armor, its approach slowed, but still bit into the flesh beneath.

The giantling’s attack missed as Arwin dodged to the side, but it didn’t so much as slow its momentum. In an insane feat of strength, it yanked back on the blade and redirected its path toward Rodrick.

“Godspit,” Rodrick swore, stealing Lillia’s favorite insult as he dropped to the ground. The sword screeped past his head and Arwin used [Scourge] to launch himself forward. The Rot

Giantling's free hand reached for him and a shimmer of blue passed over it, passing so quickly that it may as well not have ever been there.

Bands of shadow slipped out of the ground and reached up for its hand. They wrapped around it and tightened, restraining the monster for just long enough to buy Arwin time to land another blow on its knee.

This time, he was rewarded with not a clang but a crunch. The metal dented beneath Verdant Blaze, the crystals at its head ripping into the rotting flesh beyond. A furious scream ripped out of the giantling's mouth and it lunged for Arwin.

The shadows snapped and fell away. Another flash of blue passed over it and failed to take purchase as it reached out, hand extending to crush Arwin's head like a grape. [Scourge] coursed through his legs and he leapt back, just barely avoiding huge, bony fingers as they slammed shut on the air.

A shudder shook the ground as the giantling crashed to the ground. It was joined by a loud, scraping screech of armor grinding against stone. Rodrick darted forward and thrust his blade for one of its large eye holes.

The giantling lowered its head and Rodrick's sword rang harmlessly off its helm. Rodrick jumped over the monster's hand as it swung at him, then darted out of the way of its sword as it clambered back to its feet.

"Do it again!" Arwin yelled to Lillia. He ran forward, not waiting to see if she'd heard him. Arwin dropped to the ground, skidding across the stone on his knees to avoid the blade that

carved the air above him apart, then drove himself upward and swung Verdant Blaze with all the power [Scourge] would impart into him.

Shadows erupted from the ground, binding around the Giantling's other leg and pulling at its free hand. It ripped itself free, but not fast enough to avoid the hurtling hammer. It slammed home and metal crumpled beneath it.

Verdant Blaze roared in Arwin's mind as it ripped through flesh and bone, emerging from the giantling's leg in a spray of viscera. The blow had separated knee from leg entirely. A scream of pain filled the room as the giantling pitched back and crashed to the ground.

"Yes!" Rodrick yelled. "Nice! Let's finish it off!"

"Hold on." Arwin held a hand out to stop Rodrick from advancing and the other man froze in place.

The Rot Giantling rolled itself over and slammed its sword into the ground, using it as a crutch to raise itself back up. A deep growl emerged from within its chest, rancid air washing over them like a filthy blanket.

Chitinous legs pushed their way out of the hole in the monster's chest and a bulbous grey spider clambered out from within it. More legs sprouted from the severed leg and its stump, hissing and popping as they crawled free.

[Corpse Burrower – Apprentice 4]

"Oh, that is just *vile*," Rodrick muttered.

“Focus on killing them. Don’t let them touch you for obvious reasons,” Arwin said. “Something tells me that they don’t care if the bodies they infest are alive or not when they start.”

“Trust me, I’m not letting those creepy little shits anywhere near me,” Rodrick muttered, taking a step back as the spiders started toward them.

The Rot Giantling grabbed its severed leg and jammed it onto the stump. Flesh squelched as it drove a bone back into rotted muscle. The leg was mutilated and a little shorter than the other one, but the giantling was able to stand once more.

“Oh, that is bullshit,” Rodrick said. “That’s not how legs work.”

“Just keep the spiders off our backline.” Arwin hoisted Verdant Blaze. “I’ll handle the big bastard.”

Chapter 90

Arwin didn’t give the Rot Giantling time to finish its roar of defiance before he charged again. Reconstructing its leg was great and all that, but it was still the exact same target he’d struck before.

And, if it was the same target, then so long as the next thing Arwin hit was that very spot, the giantling was going to have a very bad time. The monster seemed to realize that, because it kicked at Arwin with its good leg as he sprinted for it.

Bounding into the air with aid from [Scourge], Arwin cleared the monster's leg. He dropped to the ground, slipping past the giantling's free hand, and landed on the ground behind it. He spun and swung his hammer with a roar.

Strands of shadow wrapped around the giantling's body and pierced through the holes in its armor to stab at the flesh beneath. Verdant Blaze struck the giant's leg. Metal warped and caved beneath the blow and the hammer carried straight through it.

A spider leapt from the giantling's body as it pitched back, its legs going wide as it attempted to latch onto Arwin's face. He grabbed it out of the air and pelted it into the ground. The impact did little to hurt it, but Verdant Blaze crashing down transformed the Corpse Burrower into a pile of ill-mannered paste on the ground.

[Shieldbreakers] effects ended with the change of targets, but Arwin wasn't aiming for that leg anymore. He opened his mouth to call to Lillia, but she was already ahead of him. A shadow shot out and wrapped around the leg, launching it into the pool of water.

It hit the surface with a splash and vanished into the murky depths. Watching its disappearance nearly cost Arwin his head. Lillia called out a warning and he jerked back. The giantling's sword ripped past his face, passing so close that its tip scraped against his helm, traces of blue magic flying off it.

If it hadn't been for the brief instant that Reya had bought him, the strike might have done serious damage.

“Thanks!” Arwin called, approaching the downed giantling. It didn’t have nearly as much reach now that it was on the floor, but it was also harder to get closer to it without getting in the reach of its large hands.

If he’d been fighting the monster alone it may have been difficult to find a way to strike at it. Fortunately, he wasn’t. Rodrick dashed around to the giantling’s back. He kept far enough from its hands to keep it from catching him as he circled it, then sent Arwin a glance and nodded.

They had the giantling flanked. The moment it tried to attack one of them, the other would attack. A second passed before the monster blurred into action. Perhaps it didn’t have the intelligence to determine the threat of its position or perhaps it just wanted to kill the person that had done the most damage to it. Regardless of reason, it dug its fingers into the ground and hurled its body toward Arwin.

[Scourge] ignited in Arwin’s legs and he dismissed Verdant Blaze, hurling himself to the side. He hit the ground in a roll and rose to his feet just as the giantling landed, sliding across the stone and slamming into a wall with a resounding crash.

Some of the crystals jutting from it impaled the monster with several loud squelches. The giantling ripped itself free with a snarl, more spiders pouring out of its body and onto the ground. Rodrick was forced to reposition to keep the attention of the small monsters on himself. The giantling pushed itself up and lunged for Arwin again.

This time, Arwin didn’t dodge. He swung his arms, Verdant Blaze taking shape within them, and the hammer connected with the giantling’s shoulder with a loud crack. The metal chest piece absorbed the brunt of the damage but the strike still knocked it askew. A hand flailed past

Arwin's chest and he jumped out of the way to avoid the pommel of the sword as it whipped over his head.

He pressed his advantage, bringing Verdant Blaze down on the same shoulder as the giantling tried to right itself. Metal crumpled and the monster screamed. A strand of shadow wrapped around Arwin's chest and pulled him out of the way as the giantling's hand passed through the space he'd been standing and crashed into the ground.

Rodrick raced past Arwin, jumping over a sword swing and bringing his glowing blade down on a small crack that Arwin had formed in the monster's armor. Metal shattered as it finally fell under their assault. Rodrick twisted his sword before yanking it free and running back to safety.

A Corpse Burrower pushed its way out of the wound. It only made it a step onto the ground before a shadow wrapped around its abdomen and pelted it into a wall. Even as the spider fell, another shadow grabbed it and shoved it underwater.

Not to be outdone, the giantling swung its sword. Even from its spot on the ground, the blade's reach was enormous, and Rodrick was too close to dodge it in time. Arwin shoved him back and braced the haft of his hammer to block the strike. He pumped his body full of power with [Scourge] a moment before the blow connected.

A ringing clang echoed out and a vibration ran down the hammer and through Arwin's body. It felt like he'd been rung like a bell. The sword in the giantling's hands vibrated as it was repelled, buying him an instant to strike.

Between all the power that [Scourge] and [Shieldbreaker] had drawn, Arwin didn't have much energy left to work with for this fight. He burst into motion. The giantling's free hand reached out to grab him and he twisted out of the way.

Shadows pulled at the monster's fingers and gave him time to slip past without having to waste energy on [Scourge]. Arriving at the monster's head, he raised Verdant Blaze and brought it down with all his might.

A hammer blow rang off the metal helm, severely denting it. Arwin activated [Scourge], not to deliver a harder blow but to raise the weapon faster, and brought it down again. A second strike slammed down. This one left a deep dent in the helm that probably would have killed a normal man had his head been inside it.

The giantling was, unfortunately, not a normal man. It let out a garbled scream and brought its arms inward in an attempt to crush Arwin against itself. Bands of shadow wrapped around the monster and blue light washed over it.

Lillia and Reya's efforts didn't buy Arwin any more than a second. That was fine. A second was all he needed. The hammer lifted and fell once again. Every last scrap of magical power Arwin had left to spare went into the blow.

It drove into the already-dented helm with a resounding crash. The rusted metal gave way. Bone cracked and flesh splattered as Verdant Blaze tore through it. Sickly brown blood and gore sprayed across the ground and the Rot Giantling's thrashing arms collapsed behind Arwin, finally falling still.

Achievement: [You can't do that] has been earned.

[You can't do that] – Awarded for doing damage equal to or greater the amount that an opponent just healed. Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

A squelch marked the death of the last Corpse Burrower at the blade of Rodrick's sword. Arwin turned to the others and let Verdant Blaze fade from his grip, dismissing his helm to stop the aura from activating. The bodies of dead Corpse Burrowers littered the ground around Rodrick. It didn't look like anyone had gotten hurt.

"Everyone okay?" Arwin asked.

"Yeah. That was one nasty monster," Rodrick said. He flicked the blood from his sword and sheathed it at his side. "I didn't think smashing the shit out of its head was the way to do it."

"It wasn't a true undead," Arwin said. "Probably a monster on the way to becoming undead but one that hadn't fully shed its mortal ties. If it had been, we would have been in a lot more trouble."

"Did anyone else get an Achievement?" Reya asked, coughing into her fist as her cheeks reddened.

"I did," Arwin said. "Why are you embarrassed about it?"

"Because mine is called Pathetic, and I got it for casting a spell that did so little that my target didn't even realize I'd done something."

Lillia burst into laughter and nudged Reya with her shoulder. “That’s nothing to complain about. An Achievement is still an Achievement. Trust me, there are much worse things you can get given. The Mesh isn’t always nice.”

“What did the Achievement give you?” Arwin asked.

“A skill upgrade. I went with [Imprison] to give it a guaranteed half a second against anyone that’s no more than a whole Tier above me,” Reya said. “Once I reach Apprentice 4 or 5, it should be a lot more useful.”

“Pretty solid. Guaranteed control is always useful,” Arwin said.

“Do you think I can cook this?” Lillia asked, walking up beside Arwin and looking down at the corpse of the giant.

Arwin raised an eyebrow. “Did your nose fall off at some point in the fight?”

“It might taste better than it smells.”

“And I might grow wings and fly away.”

Lillia scrunched her nose. She thought for a second, then knelt and ripped a small strip of flesh away. Arwin resisted the urge to gag as Lillia stood back up beside him and studied it through squinted eyes.

“It could make a decent steak.”

“That’s cannibalism at best. It was humanoid.”

“It wasn’t human, though,” Lillia pointed out. “Look at all this flesh. Think of how much food this would be if it doesn’t literally taste like death.”

“Do you have any idea how much weight that ‘if’ is lifting?” Arwin asked. “Because I think it might be stronger than the rest of us put combined.

“Oh, come on. It could be edible. You don’t know unless you try. Will you try some if I do?” Lillia asked. “We don’t want to waste resources.”

Her eyes enlarged as she stared into Arwin’s. He gritted his teeth and averted his gaze. He’d dealt with far greater threats than a pair of puppy-dog eyes. He definitely wasn’t going to—

“If you can take a bite and avoid turning your stomach inside-out, then I’ll consider it.”

Goddamn it.

“The hardest part is getting over the mental block,” Lillia said sagely. She lifted the piece of meat – if it could even be called that – to her mouth and took a small bite. They all stared at her expectantly. Lillia chewed once. Then she chewed again.

Doubling over, Lillia spat the chunk onto the ground. She retched and coughed, clawing at her tongue as she tried to get the taste off. Still hacking, Lillia straightened up and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I was very wrong,” Lillia said, still scraping at her tongue. “Don’t eat that.”

“Are you really surprised?” Anna asked. “And do you need healing? I feel like that might have poisoned you. Just so you know, I can’t heal the shits. It’s not a wound.”

“Noted,” Lillia grumbled miserably. Her eyes glazed over for a second and her cheeks went bright red.

“You just got an Achievement, didn’t you?” Arwin asked.

“Well, I guess I did just tell Reya that there could always be worse things than a slightly snippy Achievement.”

“What did you get?” Reya asked.

“A Title called Hungry Idiot,” Lillia said sheepishly. “It lets me taste the best flavors in anything edible so I can figure out if it’ll taste good. The Mesh really ripped into me for eating that. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Title that’s just a straight up insult.”

“That’s actually pretty impressive,” Arwin said. “Well? Does the flesh have anything redeemable about it?”

Lillia sent a critical gaze at the strip of meat on the ground, next to where she’d spat up the first bite she’d taken. “I don’t think I want to find out. I’ll try it on something the Mesh won’t smite me on the spot for tasting.”

“Does it really care?” Reya asked. “It’s not alive, is it?”

Arwin grunted. “I wouldn’t be so sure. I don’t know what the Mesh is, but saying it’s not alive might not be entirely accurate. It’s... aware. Not in the way you or I are, but it’s still aware.”

“More importantly, we’re still in the dungeon,” Rodrick said. He looked around the room. “Do we press deeper? I’ve had conversations about the Mesh before, and they always go way longer than I’d planned on. We should figure out our next steps before getting distracted.”

“I think I’d be willing to try and push a little farther as long as I can have some time to rest,” Arwin said after a moment of thought. “I think we can take at least one more room. We’ll have to find the way past this one anyway. There’s probably a way to open the door somewhere. Besides, I also need to see if any of the metal on this monster is salvageable.”

Nobody objected, and so their course was set. They would press deeper – but first, Arwin had a rotted corpse to rip apart.

Chapter 91

Arwin did his best to avoid touching the dead Rot Giantling too much as he worked the crumpled helmet off its pulped head. It was largely a fruitless effort, and even washing the helmet off in the lake didn’t manage to completely remove the vile stench engrained within it.

Time and the water had taken a heavy toll on the metal. It was covered with a thick layer of rust and the barnacles felt like they’d welded themselves on. Arwin had to use a little bit of energy from [Scourge] just to pry one off, revealing even more rusted scrap.

He wasn’t so easily deterred. The metal had withstood several hits from his [Scourge] empowered swings, and even [Shieldbreaker] had needed several blows to properly destroy it. There had to be some redeeming properties to the metal even if it was completely rusted over.

“You think this is magical and just has hidden properties?” Arwin asked Lillia, who stood beside him peering into the lake.

“I think it smells almost as bad as the corpse behind us. That should count as a magical property in itself. Psychological damage to anyone you fight when they realize you’ve been walking around with that awful thing on you.”

“You literally tried to eat it,” Arwin pointed out.

“That was experimentation. I wasn’t planning on sticking it on my head and strolling around with it.” Lilla scrunched her nose in distaste, then shrugged. “But, if there is magic, it’s probably covered up by all the buildup of shit.”

“Probably,” Arwin agreed. He looked back at the corpse. In the past few minutes, he’d managed to work off the one remaining intact leg of the giantling’s greaves and a chunk of the chest piece. The rest of the armor was so deeply embedded and fused with the monster’s body that even Arwin couldn’t be bothered to try and remove it. There were some things that even the world’s strongest bath could never fix.

“I see that look in your eyes,” Lillia said. “You’re about to ask me if I’m willing to carry some of this crap, aren’t you?”

“You were willing to take the flesh back.”

Lillia heaved a sigh. “Fine. Just... try to wash it a little more, please.”

Arwin did just that. He wasn't eager to smell the awful armor for much longer either. While he scrubbed away at it in the lake, the others scoured the room for a way to open the door to the next level down.

It was nearly thirty minutes before he decided that he couldn't possibly clean the armor any further with just water. He broke it into pieces and stuffed it into Lillia's bag. He slung the bag over his shoulder and headed over to rejoin the others.

They were huddled at the edge of the lake farthest from where he'd been working. Lillia sat beside it, her eyes screwed shut and lips pursed with concentration. There was a large pile of rubble and garbage stacked up beside her consisting of everything from fish bones to moss-covered rocks.

"Any luck finding a way down?" Arwin asked, setting the bag at his feet.

"I think so. We're working on it right now. There's something at the bottom of the water that we think might be a key." Reya nodded past Lillia into the murky depths. It was like staring into a bowl of thick stew. If there was anything down there, Arwin certainly couldn't see it. "But it's really down there and Rodrick only saw a flash of it."

"I was about to ask," Arwin said dryly. "I'd rather it be somewhere underwater than on the Rot Giantling's body. At least it might be a bit pre-washed."

"I wouldn't get too optimistic," Anna said nasally, her nose pinched shut between two fingers. "I have no idea how Rodrick saw anything through that murk, much less how Lillia is going to actually manage to find it again if it is down there."

“Hold on. I think I have something.” Lillia’s tongue protruded from her mouth and she pulled her hands up. A net made of shadow rose up from the water, pulled shut at the top. It flopped onto the ground and melted into a pool of darkness, leaving behind an assortment of bones, rocks, and sludge.

“Nice,” Rodrick said.

Lillia pulled a small tendril of shadow out of the ground and poked at her winnings. She pushed some of the trash over to the larger pile with the tendril. The dull green light coming off the moss covering the walls glimmered off a spec of silver buried beneath a pile of algae.

A shadowy tendril looped around the piece and pulled it free. It wiped the sludge away, revealing the body of an old key. Lillia grinned. “You spoke too soon. I got it.”

“So I did,” Rodrick admitted. “All the power to you. Figured we were just going to be heading back.”

“I still can’t believe you saw anything down there,” Lillia said. She stood and took the key from her tendril, shaking the last drops of dirt off it.

“The light was reflecting off it. I think I just got lucky,” Rodrick said with a shrug. “It wouldn’t have done me any good on my own. There’s no world where I was going to dive into that lake and get fourteen diseases named after me.”

“Are you recovered enough to keep going?” Anna asked Arwin. “You’re the one that spent the most energy in that fight.”

“Yeah. I should be fine. It’s been a good bit since the last fight.”

Lillia headed over to the outline of the passageway in the wall and studied it for a few seconds. She used a tendril of shadow to wipe some of the grime away to reveal a small keyhole beside the doorway.

“I’m going to open this,” Lillia warned, putting the key into its slot. Arwin walked to stand beside her, summoning Verdant Blaze to his hands and ensuring he was between anything that might have come from the passageway and the others.

The key clicked as Lillia twisted it and the door slid across wet stone in a smooth motion. Beyond it was a short hallway that led to a set of grandiose wooden doors flanked by two familiar looking purple torches. More green crystals ran along the ground and jutted from the ceiling. The light coming from the moss mixed with that of the torches. It refracted through the crystals and shimmered and danced in a silent play across the walls, their shadows the puppet masters.

“Big bugger ahead.” Rodrick’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Isn’t it a bit soon?”

“Not if we’re at the end of the dungeon.” Arwin squinted into the darkness “It could be on the smaller side.

“Can we handle the last room?” Anna asked, her staff tapping against the ground as she walked to join him in staring into the hall. “It’s probably a good bit stronger than the giantling. That could be a little rough.”

“The strongest monster in a Journeyman level dungeon might be difficult,” Lillia agreed.
“We won’t be able to let Arwin handle the majority of the fight again. It won’t be safe.”

“Getting strong never is,” Rodrick said. “I vote we go. There’s no power without risk.
That’s how the Mesh works.”

Rodrick’s words weren’t wrong. If they wanted to get strong enough to challenge a powerful guild, they couldn’t play things safe – but no amount of power was worth losing another friend.

“I think we can handle it,” Lillia said. “I’m in support.”

“I am too,” Reya put in. “I know I can’t do too much yet, but I can distract and support you from the backline. I think we should be able to beat anything that Arwin can hit, so as long as he’s not held down, we should be fine.”

“That’s hardly true. I’ve been able to handle the monsters so far, but there can be a big disparity between monsters, even in similar tiers. Don’t forget the Wyrms are only Journeyman 8,” Arwin reminded Reya. “The difference is that it likely has Titles and Achievements that have boosted its growth, while most of these monsters haven’t.”

“Do you think that’s likely in this situation?” Anna asked.

Arwin shook his head. “I don’t know. There’s no way anything here would be as strong as the Wyrms. If it were, it would have sought a stronger area. The Wyrms we fought could easily hold its own against something tier above it.”

“You think it’s as strong as a Lord Tier monster?” Anna swallowed. “And we want to kill it?”

“That’ll come when it comes. For now, we focus on us,” Arwin said. He nodded to the door. “I’m willing to push ahead. I think we can handle it.”

“Then it’s settled.” Lillia rolled her neck and stepped to the side so Arwin could get past her. “Take the lead?”

“How gracious of you,” Arwin said dryly. He stepped past her, dismissing Verdant Blaze as he walked. The hall was too thin to swing the weapon properly and it would be nothing but a hinderance. Everyone fell in behind him as he arrived at the large doors and pressed his hands against their surface.

They ground open. Arwin blinked as bright orange light spilled out from the room and into the hallway. Beyond them was a massive stone cavern. Metal braziers full of dancing flame that burned on nothing but air lined the walls.

At the far side of the room was a large hole that dropped into the darkness. It was pitch black despite all the light filling the room. Above the hole was a ledge that led to an unlit passageway.

“Gee, I wonder where the monster is hiding,” Reya muttered as she stepped into the room behind Arwin. “Definitely not in the giant cavern. Maybe it’s going to drop from above.”

Arwin’s eyes flicked up. He could just barely make out the domed ceiling in the distance – it didn’t look like anything was there. Even though he was pretty sure he agreed with Reya’s

implied guess that the monster was in the hole, there was no way he wasn't going to double check after a fate-tempting quip like that.

"Don't make too much fun of the Mesh or it'll screw with you," Rodrick warned.

"There's no way it's actually listening."

"Probably not, but that doesn't stop everything from going wrong when you tempt fate," Anna said. She adjusted her grip on her staff and looked around the room. "That's a pretty big hole, though."

"So it is," Arwin agreed. "Let's go see what it's got hiding in it, shall we?"

"You first," Lillia said, only half joking. "I've got your back."

He summoned Verdant Blaze back to his hands and headed out. Every step echoed through the room and reflected back at him. He crossed the middle of the room and drew closer to the hole, slowing as he approached.

This thing better pop up soon. I really don't to have to make Lillia go fishing again.

A distant rumble shook the ground beneath Arwin's feet. He froze in place as the tremors grew stronger and small stones rained from the ceiling, shattering as they struck the ground. Arwin lowered into a fighting stance.

He didn't have to wait long. A massive, boney hand rose up from the hole. It had to have been larger than ten men stacked on top of each other. It slammed into the ground, jagged fingers digging furrows into the stone. A second hand followed after it.

The tremors intensified as the upper torso of an enormous, skeletal giant pulled itself up from within the darkness. Old metal armor adorned its chest. Any designs that had once been present on it had long since worn away. Its yellowed ivory teeth, each one as large as a small boulder, were frozen in the permanent leer of death.

Huge chunks of crystal jutted out from the skeleton and grew across its body, veins of translucent green running throughout it, working so deeply into the bone that it was hard to tell where it started and gem began. The monster's mouth ground open to reveal rows upon rows of jagged crystal running down its gullet and deep into its chest.

It brought its hands down on the stone, shaking the ground so violently that Arwin was bucked a foot into the air. He landed on the stone with a grunt, the Mesh swirling before him as it identified the enormous creature even as chills ran down his spine. And, as the huge creature let out a roar and its eyes ignited with brilliant green light, the Mesh told Arwin what they were up against.

[Crystalline Bonehemoth – Journeyman 7]

Chapter 92

“I changed my mind,” Reya yelled over the cacophony. “Can we leave?”

Bit too late for that, I think.

The Bonehemoth reached out toward Arwin, massive fingers casting a shadow through the room as they passed over him. He activated [Scourge] and leapt out of the way as the hand crashed down and slammed into the stone with enough force to generate a small earthquake.

Arwin landed, stumbling from the tremors, but managed to keep his footing as he brought Verdant Blaze crashing down on the side of the monster's arm. It struck the bone with a loud crack, sending fragments flying everywhere, but it did little more damage than the bite from an aggressive rat would have done to him.

Darkness passed over Arwin as another arm rose above him. The Bonehemoth was far from fast, but it was so big that it almost didn't matter. He cursed and activated [Scourge] again to fling himself to safety.

Tremors raced through the stone, bouncing Arwin like a child's toy as he hit the ground in a roll. His teeth rattled in his skull as he skidded to a stop and pushed himself to his feet.

"We're going to need a plan for this!" Arwin yelled. "I can't do enough damage to it on my own with it swinging at me!"

"I don't think I can slow it much," Reya called back. "I think I could outrun it if I was at the far ends of its reach, though."

The Bonehemoth reached out toward Arwin, forcing him to run to the side. He didn't fancy his chances if the monster got him in its grip. Given how hard it had just hit the ground, he was pretty sure he was completely outclassed in strength. The only saving grace was that the monster was considerably slower than he was, even without [Scourge].

Shadows whipped out and tried to restrain the huge creature, but they snapped without so much as slowing it.

“The light is too bright to get strong shadows,” Lilla said with a curse. “And even if it was dimmer, I don’t think I’m anywhere near strong enough to restrain something like this. It’s too damn big.”

“Just focus on distracting it for Arwin,” Rodrick said. “I’ll help.”

His sword ignited with burning light and he sprinted forward, passing Arwin and waving the blade with a yell. His efforts were immediately rewarded as the Bonehemoth brought a hand hurtling down toward him.

Rodrick’s legs pumped as he sprinted to the side as hard as he could. He threw himself forward into a dive as bone crashed down behind him. Ground bucked beneath Arwin again, nearly tossing him to the ground.

For a moment, he had no idea if Rodrick had escaped the blow. His chest clenched, but a relieved breath slipped out from his mouth as the warrior ran out from behind the monster’s hand, waving his glowing sword and screaming obscenities.

That’s one way to get its attention, I suppose. I just have to figure out what the hell I’m meant to do against something like this. If I could hit it with [Shieldbreaker] enough times in the same spot, I could probably take it out. There’s no way I can get to its head, though.

“I can make platforms out of the shadows,” Lillia called to Arwin as if she could read his thoughts. “That can get you up to its head while it’s focused on Rodrick.”

“Are you sure?” Arwin asked. “That’s quite a distance.”

“Yeah. It gets darker the farther out it is, and I’ll follow you. Trust me.”

Another rumble shook the earth. Rodrick skidded out of a cloud of dust, his sword a glowing beacon at his side. The Bonehemoth was definitely focused on him. There was only so long he’d be able to outrun the monster. He was keeping at the edges of its reach to buy himself a little more time, but his luck or speed would eventually run out.

“Let’s do it,” Arwin said. He dismissed Verdant Blaze and sprinted toward the Bonehemoth as it extended both of its hands for Rodrick. Lillia ran beside him, the shadows at her back coiling and forming into dark wings.

“Jump!” Lillia yelled.

He leapt into the air and the shadows beneath him stretched up. They formed into a platform beneath his foot. Arwin took the next step without a second of hesitation. Strands of darkness leapt from the first platform and into a second.

The Bonehemoth’s glowing eyes snapped to Arwin as he approached. It lifted a hand and started to turn toward him. A shimmer of blue light passed over its body and vanished an instant later without so much as even making it hesitate.

Before it could reach out, a pained roar ripped out of its lips. Rodrick had driven his glowing sword into the monster’s other palm. He raised the sword and drove it home twice more before leaping to safety as the boney hand closed over the space where he’d been.

Arwin's mad dash toward the monster brought him up to its head. It finally reached up toward him, undistracted by Rodrick, and extended a hand to smack him out of the air. The next step Arwin took found nothing but air and he plummeted down.

His heart leapt into his chest. The hand passed above him and his foot landed on a platform. He nearly buckled from the force of the fall, but he managed to maintain his sprint back up toward the monster's head.

Lillia leapt into the air, her dark wings flapping once and propelling her into the sky. She thrust her hands forward and shadows stretched out of the wall to wrap around its head as the Bonehemoth extended its arms toward her. The shadows were stretched thin, clearly drawing more power than Lillia had to spare.

For a second, the monster's face was blocked off. Arwin's makeshift stairwell brought him up to the creature's head just as its vision was cut. He leapt forward, Verdant Blaze manifesting in his hands, and brought it down on the center Bonehemoth's temple with all the force that [Scourge] could muster.

A loud crack split the air and chunks of bone rained down. The shadows caught Arwin before he could fall, but before he could swing again, a massive roar ripped through the cavern. Lines of electricity ripped through Arwin's body as his limbs stiffened against his will. A loud hum rose up in his ears, but he couldn't so much as wonder what it was.

The shadows that had been holding him aloft vanished. He plummeted downward, unable to so much as twitch a muscle. Lillia fell to his side. Her wings evaporated as they tumbled toward the unforgiving ground below.

Fragments of blue light fell away from Lillia with the sound like shattering glass. She spun, tucking her arms in close to her chest as the darkness swirled back to her, reforming her wings.

They snapped open and she pulled up, shooting over to Arwin and grabbing him out of the air. The shadows coming off her body wound around him like ropes, holding him against her body as she pulled up and flew higher into the air.

What felt like a river of freezing water poured over Arwin. He drew in a sharp breath as blue light broke and swirled around him. Control returned to his body.

“I’m good!” Arwin yelled.

The shadows holding him to Lillia snapped and reformed beneath his feet. Arwin hit them in a run, sprinting back toward the behemoth. It reached out to him again and he dove forward, dropping through the air and letting the huge hands pass overhead.

He hit a carpet of darkness in a roll as it formed beneath him, then ascended the stairwell that gathered at his feet. The Bonehemoth’s hands slammed into the ground behind him with a massive crash.

It let out another furious cry and a flash of light flickered through the room as Rodrick’s sword carved into it again. Whatever the energy in his attack was, it was doing a lot of damage to the huge monster.

Arwin didn't have time to wonder why. Lillia had brought him back to the Bonehemoth's head, and the only thing on his mind was playing the world's largest game of whack-a-mole. He leapt off the shadows and shoved his foot into a crack in the monster's skull.

He pulled out every stop, letting his [Soul Flame] course through the weapon and into its head. He didn't know how much damage flame was going to do bone, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

[Scourge] ripped through his veins and Verdant Blaze crashed down. Bone shattered like a bomb had gone off and the hammer ripped into the monster's skull. Arwin stiffened, bracing himself for what he suspected was to come, but there was no preparing for it.

A scream tore through the air and his body locked up like a wooden board as rivers of electricity tore through him. Arwin started to pitch back, but the foot he'd stuck into the monster's skull had just enough leverage to keep him teetering in place. The benefit of being functionally frozen solid was that *none* of his body would move. The loud hum that had been building in his ears reached a crescendo.

All he could do was wait for –

Shimmering motes of blue fell away from Arwin with a tinkling crash. Control returned to his muscles once more. Brilliant blue and grey light burned at the center of Arwin's chest, emanating from the gem in his armor.

The roars were magical. That must have counted for the magic stored in the crystal.

He called out to it and the power responded. The [Soul Flame] burning around Verdant Blaze's head turned a blueish gray and he brought the hammer down once more. It struck the same spot he'd hit twice before with a loud crash.

Bone shattered. Power ripped out from Verdant Blaze, coursing out flaming tongues of flaming gray that wormed into the Bonehemoth's skull. For an instant, the enormous monster locked in place as its own magic was turned against it. Faint particles of frost gathered at the site that Arwin had struck, remnants of the Ice Mage's power finally released from their prison.

Arwin didn't sit around to see the results of his strike. He raised his arms and brought them down once more. [Scourge] coursed through his veins as he drove his hammer into the large dent he'd formed.

A brilliant crack split the air. Fragments flew up all around Arwin and the spell that had been pinning the Bonehemoth in place shattered. It thrashed, launching him from its head. He tucked his arms and legs in and shadows swirled around him, forming into a ramp.

He hit it in a roll that took him all the way back down to the ground. A rush of air roared overhead as an unseen hand hurtled through the air where he'd been moments before. Arwin felt himself hit the rough stone and pushed himself up to his feet.

Another roar ripped through the room and his body ground to a halt, breath catching in his chest. The effects of the magic weren't anywhere near as bad down on the ground as they had been next to the Bonehemoth's head, but Lillia had still been in the air.

Reya, who had positioned herself near the exit to reduce as much of the magic's power as possible, recovered from the yell and thrust her hands toward Lillia. Even as the magic freed her, the sky above Arwin darkened.

One of the Bonehemoth's hands hurtled down toward Arwin. He tried to pull himself free, but the effects of the roar still had him in their grip. Reya spun toward him, the firelight illuminating the panic in her eyes.

Judging from the last times she'd freed Arwin, it took her a second or two to recover between casts.

She wasn't going to be fast enough.

A flash of burning yellow light ignited to Arwin's side. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Rodrick sprinting toward him, his entire body clad in burning yellow and white flame. He'd broken through the Bonehemoth's roar with some sort of self-buff. Despite his situation, Arwin couldn't keep an idle thought from flashing through his head.

That doesn't look like a normal Warrior skill.

Wind from the descending hand pressed down upon him. Autonomy started to return to his body, but not nearly fast enough.

Rodrick dove forward in a tackle. He shoved Arwin back and away from the hand's path – and traded his own momentum away in the process. The enormous hand slammed to the ground with a resounding cash. Arwin rolled across the ground right at its edge, missed by just feet. His body finally threw off the effects of the magic and he scrambled to his feet.

“Rodrick!” Arwin yelled, his words swallowed by the cloud of dust rising up all around him. “Rodrick! Are you there?”

There was no response.

Chapter 93

Arwin ripped his gaze away from the cloud of dust. Lillia was fighting to keep the Bonehemoth’s attention, and letting his emotions get in the way of killing the monster would only result in the situation degrading even further.

He raced forward, his skull pounding in a furious haze, and leapt onto the monster’s massive arm bone as it raised lifted to swat at Lillia. He dismissed Verdant Blaze and ascended the craggy surface, climbing it like a spider.

Lillia’s shadows stabbed at the monster’s eyes and it roared in anger. Arwin clung onto its arm for dear life as it swung at Lillia. Her wings tucked in close to her back and she dropped, shooting past the hand and gliding up behind the monster to send more shadows stabbing at it.

Beneath them, Arwin could just barely make out Anna sprinting away from the relative safety at the edge of the room toward where Rodrick had last been seen. His heart clenched and he ripped his eyes away, continuing his climb.

If the Bonehemoth turned its attention away from Lillia, Anna would likely be its next target. He scaled as quickly as he dared and then some, using small bursts of power from [Scourge] to jump from bone to bone.

The surface of the monster's body was somehow simultaneously slippery and jagged. His feet only found purchase on the jagged cracks running throughout it, and keeping his balance when the whole world was moving around him was immensely difficult.

Lillia was forced to dive out of the way once more and the Bonehemoth screamed. Arwin's body locked up – and a wave of blue slammed into him, freeing him after no more than half a second. Lillia plummeted in the corner of his vision, but all Arwin could do was hope that Reya would save her in time.

The Bonehemoth's glowing eyes turned as the shadows finally stopped assaulting its head – and their gaze went right past Arwin, locking onto the easy target kneeling in the fading dust cloud.

Arwin gritted his teeth, pushing his body to the max. He leapt farther with every jump, using almost all of the energy he had remaining. The Bonehemoth's arm lifted. Arwin swirled his hands, desperately trying to keep his balance, but it was impossible.

He fell – and landed on a platform of shadows. Throwing himself to his feet, Arwin raced up toward its head. An eye flicked toward him and a hand started to move, realizing the source of its pain was approaching once more, but it was too late.

Arwin leapt from the shadows, rearing his arms back over his head. Verdant Blaze materialized in his grip and he let out a furious scream as he brought it crashing down. It struck the large wound in the Bonehemoth's skull with a brilliant explosion of [Soul Flame].

Bone shattered and caved in. Cracks raced out in a spreading spiderweb that enveloped the Bonehemoth's entire skull. Its mouth yawned open – but no roar emerged. The cracking grew louder, a smattering of pops and breaks amid a dull undertone of grinding crunches. A huge plate of bone on its temple pitched forward and fell to the ground where it shattered with a crash.

The whole monster slumped, sliding back into the hole that it had clambered out of. Arwin threw himself back, hitting a dark slide that formed beneath him. It carried him down to the ground and sent him rolling across the dirt until he struck a large rock and came to a stop with a pained grunt.

A deep rumble shook the cavern as the Bonehemoth crashed against the walls of the hole on its way down. The last thing Arwin saw of it was a limp hand vanishing into the black. He barely even cared.

Shoving his aching body up, Arwin dismissed his armor and weapon as he staggered across the room toward where Rodrick had fallen. His stomach twisted and churned into knots. He couldn't bear the idea of losing another person. Not for something as worthless as a mere dungeon.

Anna knelt with her back to him, her neck as pale as sheet. Arwin stumbled as he ran up to her.

“Anna! Is Rodrick–”

The words caught in his throat. Rodrick's head rested in Anna's lap. The bottom half of his armor was completely gone and he was naked from the waist down – but somehow in one piece. Shimmering white light poured from Anna's exertion-ridden hands and into him.

“Alive,” Anna rasped, her hands dropping at her sides. “The bottom half of his body was crushed. He went unconscious from shock, but I hadn't used any energy yet, so I had enough to heal him. I—” She paused to draw in a deep breath and refill her lungs with air. “I thought I lost him. Godspit. What was that huge fucker doing down here?”

Arwin dropped by her side, leaning back onto his arms as a relieved, hysterical laugh built in his throat. It grew in intensity until tears streamed down his cheeks and he had to drop back onto the cold stone to compose himself.

He could feel the Mesh swirling at the back of his mind, but it seemed that it was going to wait until he was actually in a state of mind to process its words before giving him any information.

“Thank God.” Arwin's throat was so tight that he could barely even breathe properly. “I don't know what I would have done if he'd died. I'm sorry. I should have better prepared us. It was stupid to—”

“Oh, cork it,” Anna snapped. “We aren't children, Arwin. We knew the risks of advancing and all agreed to do it. Nobody died. And, even if he had, it wouldn't have been your fault.”

Arwin couldn't do anything but nod. Lillia and Reya were both on the other side of the room and approaching them, the relief on their faces clear when they saw that Rodrick wasn't a mushed splatter on the ground.

"He's alive?" Lillia asked as they arrived.

"Yeah. It would have been really bad if I was a second or two slower, but he'll make it," Anna said. "There's no need for anyone to take responsibility for anything other than a new pair of pants. There's a lot of him that I'm willing to share, but this isn't one of them."

Arwin let out a choked mixture between a laugh and a cough. He didn't have a pair of pants to spare on him, but he pulled his shirt off and draped it over Rodrick's midsection.

"I can't believe we won that fight," Reya muttered. "I've never seen a monster so big."

"I can't believe we killed it," Anna said. "If I saw correctly... Arwin, did you manage to somehow use its own magic against it?"

"Yes. It was a feature of my armor," Arwin said. "It gathers magic that's cast around it and can eventually let me empower an attack with it."

"Damn." Anna shook her head and let out a whistle. "That's a really impressive piece of gear. A warrior going around and casting magic without having a class based on it... terrifying."

"And badass," Reya put in. She glanced back at the hole and shuddered. "Thank whatever god is listening you had that, though. If you didn't get those extra hits, I don't know if

we would have made it through this. That monster could have destroyed an entire town if it were outside. How did it get down here?"

"It probably wasn't that big when it came down here," Arwin said wearily. "Something in the dungeon gave it enough power to evolve, and it definitely had a number of Titles and Achievements. I suspect the Mesh will let us know some of that soon enough."

"Is it just sitting around and waiting for you as well?" Reya asked.

"Yeah. I owe it thanks for that. I think anything I read right now would pass right through my eyeballs without even registering," Arwin said. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine," Lillia said. "I don't think we would have been if it weren't for Reya, though."

"We'd all be dead," Arwin said with a nod and a grimace. He'd known how useful Reya's ability was, but he hadn't expected it to save their lives this quickly. "You did fantastic, Reya."

"I should have broken the control on you before Lillia," Reya said with a shake of her head. "My screw up almost got Rodrick killed."

"Everyone screws up inevitably," Arwin said. "And Lillia was in eminent danger while I was not. You did the right thing. There's nothing to blame yourself for, especially when nobody actually died."

Reya flopped down across from Anna and nodded mutely. It didn't look like she'd be able to muster any more words anytime soon, and he didn't blame her. Distant eyes spoke volumes. Reya had gotten something from the Mesh for her participation in the fight. Lillia walked over to sit next to Arwin, making a small semi-circle around Rodrick's body as his chest rise and fell in slow breaths.

Arwin's heart still slammed in his chest like a runaway freight train. Now that the adrenaline was leaving his body, all that remained was a heavy blanket of weariness that wrapped around his shoulders and weighed down on his back. They'd won – but now that the fight had ended, his mind had nothing left to distract it.

Does Rodrick have some form of Unique class or ability? I can't claim to know every single warrior ability in existence – I don't think anyone can – but there's no way that glowing light was a normal warrior. His attacks were also doing more damage to the Bonehemoth than I feel like normal blows, empowered or not, should have been.

He could tell by the look in Anna's eyes that she knew what he was thinking. Her features tightened and she shook her head, a silent request to hold off on mentioning anything. Arwin wasn't in any rush to press for more information – he had secrets of his own that he suspected wouldn't be lasting through the night.

Golden light shimmered before Arwin's eyes. The Mesh finally decided that it had let him rest for long enough. It would be denied no longer. Golden lines shimmered through the air as if drawn by a dancing butterfly, light blooming from them and turning into words.

Achievement: [Savior of the Bonehemoth] has been earned.

[Savior of the Bonehemoth] – *Awarded for aiding in the destruction of the Crystalline Bonehemoth and granting it peace from its agony. Effects: Your party has received access to the Bonehemoth’s Horde. This achievement has been consumed.*

[Giantsbane] – *Awarded for slaying a monster over ten times your height. Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

Holy shit. Two Achievements? The Mesh is really raining the rewards down on us. I suppose it makes sense. That might be one of the roughest fights I’ve ever had, and we actually managed to win it.

A delicate chime rang through the air. Arwin looked up as a shimmer of green energy lit in the air directly above Rodrick’s head. A loop of metal the size of a small dog emerged from it. It was followed by a thick, rusted bar and, after that, the rest of a key. Arwin’s hands shot out to grab it before the heavy metal could land on the resting warrior.

“Did everyone else just get that Achievement?” Arwin asked, holding the key out before him. It was comically huge in his hands, but when compared to the Bonehemoth, it was the opposite.

“I got two achievements,” Reya said. “A skill upgrade and the Savior one.”

“Two here as well,” Lillia put in.

“Same for me,” Anna said. “Along with other things. I went up to Apprentice 4 and got a ranged healing spell. But... did the Mesh make a mistake? I don’t think what we did could be considered saving in any sense of the word.”

“It didn’t seem particularly intelligent either,” Lillia said. “Or, if it was, it was far too malicious for it to matter. That thing was doing its absolute best to kill all of us.”

“You think the horde is in that platform above the hole?” Reya asked as she squinted across the room.

“Where else would it be? That’s prime treasure-hiding estate, Reya.”

They all looked down as Rodrick spoke. His voice was weaker normal, but the cheeky grin on his lips told them that he was alright.

“Rodrick!” Anna exclaimed, pulling him up into a tight embrace and pressing her lips to his. She said something muffled, then pulled back and cleared her throat. “Are you okay?”

“Thanks to you, yes,” Rodrick said. “I knew you’d save my ass. You always do.”

“Idiot,” Anna said. “What if you’d gotten crushed? If the hand was just a little higher up...”

“It wasn’t. That’s all that matters. I took the risk. If I hadn’t, I suspect Arwin would be a pancake. It didn’t seem like he had any way to throw off the paralysis and Reya’s ability has a limit to how fast she can use it.”

“Rodrick’s right. He saved my life,” Arwin said. “I owe you one.”

“Hey, we’re a guild, right? That’s what mates are for. Also, I got two Achievements. If all I have to do for that is nearly die, I think I’m going to do it a whole lot more.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Anna snapped.

“Sorry, sorry.” Rodrick pushed himself into a seated position with a grunt. “Damn, why is it so cold?”

He looked down at his legs, then pulled the shirt back. “Ah.” Rodrick hurriedly returned the shirt to its spot. “That would explain it. What do you think the chances are that treasure waiting for us has any pants in it?”

“I think we’ll find out,” Arwin replied, hoisting the key and slinging it over his shoulder. “And, with any luck, maybe it’ll have some clues as to what the hell happened here as well. Shall we go see what it left us?”

“Hold on,” Anna said, swallowing and setting her jaw. “I think there’s something we need to speak about first. Rodrick and I have been hiding something.”

Chapter 94

Arwin lowered the key and let it rest against his side. “You don’t have to say anything. Things are secret for a reason.”

A small laugh slipped from Anna’s mouth and she shook her head. “That’s sweet of you, but there’s no need. I think our lots are thrown in together at this point. There’s no reason to hide anything any longer. Not from our side, at least.”

“What are you talking about?” Reya looked from Arwin to Anna in confusion. “Hiding what?”

“Rodrick isn’t a warrior,” Arwin said.

Anna nodded. “Was it that obvious?”

“Not initially. I only just figured it out. An empowered attack isn’t that uncommon for a warrior, though the energy probably should have given it away. A glowing control break was what woke me up. Rodrick looked more like he was blessed than drawing on his own power.”

“Hey, you hear that?” Rodrick asked. “I honestly thought you’d figured it out a bit ago. That makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside – although that might actually just be Anna’s the remnants of Anna’s magic.”

“If you’re not a warrior, what are you?” Lillia asked. “A paladin of some sort?”

Rodrick’s smile slipped away. “I used to be. Paladin of Light, specifically. I didn’t make it all that far down the good path.”

“Why would you hide that?” Reya asked with a frown. “It’s just a class, isn’t it? Is paladin really rare or something?”

“Not particularly,” Anna answered. “The problem is that Rodrick is no longer a paladin. Paladins have tenants that they’re required to follow. Those are what give them a large portion of their powers. Rodrick broke his tenants.”

“Which is a really roundabout way to say I’m a Fallen Paladin,” Rodrick said. “And nobody wants to work together with an oathbreaker. Anna came up with the idea to just pretend to be a warrior if we ran into anyone else. It wasn’t half bad. A Fallen Paladin really isn’t all that much better than a random warrior. I don’t have access to any magic. All I’ve got are the abilities got at Apprentice 1 and 2. Any new ones I get are basically just normal warrior stuff.”

“Why did you break—” Reya started, but Arwin set his hand on her shoulder and she bit off her words. “What?”

“I don’t think that’s our concern,” Arwin said. “If they wanted to share it, they would.”

“It was nothing good,” Rodrick said with a heavy sigh. “And it’s nothing I care to pollute today with. It isn’t something that will crop up, I can assure you of that.”

Reya shrugged. “So you’re basically just a warrior now?”

“Functionally,” Rodrick said with a nod. “I just can’t get any more paladin abilities. Once I reach Journeyman, I’ll hopefully get a class upgrade that lets me leave this all behind.”

“I feel like we can do that,” Reya said hesitantly. She sent a look at Arwin, then frowned. “I don’t know if I see why this is such a big deal. Is being a Fallen Paladin that bad?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “The most common defectors to the monster horde are Fallen Paladins. You don’t Fall because you made a tiny mistake. It’s really serious – and Rodrick’s life would be in serious danger if anyone ever found out the truth. People might think he is a spy.”

“I’ll never breath a word of it,” Reya promised, pressing a hand over her heart. “I don’t think most people like thieves anyway. Even it isn’t my class, I don’t think anyone in Milten thinks of me as anything but.”

“Thank you,” Anna said simply.

“Are you really just a normal healer, then?” Arwin asked.

“Yes. We met in the Adventurer’s Guild,” Anna replied. “My class is nothing more than a plain Healer. I’m lucky for it. If I’d had anything more, the guild likely would have put a lot more attention on me and it would have been far harder to slip away.”

“Well, if we’re on the topic of secrets…” Lillia sent a glance at Arwin. He shrugged in response. Rodrick and Anna had to find out about their past at some point, and now was as good a time as any.

“You’ve got a really Unique class,” Anna said. “It was kind of obvious. I’ve never seen magic that lets you fly around on wings of darkness and control the shadows like that. You must have an immense amount of magical power as well.”

“I do have a powerful Unique class, but that’s not really what I was going to bring up,” Lillia said. She mulled over her words for a second, then seemingly gave up on trying to find a better way to string them together and sighed. “We actually knew each other long before the this guild came into being.”

“I knew it!” Reya exclaimed.

“Did you work together before leaving the Adventurer’s Guild?” Rodrick guessed. “It wasn’t hard to tell Arwin wasn’t a big fan of them from the way he spoke. It’s half the reason we figured throwing our lot in together with you would be safe.”

“Not exactly,” Arwin said. Every word that came out of his mouth suddenly felt awkward. There didn’t seem like there was any good way to actually say what he wanted to say without sounding ridiculous. “Lillia was on the other side of the war.”

“She defected from the monster horde?” Anna’s eyes widened. “That makes a lot of sense, actually. You aren’t just a big fan of monsters at all. You’re a literal demon.”

“No way,” Reya breathed. She stared at Lillia in disbelief. “Are you really?”

Lillia nodded. A flicker of worry passed over her features and she swallowed. “I am. But—”

“Then your tail is real?” Reya asked. “Can I see it?”

“I – what?” Lillia blinked in confusion.

“Oh, is that disrespectful? I don’t know demon customs or anything. Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“No, it’s not disrespectful,” Lillia said. She looked around at the others, but aside from some mild amusement, neither Rodrick nor Anna looked all that put out by her revelation. “I… didn’t think any of you would take it that well.”

“The guild already thinks I’m working with the horde,” Rodrick said with a shrug. “And I know you. Don’t particularly care if you’ve got a tail or not – though I think Anna would have my head if I went around asking to see it.”

“Damn right,” Anna said. “Feel free to show me, though.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Rodrick protested. “If she’s going around showing her tail–”

“I, ah, think I’ll probably keep that for a later time,” Lillia suggested lamely. She sent a desperate glance at Arwin. The wind had been completely taken from her sails. He suppressed a laugh.

“Lillia wasn’t just a random demon,” Arwin said, raising a hand to get everyone’s attention before the conversation could derail so badly that it would be irrecoverable. “And I wasn’t just a random member of the guild.”

Realization finally set in on Reya. Her lips pulled open into an *o* and she looked from Arwin to Reya.

“No way.”

“What? What is it?” Rodrick asked.

“I was the Champion of Lian,” Arwin said. “And Lillia was the demon queen.”

Rodrick chuckled. “Ah, of course. I should have guessed.”

“Rodrick?” Anna said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“He isn’t joking.”

Rodrick looked back to Arwin. The smile on his face slowly melted. Arwin could practically see him thinking through the fights they’d been in together and putting the inconsistencies together.

“Nine Underlands,” Rodrick muttered. “What in the world happened? The Hero can’t be out here. He’s – wait. You aren’t the current Hero, are you? You’re the one that went missing.”

“I am,” Arwin said.

“What are you doing here? And how did you possibly come to start a guild with the – what, former demon queen? Shouldn’t you both be King Ranked or something like that? Why are you pretending to be Apprentice Tiers?”

Arwin read the unspoken question on his lips.

Why did you let Zeke die?

“Because we aren’t who we used to be. The guild was playing us,” Arwin said. “They control both sides of the war. Lillia and I were both betrayed – or saved. We don’t know which. And, in the process, we both lost our classes. All we do know is that the guild and the monster coalition are intentionally keeping the war running.”

“Slow down,” Rodrick said, his brow furrowed. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and blinked furiously. “You’re telling me that... what, everything is just a giant conspiracy? And that

you and the demon queen faked your deaths, losing all your strength in the process, to start a guild in the middle of nowhere?”

“Not exactly. We didn’t have a choice in the matter,” Arwin said. “And I never planned to start a guild. Do you recall how the papers said we both died?”

“A massive magical explosion, wasn’t it?” Anna asked.

Arwin nodded. “It was. The thing is, it didn’t kill us. It just threw us across the kingdom and we both somehow landed here. All the magic ended up warping my class and replacing it with the smithing one I have now. Lillia—”

“I became a tavern keeper,” Lillia finished.

“That’s awful,” Anna said. “If people found out—”

“We’d just be killed.” Arwin shook his head. “And I’ll be honest, I’ve been fighting my entire life. There will be a time when a reckoning comes to the guild, but I’m not throwing my second chance at life away completely for revenge. I’m just a smith now.”

“Do you miss them?” Rodrick asked. “Your powers. I mean – damn. You were at the peak. The strongest warrior we had. And now...”

“Not for a second,” Arwin said. “I’d trade them all away a thousand times over. This is everything I’ve ever wanted. And I don’t think Lillia and I were actually as strong as we were said to be. The guild intentionally kept us weak. We were figureheads. Actors, not true warriors.”

Rodrick fell silent, a contemplative look passing over his features.

“It feels like someone had to have done this intentionally,” Anna said. “The chances of you and Lillia both showing up in the same city seem impossibly low.”

“They do,” Lillia agreed. “That’s why we think it’s possible someone saved us. Unfortunately, we have no idea who. Or why. To be honest, we’ve got more pressing problems to deal with.”

“I understand how difficult that probably was to share,” Anna said, bowing her head in appreciation. “Forgive me if I steal your promise, Reya, but not a word of it will ever leave my mouth. I swear it.”

“As do I,” Rodrick said. “Hell, if you’re actually the Hero, I’m pretty sure my loyalty is meant to be to you anyway. I never got good enough to get pulled into the army, but I’m sure that was somewhere in the contract. I didn’t read it.”

His words cut the tension and Arwin let out a burst of laughter. “Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“I can’t really believe I’m sitting here next to the bleeding Hero and his greatest enemy,” Rodrick said. He let out a whistle. “Did you realize you were betrayed before you met again?”

“No,” Lillia said. “We had no idea.”

“So when you saw each other again, did you start going at it with your crafter classes?” Rodrick asked as he covered a laugh. “I wish I could have been a fly on the wall for that.”

“Surprisingly, no. I think we were both fed up with fighting to the point where we didn’t care anymore,” Arwin said.

And I don’t think I could even try to fight Lillia anymore, even if I wanted to.

He shook his head to clear it and coughed into a fist. “Anyway. We shouldn’t sit around here forever. Now you know.”

“Are we really supposed to just... go back to doing dungeon stuff now?” Rodrick demanded. “I want an autograph!”

“No,” Arwin said.

“No,” Lillia said.

Reya, who looked like she’d been about to ask for the same thing, cleared her throat. “Can I at least see your tail?”

Arwin rolled his eyes. In spite of his best efforts, he couldn’t keep a grin from his lips. This was what a guild was meant to be. He’d just dropped a piece of information that could have shattered people’s worlds and nobody had been tripped up for more than a few seconds. It didn’t matter who they were or where they’d come from. A Fallen Paladin and a healer on the run, a thief with more enemies than there were seconds in the day, the demon queen and the Hero of Lian – none of it mattered.

They were a guild.

“Come on,” Arwin said, jerking his chin toward the ledge. “Let’s go see what that horde has waiting for us. If we’re all lucky, maybe it’ll have some pants.”

Chapter 95

Lillia’s shadows came to use once more as they formed into a stairwell leading up to the ledge above the seemingly bottomless pit. The group ascended up them and came to a stop at the tight passageway leading into the wall.

“What do you think the chances are we get attacked on the way to our loot?” Rodrick asked. He had Arwin’s shirt tied precariously around his waist, and Arwin was pretty sure that the biggest threat to anyone in the immediate vicinity was a light breeze.

“It’s possible, but I doubt that huge thing would have tolerated much hanging out around its horde,” Lillia said as they pressed into the dark. “It didn’t seem like a hospitable neighbor.”

Arwin nodded, then remembered that it was too dark for anyone other than Lillia to tell what he was doing. “I don’t think we’re going to have any more enemies. Not in this room, at least. I’m fairly certain this is the end of the dungeon.”

“There’s no way there’s something more powerful than that thing waiting for us deeper down.” Reya’s voice cracked with worry and she cleared her throat. “Right?”

Before Arwin could answer, he bumped into Lillia’s back. She’d stopped walking.

“Sorry,” Lillia said. “This is the end of the passage. Can you see the door in front of us?”

Arwin squeezed past her and squinted. The only things he could see were vague outlines and shapes in the dark, but after feeling along the wall for a moment, his fingers found a cold metal handle.

“Found it,” Arwin said. “On the off chance that there are enemies here, can we count on you to hold them off until we can get to somewhere with light?” Arwin asked Lillia.

“Yeah. My shadows couldn’t do too much to something as big as the Bonehemoth, but I’ve got enough energy left over to handle something small.”

That was enough for him. He pushed the door open a crack. Dull green light spilled out into the hall and illuminated the stone with its faint glow. There were no signs of motion from beyond, so Arwin opened the door the rest of the way.

A cavern stretched out before them. Huge, jagged crystals jutted out on the walls and ceiling, blankets of rippling quartz covering everything but a thin passageway that wound up to an altar made up of purple gemstones.

The altar was about two times Arwin’s height and six times his width. It seemed to be made from stone, but the crystals covering its surface made it impossible to tell anything for sure. Any designs that may have been on it in the past were long since swallowed.

“Whoa,” Reya breathed from behind Arwin. “It’s beautiful.”

“And slightly ominous,” Rodrick muttered. “These are the same crystals that were on the last two monsters we fought.”

“Make sure not to touch anything,” Arwin said. He stepped onto the tight passageway and started down it. His head turned on a swivel, gaze scouring the room in search of something that may have been lying in wait.

They found nothing but crystal. The passageway led him along its twists and turns until he stood at the glistening altar – the only patch of color in the entire room that wasn’t purple. Across from him was what could only be described as a solid wall of crystal.

Beyond it, Arwin could barely make out a large hole. It had been completely sealed over by the green gems, but it looked similar enough to the one that had been in the room behind them that it didn’t take a genius to tell what it had been for.

The Bonehemoth used to be able to access this area from there. But why would it care at all about an altar like this? It’s big, sure, but nowhere near big enough for it. How would such a massive monster store a horde here?

The crystal held no answers. Arwin scanned the room one last time, but there really didn’t seem to be anything other than the huge altar before him. He chewed his lower lip in thought. There was no way that the Mesh would have considered a mere block of stone a horde.

“I’m not seeing our loot,” Rodrick said as he and the others walked up behind Arwin. “Where’s the hole to stick the key?”

“I think we might have to do some digging,” Arwin said. He set the key down and hoisted Verdant Blaze. “I suggest you head back to the entrance of the room. I’m about to start swinging heavy objects at disturbing speeds.”

He repressed a laugh at the annoyed grumbles that went up as everyone headed back to the safety of the hall leading into the room. Once they were all out of range, Arwin summoned his full armor around himself to limit the amount of spots that stray fragments could catch.

Then he reared back and swung Verdant Blaze. The hammer slammed into the crystal covering the altar with a loud crack. Nothing happened. Arwin wasn't too bothered. There were a lot of things that he couldn't handle in this world, but anything that sat around and let him wail on it wasn't one of them.

He swung the hammer again. And again. And again. Arwin didn't even bother using [Scourge]. Verdant Blaze struck harder with every blow. The crystals in its head vibrated in a keening song, sending feelings of delight and hunger through its connection with Arwin.

His hammer struck.

Hairline fractures formed in the crystal.

His hammer struck.

Small shards of glistening purple rained down by his feet.

His hammer struck.

Loud cracks split the air and huge chunks of crystal rained down. Arwin went to swing Verdant Blaze again but paused on the backswing. The stone surface of the altar sat before him, a small portion of it dug out from the shimmering substance covering it. Faded designs covered its surface, but it was impossible to make anything out yet.

Arwin wedged the hammer into the hole he'd made and pulled back, ripping away chunks of crystal and sending them ringing to the floor to unveil more of the stone. With every move, he unveiled more of the altar.

All the designs ran toward its center, where a raised piece of circular stone jutted out of its surface. It seemed to be held in place by a pin that had once allowed it to spin but had been long since wedged shut by crystal.

He brought Verdant Blaze down on the pin, shattering it. The stone plate crashed to the ground and shattered into fragments, revealing a large keyhole. Arwin lowered the hammer and wiped the sweat from his brow as he turned to the others.

“Found the hole.”

“You know what? I’m not even going to take the low hanging fruit,” Anna said as they all worked their way past the crystals and down the path to rejoin him. “It’s so easy that it wouldn’t even be funny.”

“Put the key in already,” Lillia said, coughing to cover a laugh. “I want to see what we got from all this shit. Two Achievements is already great, but I’m hoping for a bit more considering that the horde was important enough to warrant the Mesh’s attention.”

Arwin felt the same way. He dismissed Verdant Blaze and lifted the key, sliding it into the lock. It slotted into place with a loud click and he twisted the handle. It was like trying to pry apart the jaws of a crocodile.

He gritted his teeth and activated [Scourge]. Power pumped through his arms and the key turned silently. It made a full rotation before a loud pop rang out and a shudder shook the stone altar.

Arwin released the key and took a step back as the purple crystals started to crack apart. They split and tinkled to the ground like a rain of shimmering glass, sloughing off the stone in a wave.

A mechanism cranked to life within the altar. Rhythmic thuds filled the air. They all looked around the room as the ground started to rumble beneath them. The top of the altar shifted.

With every click, it rose another notch. And, finally, Arwin realized what he was looking at. It wasn't an altar. It was a huge chest. Tick by tick, the stone lid at its top ground back until it was finally raised to a ninety-degree angle. The mechanism rumbled to a halt and the room fell silent once more.

Arwin stuck a foot into the loop at the head of the key and stepped off it. He grabbed onto the lip of the chest and pulled himself up to peer over the edge of the chest, summoning his headgear in the process. Half of him expected to find a monster lying in wait for something juicy to bite at.

Instead, he found himself staring at a hole roughly forty or fifty feet deep. It led into a well-lit room below. The floor was made up of beautiful tiles arranged into a mural. Most of it was blocked from his vision, so Arwin couldn't tell what it depicted.

He waited for a few seconds to see if anything would show its head. His only reward was silence.

“Well, this seems needlessly complicated,” Arwin muttered.

“What is it? What’s in there?” Rodrick asked.

“A hole that leads into another room,” Arwin replied. “I’m going in. Everyone else wait up here in case something goes wrong.”

“Hold on.” Lillia raised a hand to forestall him. “You aren’t just disposable. I’ll go with you.”

“You’re the only one that can make a way out.” Arwin shook his head. “I need you up here so you can make me a way out if things go wrong. You could get caught up in a fight if you’re down there, and it doesn’t look like there’s much room to maneuver. It’s okay. I can handle myself.”

Lillia pressed her lips together. Shadows gathered at her back and she jumped, wings propelling her into the air. She landed on the edge of the chest beside Arwin.

“Fine. I’ll watch from up here.” She formed a rope of shadow and cast it down. “Here.”

Arwin grabbed onto the rope.

“Be careful,” Reya called up.

“I will,” Arwin promised. Then, holding onto the rope, he slid down to see what was reward laid in wait for them.

Chapter 96

Arwin slid down the rope until the ground was close enough to drop the rest of the way safely. He readied himself as he fell, armor snapping to place around his body even as he landed, but the room was just as empty as it had appeared.

It was, however, far larger than he'd initially thought. The room was likely three or four times bigger than the one above it. Massive murals covered the ground and ran up the walls and ceiling, all made out of lines drawn into the stone with powdered green and purple crystal. Arwin's shadows seemed to duplicate and dance across the ground with every move.

The hole that he'd seen covered by crystal in the room above ran through its far end, spikes of crystal frozen in their slow crawl around its edges. In the center of the room, just a short distance away from Arwin, was a chest made from bone and covered with more of the purple crystal.

Arwin turned in a circle, his eyes widening in disbelief. There was no doubt that their rewards waited for him in the chest, but the rest of the room was like nothing he'd ever seen. They weren't just art. It was a story.

The mural on the wall nearest to the chest depicted a skeleton clad in beautiful metal armor setting out from a village. The next showed the skeleton arriving at a cave with green crystals lining its entrance.

It entered the cave, killing the monsters within it with a blade made of purple energy. Trails of shimmering blue traced across the murals and the skeleton followed after them, its hands outstretched in desire.

That must be the magical call of the dungeon that brings monsters to it.

Arwin walked along the mural, heading down the side of the room to continue viewing it.

The skeleton continued deeper, delving into the depths of the dungeon. It ripped apart a coven of Chiropires with its purple magic and devoured their largest one. And still, the swirls of blue called the skeleton deeper.

It traveled into the depths of the dungeon, following the energy, and finally found what it was searching for. An enormous cavern full of green crystal, power gathered within them and waiting to be claimed.

The skeleton tore into the crystals, shoveling them into its mouth. It devoured them, and the magical energy gathered around it. Even though the skeleton had no facial features, Arwin could see the delight etched into its form on the mural.

It didn't stop there. The blue lines were back, and they led up a familiar looking passageway in a now-empty room. In pursuit, the skeleton ascended the wall and entered the passage. Beyond was a room with a plain stone chest nearly twice the skeleton's height. The lines all up to a single, beautifully carved crystal resting within the chest.

That crystal went right into the skeleton's jaws. It threw its head back, seemingly roaring in victory as lines of blue power raced into its body.

The story wasn't over, though. Arwin's eyes were drawn to the floor. Instead of entering the skeleton, all the energy poured into the crystal still lodged in its chest. Its body warped, parts of it nearly doubling in size while others lagged behind. Green crystal jutted out from it at random spots.

The skeleton ripped the crystals off itself, but it was pointless. With every mural that followed, the crystals grew – and so did the skeleton. Digging into the earth beneath the empty chest, the skeleton worked to hollow it out.

It carved out a room even as its body grew and warped. The very same room, Arwin realized, that he was standing in right now. And then it sat down. Almost a dozen murals followed of the skeleton sitting in place.

The crystals on its chest slowly turned from green to purple. All the uneven growth evened out. For a while, it seemed as if it had gotten the crystal growth under control. Then the skeleton's eyes flickered, sparks of green lighting within them.

But the peace was temporary. The purple crystal cracked and fell away. In the center of the skeleton's body, the beautifully carved crystal rested, as green and untouched as ever.

Lines of blue continued to swirl around the monster, but they weren't entering its body. They were entering the crystal in its center. It seemed like the purple crystal had stalled the crystal's growth, but not enough to completely stop it. Slowly, the green started its return – and the skeleton grew once more. It barely even fit in the room anymore and had to crawl on all fours to move around.

The skeleton thrust a hand into its chest and wrapped its hand around the glowing crystal. Its mouth split open in a roar of pain as it ripped it free. The fragments of its body rained down, turning into green crystal as soon as they hit the ground. Those crystals then reached out, growing toward the skeleton and climbing back up its body.

It tore itself free, still holding the carved gemstone. Desperate hunger shone in its eyes as lines of purple energy left its body and started to bind around the carved gemstone. Nothing stopped the advance of the green plague. It continued to climb up the monster's body and force it to grow even larger.

The lines of purple energy finally faded. They'd bound the crystal completely – and yet, the crystal growth didn't stop. The skeleton looked down at itself. Gem had worked itself into its bones so deeply that it could never be removed – and it was still growing.

It had removed the source, but it was too late to halt its effects. The skeleton snapped a piece of bone off one finger and set it down. The bone formed into a chest in its fingers and it set it on the ground, placing the crystal within it. It ripped the pieces of purple gem that still remained on its body off and placed them on top of the chest. They grew, spreading slowly to cover the whole chest and the area around it.

The green crystal stopped as it grew closer to its purple counterpart – but it was too late for the skeleton. Its growth continued. The monster grabbed pieces of crystal, grinding them to dust in its hands as it turned to the walls of the room and started to draw.

It was making the murals that Arwin was now reading. The final panel was of the charged green crystal, swirls of blue light pouring into it, and the bands of purple that the skeleton had put in blocking them from entering.

After that, there was nothing. He stood by the huge hole that the Bonehemoth had emerged from. The same one that it had dug to escape from the room it had built itself.

Arwin swallowed. He didn't know exactly what the strange gemstones were or how they worked, but he'd used them himself. He knew they absorbed magical energy – but it was clear they absorbed more than that. The monster he'd come against was far larger than the one in the murals, and it showed none of the intelligence that would have been needed to make something like this.

They're some form of magical parasite.

A parasite that had worked into the skeleton and transformed it into a hulking beast devoid of any intelligence... and the very same parasite that resided in Arwin's armor and hammer.

He swallowed.

No reason to panic. It seems like they're somehow inert. The skeleton managed to suppress the main crystal with that purple energy it had, but I think they'd grown so much inside its own body that it couldn't resist them any longer. From the look of things, the crystals were stealing magical energy and using the monster's body as a host.

“Arwin!” Lillia yelled down, her voice echoing through the darkness. “Are you okay? What’s down there?”

“A bunch of murals,” Arwin called back. “Whatever you do, don’t touch the crystals up there. They’re dangerous. I think they seek out and consume magic, but they’re inert right now. Probably.”

“Probably?” Lillia asked. “What’s down there? Are you sure?”

“Not yet, but nothing has happened so far. I think it’s safe to come down here, but make sure one person stays back to watch the exit.”

A few seconds later, Reya slid down the shadowy rope. Anna followed after her and Lillia took up the rear. Any words they may have said died on their lips as they took in the room around them. Arwin looked to the bone chest as the others examined the murals.

I can see how the Mesh registered that kill as saving the Bonehemoth rather than slaying it. It was being tortured. It’s likely that its last sentient act was sealing the crystal and stuffing it into this box.

Did the skeleton actually manage to completely seal it? If it did... that would be a powerful crafting material. A really, really powerful crafting material.

But, if it didn’t, that could be a magical time bomb just waiting to go off and consume everything in the area. What in the world was something like this doing in a Journeyman dungeon?

Arwin's eyes went wide.

“Shit,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Lillia asked, her eyes snapping away from the mural to look at him.

“The dungeon. I don't think it was a Journeyman dungeon at all. Not originally, at least,” Arwin said. “The rating got downgraded after the skeleton ate all the magic in it and then modified the core crystal. The only strong monster left was the skeleton itself, and it looks like the crystal degraded it and stole so much of its power that it probably grew weaker even as it grew larger.”

“That would explain a lot,” Lillia said, her gaze returning to the murals. “Have you ever heard of something like this? If something like this managed to get out of the dungeon...”

“I don't think it can,” Arwin said. “I've worked with this crystal. It's in most of my gear. If it were still as strong as it used to be, it would have absorbed magic from me and grown, not just sat there. I think whatever this parasite was is long dead. The skeleton killed it and locked its corpse away, and all that's left are the equivalent of its fingernail clippings.”

“So the skeleton died to lock it away?” Reya asked. “That's kind of depressing. I thought it was just trying to kill us.”

“At the time we saw it, it was,” Lillia said. “There was no intelligence left in that monster. That's why the Mesh said we saved it.”

“It’s still sad,” Reya said. “I wonder what would have happened if it hadn’t sealed the crystal. That’s the purple stuff, right?”

“Seems to be,” Arwin confirmed. “And I don’t know. The crystal was already leaving the cave at the time the skeleton arrived, but that was all gone when we got here. It may have overrun the region, or something stronger might have stopped it. I think the bottom level of this dungeon is basically a battlefield and a graveyard.”

“Which leaves us with a bit of a problem.” Lillia turned to the chest beside them. “What in the Nine Underlands are we going to do about that? If the murals are right, the heart of the parasite is right here. Even if it’s long dead, it could be a powerful item.”

“Or we could release a magic plague,” Anna said, walking up to stand beside them. “We don’t know for sure it’s dead.”

“Would the Mesh really give us something like that as a reward?” Reya asked.

Arwin shrugged. “It’s impossible to tell. It does love its challenges.”

“But the only things that makes challenge worthwhile are rewards, and we’ve already done the challenge,” Lillia pointed out. “The crystal didn’t do anything until the skeleton ate it.”

“If it’s still alive, it may have changed.” Arwin chewed the insides of his cheeks, then let out a huff. “I just don’t know if we’re in a spot where we can pass up on more power. The Wyrms issue still needs to be dealt with, not to mention Jessen. This was the final reward in the dungeon. It won’t be trivial.”

“Open it,” Lillia said. “I don’t think the crystal is still alive. Like you said, it was all inert above us. We’ve already put in the work. Think of what you could make with something that powerful.”

“I’ll go with what you all decide,” Anna said.

They all looked to Reya.

“Don’t look at me. I’ve got sticky fingers.” Reya held her hands up. “I take everything that isn’t nailed down. I think Lillia is right.”

Arwin nodded. He turned back to the chest and set his hands on it. The purple crystal crumbled away at his touch and his hands met the lid. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

Then he opened the chest.



20 gold 9 silver – Arwin

100 gold - Reya

Gold is about 50 bucks, roughly.