Chapter 44

Willow’s Bend was a disorganized mess. They had many more buildings but not even close to the quality of buildings I had built in Malcum. The larger population did make the town appear much more lively. But the blandness of seeing just about everyone being a human was a drawback. I liked how Malcum was so diverse…it kept the place extremely interesting. This just looked like a modest medieval city. The guards at the gate didn’t make any effort to stop me as I rode through.

I did get multiple compliments on Titan and I rode down the cobblestone street. The uneven rock street made me so grateful to have recruited Sanso so early in the game. He had managed to make all our streets flat stone. I decided to find a store to sell my loot. I had a bunch of hides and scorpion parts. I was going to hang onto all the giant porcupine quills for Galana’s arrows.

I found a general goods store and left Titan outside. The store had shelves with a number of household items, so not really a player store. A few townsfolk were shopping and I found a middle-aged woman who looked to be the owner. I walked to her, “Do you purchase animal and monster parts?” I asked her.

Her vision focused on me and the salt and pepper-haired woman smiled, “Yes let's go to the counter and show me what you wish to sell.” I started unloading all my trash from my bag.

Scorpion poison glands, lion hides, scorpion stingers, some groundhog pelts, a few snake skins, two dozen Simba carvings, some of Savannah’s more useless potions, and a handful of chunks of copper. The last had been from Sanso when he first had found the copper deposit and I had completely forgotten about. The woman looked over everything and used her skill to identify everything. She put aside the potions and piled everything else up. “I will give you 7 gold, 18 silver, and 3 copper for this pile.” She put her hands on the potions, “Five gold for the hair growth potion and one gold for each of the other three.”

My jaw dropped. All the shit I had harvested over hours and hours of grinding was worth less than the four potions that Savannah made after being an alchemist for just a week! How was this fair? I only paid one silver for each potion… Hmm, my little young elf piggy bank. Savannah I want hundreds of hair growth potions you little gold mine.

“Agreed. Is there anything you can tell me about the local happenings?” I asked the woman.

She hesitated for a few seconds before talking, “The town watch needs help thinning the sand crabs along the beach. Talk to Sargent Pierholm. The herbalist is wanting more black mint from the hills surrounding the lake. The blacksmith needs iron ingots. Lord Hardshalk needs pink silk to make a wedding dress for his bride.” I held up my hand stopping the woman. Apparently, these were all quests I could pursue in town.

Just talking to a single NPC and I had a laundry list of possible quests to pursue. This hurt a little bit, as I compared the limited offerings that Malcum had. Well, I wasn’t here for quests. I asked the woman about Malcum, “Have you heard anything about a town far to the north of here? I think it is called Malcum.”

“Haven't heard much about it. A few people passed through here to settle there but it is a very small town. Not much going on there. If you talk to Gerod in trader’s house he might know a trader that needs and escort going up there.” The woman finished.

These NPCs were very stiff and had canned responses. She kept directing me to quests and wasn’t really interacting with me like my NPCs in Malcum. In this way, my little town was far superior. I thanked the woman and went to a tavern.

The tavern was full of humans and much dirtier than Fareth’s inn common room. I ordered an ale and it was bitter and far inferior to our Jungle brew. I was feeling better and better about my little town. The rumors swirling in the tavern were mostly centered around the Incursion event. The insectoids that came through the rifts got this far north and did some damage. Also, there was a huge request from the city of Mistbreak to try and retake their city. That must be the city that had fallen with the player's help during the Incursion. I guess the admins had not fixed the issue yet.

I asked about Malcum but only got one old man who said the town used to export large quantities of lumber downriver to here. He said due to them halting the shipments Willow’s Bend had stopped growing. I made note of this. It appeared inter-town economics might help grow both participating locations.

I went to my notes and added I needed to recruit some good traders in the next NPC auction. That meant I should also get some caravan guards. Did they need caravan guards if they were using the portal stones? I just didn’t know. I sorted in the auction and there were four types of guards; city, palace, caravan, and ceremonial. When the auction started to get close to closing I would search again.

I walked the small city for ideas for Malcum. The docks were very active. Some fishing and trade. Maybe we could excavate and create our own little lake on the Shiverwood side of the river? Willow’s bend did have two healers. My lightning mage, Manto, was serving as our town healer and our angelkin would be able to heal when my barracks was garrisoned. I was about to leave when I came upon a bookstore.

The bookstore wasn’t the interesting thing. It was the fact the proprietor was not a human. He was a dwarf. I walked in and the dwarf looked up from the book he was reading but didn’t move. He had no patrons inside. “Good dwarf your shop seems a little out of place here.”

“Ehh, not my best business decision but it is quiet here and the lack of customers does give me time to read which is why I choose to open a bookshop in the first place.” He put down his book.

“My name is Tallis and I was wondering if you would be interested in relocating your shop?” My thought was not on getting a bookshop but the possibility of getting an NPC that may be good at procuring books for our future library. I may have been looking too far forward but the opportunity was in front of me now.

“Garn Steelhand,” the dwarf said and rose to shake my hand. “What are you offering Tallis?”

“Well, what kind of profit do you make here after you pay taxes?” I asked.

He looked me over, deciding before speaking, “About a gold a month, sometimes a little less.” He seemed to be being honest.

“Would you be interested in free rent and being paid 1 gold a month to run your shop elsewhere?” I asked getting his interest.

“Are you working for the local lord and trying to get me out of here?” I have been harassed a bit but no one has come out and offered me coin to leave.

I smiled finding the racism here, “No I run my own town far to the north. It is called Malcum. We plan to build a library and need someone proficient in procuring books.” His eyes went bright at my words.

“So you are going to pay me to run my shop in your town and not charge me rent? How are building costs within your city,” he asked while standing up and with bright eyes filled with interest.

I looked at the shop and it wasn’t too big, “I will have a shop this size built for you with a residence on the second floor. You will be charged no rent for the building but once the library is built you will be responsible for procuring books for it.”

“Some offers are too good to be true and your offer sounds as such,” Garn said.

I went to my interface and created the contract for the dwarf and sent it to him. Garn paused as the info hit him, “Well I will be a rock mole. Looks legit.” He held out his hand and we shook. “Will take me a few days to pack up and get up to your little town.” I smiled at the dwarf and had poached a valuable NPC to my town. I gave the dwarf a gold coin and sent off a message to Mad Dog to talk with Breda so she could plan to build the bookshop for Garn Steelhand.

My time away was past a day now. I left the bookshop and got Titan. I needed to get south and connect my portal stone network. We rode out of town and headed south.

We passed three towns while traversing the 120 miles to the city of Stillwater. The towns were Stagshell, Bellburn and Wildgulch. They all looked similar to Willow’s Bend in their composition.

Stillwater was a real city. High stone walls surrounded a large city. The city had nearly 100,000 people and was bustling. The stone-walled city was on a massive lake. The lake was so big I could not even see the far side. There was a constant flow of NPCs in and out of the gate I was approaching. Four guards were at the gate checking people entering the city. I had to wait in line. A few questions from the guards and I was given a brass coin. The coin would allow me to bypass the line in the future.

The city had a lot of variety in buildings. Stone, wood, marble. One, two, and three stories in height. The streets were organic and not straight like Breda was planning for Malcum. There was a central city here contained within another stone wall that was made from finer white stone. The gates were guarded by another set of guards and I doubted I could gain entrance.

It took me almost half an hour and asking for directions three times before I found the portal stone. The winding nature of the streets had made navigation through the city difficult. At least I could pin the portal stone on my map. Finding it again would be easier. Linking it to my personal network just took me to touch the portal stone. Although to use the portal stone I had to pay as the key for the stone was secured by the porters. It would cost me three silver so not breaking the bank.

I decided to give myself a few hours to explore the city before returning to Malcum. I paid a silver to leave Titan at a stable. Maybe I could find another NPC gem here to recruit to Malcum. With so many NPCs player quests were being offered around every corner. Maybe I could port here and do quests when I had free time. It would be a nice change of pace.

I went and started to check the prices of Malcum’s goods. Hides were in high demand, and lumber was fairly expensive and was actually imported from upriver. We could in fact undercut the prices of the other towns if we decided to ship lumber. But I thought trading finished furniture would give a better margin.

The one shop I did enter was a map shop. I spent 10 gold on the kingdom maps. The kingdom had four more cities this size and one capital city. The capital city was called Crystalhelm and had over 500,000 NPCs. So the kingdom to my south had over 1 million NPCs. It had me rethinking my plans for telling the tax collectors to fuck off when they arrived. No I would still do that.

As I walked around the city the one thing I couldn’t find was any non-humans. I asked a guard in passing if the city had any non-humans and he said all the non-humans had to live in the slums by the docks. My eyes lit up. I made my way to the docks and found the slums by a sailor pointing the way. Two large wolfmen stood guard at the entrance to the slums.

“No humans allowed,” they growled at me. I cocked my head. One of the wolfmen looked a little uneasy.

“Why not?” I asked.

“If we can’t walk freely in the city then you cant walk freely in the ghetto,” the confident wolfman said.

I wasn’t sure if this ghetto area of the city would harbor a criminal element. It seemed that way to me. Maybe recruiting NPCs from this group of non-humans would not be a good idea. Then I saw a rabbit girl carrying a basket with loaves of bread. I yelled to the girl, “Girl can I purchase some bread from you?” The wolfmen looked behind them at the girl with the floppy rabbit ears. She looked scared at being called. I guessed she was nine or ten.

“It is ok Bella we are here,” one of the wolfmen said. The girl approached and meekly held out the basket.

“How much?” I asked looking at the steaming bread. She looked up to one of the wolfmen for help.

“10 coppers for the large loaf, 2 coppers for one of the small ones,” the wolfman supplied helpfully while smiling at the girl. A gave her a silver and took the entire basket. I passed each of the wolfmen a small roll and sampled each remaining bread type in the basket. They were good. Not great but definitely very good.

“Who baked these?” I asked while chewing on cheese-crusted bread.

The rabbit girl shrunk away and squeaked, “My..my..my parents. I was delivering them to the leatherworker's shop. Now I need to go get more…” The poor girl was terrified. It wasn’t of the wolfmen it was me.

I looked at the wolfmen and asked, “I am from Malcum far to the north. I am looking for crafters to help populate the town. We don’t discriminate. In fact, the population of Malcum is only about half human. Do you think there are any crafters that would be interested in coming to Malcum?” The wolfmen seemed at a loss for words but Bella’s eyes went wide and she left running back home.

The wolfmen wouldn’t leave their post and soon Bella was towing an adult female rabbitkin. I guessed her mother. “Bella stop pulling, we are here. Bella said you are from Malcum. So it is true Malcum is accepting non-humans? We heard rumors but it is a huge gamble to travel so far and not know what you are getting into. Many people here fled the city of Mistbreak when the insectoids took it over. Life here is not good and the ghetto is getting very crowded.” The rabbit woman was very calm talking to me.

“How many people live in the ghetto?” I asked.

“About two thousand,” the woman said. “It changes daily. Most of us are beastkin but there are a fair number of gnomes and halflings. What type of skills are you looking for?” My excitement level started to rise. Could I really circumvent the NPC auction like this? I just needed to travel to cities where non-humans were oppressed.

“I am looking for anyone who can contribute positively to our city,” I said sincerely. She looked at me wither large rabbit eyes.

“Talon bring him to the inn. I will see if anyone wants to travel to Malcum. I need to go talk to my husband. Come Bella.” Bella the rabbit girl literally hopped next to her mother as they returned to their bakery.

I looked at the wolfman named Talon, “Really Talon? Is that your real name? Wouldn’t Fang, Lupine, or even Bob have been better?” Maybe I shouldn’t have needled the guard but they had given me a slightly hard time and his fellow thought it was funny and chuckled.

“Come human I will have a drink with you while the bakers sort out the people.” Talon walked me into the ghetto and we entered a building with no sign. The room was well lit with magic lights and tables were occupied with many beastkin and a few gnomes. I was watched wearily as I sat and Taon got us each a mug.

I swapped mugs with Talon and his eyebrow rose, “By the looks, I am getting I was worried my mug much have some spit in it.” I smiled. Talon leaned forward and got close to me.

“Probably does,” and he laughed. He drank his anyway. “So Talon was what my sister used to call me. It is my nickname and I prefer to use it to remember her.”

“Oh, I am sorry I didn’t mean to make fun of…” I stumbled. But the man raised his pawed hand.

“Don’t worry human, she lives. Just very far from here and I will likely never see her again. I actually like it when people point it out. Usually, they ask if I am related to some bird of prey or something more intellectual than what you said,” he smirked at me. “So do you have need of any guards in your little town? I have a decade worth of experience. My cousin that we left out there has about six months but he is a decent enough sort. I wouldn’t mind taking my family somewhere…more hospitable.” Talon relaxed in his chair and sipped his mug waiting on me.

“Yes, we need good people. There are a number of holes to fill in our ranks. What I can offer is a reasonable wage and affordable housing. I don’t think we can take all 2000 people but maybe a few hundred.” I said thinking about my current infrastructure.

The rabbit family came into the room and sat at our table. It was the woman who talked, “The word is spreading. So what are you offering? We are skilled bakers.” She almost pleaded.

“I sampled your goods and agree. You are welcome in Malcum. I can offer you the same as I offered the dwarf bookstore owner in Willow’s Bend. I will build you a shop with a residence above it. I will own the building but you can live there rent-free. You have to supply bread for the city guard and the army daily. I will supply the ingredients. Anything beyond that you can sell for profit.” Maybe I was being too generous because their eyes got bright.

“That is most generous. How far is Malcum?” The woman asked.

“Two hundred and fifty miles north,” I supplied. They looked at each other and nodded. We shook on it and they left excitedly to pack.

Talon looked at me, “That easy?” he asked. I nodded. “I will stay and manage the crowds for you as they come. How long will you stay?”

“Eight hours,” I said committing to a long haul of interviews. And that is exactly what it was. In the end, I had two hundred and sixty-eight skilled workers coming to Malcun and another four hundred and fifty-six family members. More than we could comfortably handle but this was a game so I figured it would magic itself out.

My new roster of 724 villagers to Malcum might strain us but it was needed. 70% were beastkin and 20% were gnomes and the remaining 10% were a mix of other races. I considered traveling to some of the other cities but needed to get back to Malcum. I looked at my list of skilled workers.

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| **Butchers** | 14 |
| **Bakers** | 12 |
| **Jewelers** | 8 |
| **Ropemakers** | 8 |
| **Rugmakers** | 4 |
| **Painters** | 5 |
| **Shoemakers** | 8 |
| **Tanners** | 9 |
| **Tavern Workers** | 44 |
| **Pursemakers** | 12 |
| **Roofers** | 9 |
| **Hatmakers** | 5 |
| **Maidservants** | 19 |
| **Masons** | 9 |
| **Glovemakers** | 6 |
| **Coopers** | 11 |
| **Carpenters** | 21 |
| **Tailors** | 10 |
| **Locksmiths** | 5 |
| **Guards** | 27 |
| **Weavers** | 9 |
| **Chandlers** | 10 |
| **Furriers** | 3 |

Some skills I did not need and many would have too large a population and struggle to make sufficient sales. I mean I already had 2 candlemakers in Malcum and I was adding 10 more! We had magic lights so really didn’t need candles at all! Well, one of the candle makers said they could make wax for sealing crates and bottles so they did have other uses. Also, I knew I was inviting a lot of people to come and giving them free housing to a lot of very poor NPCs. My hope was we could get past the speed bump of feeding and housing everyone and instantly create an economy within Malcum. The problem was these NPCs didn’t have strong magical skills that I could tell. They did everything in a slow and non-magical way. At least Galana would be happy to add 27 new guards to the town.

I realized the one thing I was missing from the list was farmers and livestock breeders. Hopefully, I wouldn’t run into some sort of food crisis. I was essentially going from a high-end, high-level NPC recruitment system to average NPCs with no standout abilities. The levels of the NPCs I interviewed were all between 3 and 14. Not a single one was higher.

I finally left the tavern in the ghetto and went back to the portal stone. I needed to make preparations for something that was either a brilliant move or one of the dumbest things I could have done.