

Lair Divers Tale - Prologue

The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance as young Brennan stood on the roof of Lord Cowan's Manor. He was tired, cold, wet and hungry, but his anger kept him strong. And besides, being hungry wasn't a new sensation, not after living on the streets for the last few months.

No, he was too angry to stop, to seek shelter as the wind and rain whipped around him, tucked up against a small corner in the roof. It had taken weeks of scouting, watching and waiting for him to figure out the perfect place to hide, someplace invisible to the patrolling guards, where he could look into Lord Cowan's office. And in that spot he sat, watching the empty office, waiting for the perfect moment. The perfect opportunity...

To do what, he didn't know.

In truth he hadn't thought that far ahead, hadn't really planned on what he would actually do. He was just letting his anger, his hunger for vengeance lead him. Part of him, a dark part of him, wanted the bastard dead, wanted to do it himself, wanted to watch the life leave his eyes knowing the young boy he had orphaned had ended his life. Another part of him wanted to prove what a rotten man he was, wanted to watch him bandied about and looked at in disgust.

He wasn't entirely sure which side would win.

Time went by and the sky grew darker, the storm more intense. Nervousness started to eat away at the anger, mostly worrying about the storm and what would happen after. Suddenly the door into the office was shoved open and in walked two armored men, metal plated and armed with fancy swords at their hips. They carried between them a wooden chest, banded with iron and a lock as big as both of Brennan's fists. The two men carried it into the room, put it down gently in front of the desk and turned to leave, closing the large door behind them.

The young boy watched all of this with wide eyes, his black hair and dirty face almost invisible in the small corner of the high window. He couldn't help but wonder what was in that chest, what treasure the lord of this small city had managed to barter for. Almost without realizing it Brennan slid his cheap dagger along the edges of the window, popping it open after a few moments of work. He quickly slid into the room, closing the window gently behind him.

The sudden silence was almost more jarring than the thunder and whipping wind outside. It was oppressive and filled with a tension that seemed tangible. Slowly Brennan climbed down the book shelf he had been crouched on, dropping to the carpeted floor with a soft thud. He froze, his eyes and ears straining to detect any sign that the sound had been heard.

When none came he made his way to the chest, studying it for a moment before lifting the lock. It was heavy, sturdy and well made. The iron it was made with held little to no external flaws and

would have been the end of this endeavor for anyone without the skills to pick a lock or without heavy tools to bash it open.

Maybe next time Lord Cowan would think before ordering the death of a skilled locksmith and his family.

He pulled out his fathers tools and fiddled with the lock, his fathers voice in his ear as he focused. The lock clicked and bound, clicked and bound, clicked and... popped open. With a smirk Brennan unhooked the lock from the chest, placing it on the ground softly. He steadied himself before pulling open the chest. The interior was lined with red cloth and shaped to fit the contents perfectly. Nestled in the cloth was an empty, well made leather satchel only slightly larger than Brennan's head and a thick, leather bound book with shiny metal banding. The book was slightly oversized, and heavy but fit into his own bag easily enough.

Once he had put the book into his bag he pulled out the satchel and slung it over his shoulder, securing it tightly. He quickly re-locked the chest before standing. Giving the room a once over, his eyes landed on an unlit lantern and he couldn't help but smile. He grabbed the lantern and walked over to the large desk before steadily pouring out the oil over the paper and book laden desk, before walking to the room's primary source of light and heat. Grabbing a half lit log from the fireplace he took one more look around before tossing the burning wood onto the desk. Immediately the desk was alight, filling the room with heat and light.

Not willing to risk his own safety to watch the fire spread, he climbed back up the bookcase he had climbed down, pushing the window back open. Wind buffeted him, the cold biting as he pushed back onto the roof. He shut the window behind him and looked back, seeing the flames spreading across the interior before smoke began to obscure his view.

It was time to go.

He quickly climbed down the stone and wooden exterior of the manor, doing his best to stay out of sight. He followed the path he originally took to get to his hiding spot, somehow managing to avoid the guards a second time. He was just dropping onto the opposite side of the modest but well made stone walls around the manor when...

"Fire! Fire! Get some buckets!"

The shouting must have been loud to be heard over the wind, rain and thunder, especially on the other side of the walls. The guards patrolling the exterior turned to the shouting and ran inside, leaving Brennan with a clear route to escape. And so he ran into the city, staying in the dark alleyways and rougher streets. He had made it, somehow, and gotten a small bit of revenge. It wasn't the revenge he had planned, but maybe it would be even better.

He could hardly believe his good luck.

Chapter 1

The morning started with the familiar sound of semi muffled activity, workers shouting and cargo being unloaded. Thankfully, by now, Brennan was used to the morning noise, and he hardly even registered it anymore. He was a heavy sleeper anyway, so really it just meant his tiny, no frills, rented room was even cheaper. After a few moments enjoying the relatively well made bed he slid off, stretching as he stood. With a sigh he began his morning ritual, ending with a small, simple breakfast of dried meat, a hunk of cheese and some bread. He would have made something, but he was on a time limit if he wanted to find a halfway decent team to work with today.

The past year had been a nice change of pace for Brennan. The city he currently lived in, Primonte, was a large city, mostly because of the three lairs in close proximity to its walls. It was a trade city as well, built along the massive Fremarch River. The city was known for its through traffic, be it traders, lair divers or travelers on their way along the river. This meant that a person could disappear into the crowd, and no one kept track of unfamiliar faces, which Brennan took full advantage of.

Brennan had spent the last ten years, since he was twelve, on the run from the mercenaries of Lord Cowan. He could hardly remember a time when he wasn't looking over his shoulder, worried he was being followed. Which is what made the last year so refreshing. Him staying in one location meant he was running the same three dungeons weekly, enough to know them pretty well by this point, besides the occasional bout of lair chaos.

As the sun rose into view through his only window, Brennan pulled on his black leather boots. They were the newest addition to his outfit, a piece of lair equipment that let him dash a full dozen feet almost instantly. Better still was the low recharge time. Even better, he had barely needed to upgrade them at all to get them like that. Thankfully the team he had dove with when he got them had finally moved on to another city. No one around knew the boots had only let the wearer dash five times a day when they had first found them, which meant they were finally safe to use.

After his boots were on and strapped he pulled on his leather and plate armor, a loose system of armor that let him move freely while still protecting his most important bits. They protected him much better than leather and thin metal normally would as well, though he treated them like normal armor. Too much high quality lair equipment meant too much attention.

Finally he strapped on his sword and his satchel, the same one he had stolen years ago. The sword was nothing special, a lair object that did nothing but what it was designed to do, only a bit better. The satchel was strapped around and connected to his opposite hip. The

leather was purposely darkened with grease and wax, with leather extra strapped, glued and tied around it to both protect it and disguise it.

With his equipment finally in place he left his small living quarters, grabbing his heater style shield as he walked out. As soon as he picked it up he could feel the extra strength it provided. Of course that's not all the shield did, but it was the most obvious ability it had.

The short walk to the guild hall was uneventful, mostly because it was too early for anyone but the guards and fellow divers to be out and about. Occasionally he would see a messenger or an errand runner, but other than that the streets were clear. He could hear the hustle and bustle of the docks not far away, but that was mostly contained to the waterfront. Eventually he reached the open doors of the local guild hall, stepping into the well lit building.

A large open floor reached all the way back to the service counters, while to his left were a few tables set up for teams to sit at. Past that was a staircase to the second floor where the higher ranked members spent their time, as well as where a few bedrooms were located. To his right was a map wall, a posting board and a few rows of bookshelves, filled with information about the region, the nearby lairs and other general things.

Brennan stepped further into the building, immediately making his way to the posting board. The guild hall was filled with the soft mutterings and mumbled conversations of other divers, soft enough that it easily fell into the background. Most of the conversation stemmed from the half dozen tables that sat in the far corner of the hall. There people discussed business, strategy and bragged about their latest lair dive. More divers came and went, completing their business before leaving to whatever inn, tavern or tent they were staying in.

Brennan stood in front of the posting board, looking through the local requests for fillers. There were a handful of new ones, even a few that looked decent enough and fit what he rolls he was good at. He was more flexible than most divers, meaning he could fill more roles in a team, but he still had his limits. For most it was a trade off. Either invest in equipment for multiple roles for more flexibility, or focus on fitting in one role to maximize your potential. For Brennan, it was really a no brainer. Eventually he settled on one of the more recent offers, pulling the small clip of paper off of the board before making his way to the main desk of the guild hall, greeting the worker behind the desk with a smile.

"Hello, I'm looking to get in contact with this group." He said, sliding the slip of paper across the counter.

The worker nodded and compared the slip to some paperwork. After a minute she looked up and smiled gesturing behind Brennan.

"You're in luck! It would appear they are still here." She said with a smile. "Back table in the corner."

He nodded his thanks and left a brass coin on the counter, the woman giving him another smile as he left. He made his way to the tables, skirting around most of them until he reached his destination. A decent sized group, four people sat on one side of the round table, while another sat closer to him. The disparity between the group and the woman sitting alone was obvious. The group was dressed in decent armor in good repair, while the single woman was dressed in what appeared to be home made leather armor, slightly patched and repaired. It wasn't really bad work, especially considering the green color of the leather meant it wasn't natural leather, but it was still clearly made by untrained hands. Everyone seated at the table looked up at me as I got closer.

"Hello, I'm Brennan." I started. "Are you still looking for a filler?"

"We are, Kyra here already agreed to be our harvester." The largest of the group said. "We're just looking for a second back liner."

A back liner was someone who could rush around the lair, going where they were needed, rather than posting in one location and standing your ground. Thankfully today Brennan was uniquely suited for such a role.

"I can fill that, I have plenty of experience with that." He answered. "I also have a movement skill on my boots."

"What kind?" Asked what looked like the mage of the group.

"Just a simple dash, but it's a small scale cooldown." I explained. "Five seconds." The leader let out a low whistle, clearly impressed.

"That is a pretty good find." He said. "Where did you find that?"

"A family heirloom." Brennan lied easily. "As is my sword and shield."

"And what do they do?" Asked the girl on the opposite side of the leader as the mage.

"The shield is a strength increase, and the sword is just basic equipment." Brennan answered. "It cuts better. Will that be enough?"

"For a filler? Yeah, we can work with that. Especially since it's the smallest lair of the three" The leader said, nodding. "My name is Tary, I'm the heavy, this is Marla, she is the healer, Liam here is our mage and Ward is our primary back liner."

"Nice to meet you all." Brennan said politely as he sat down at the table.

Over the next few hours the group discussed the strategies and abilities they had, as well as what their equipment could do. The mage had a decent spell book, though he only had

one element, fire. The healer was basic, but sufficient for the lair they were headed for, the closest one to the city. Each of them had at least three pieces of lair equipment, which spoke well of the group's skill. Or their purses.

"You two will each get a sixth of the harvesting profit, and if we find over four pieces of equipment you will be added to the pool." Tary explained when they finally finished discussing capabilities. "We divide the equipment after we return. Equipment goes to whoever would find it the most useful, if two people would find something useful, our group comes first."

Brennan nodded in agreement to the split. It was pretty fair all things considered, and he had definitely agreed to worse. Kyra also nodded along, though she said nothing.

"That works for me." Brennan said after a quick thought.

"Good." Tary agreed, standing and nodding. "Shall we get the contract written up?"

Brennan nodded and stood, the rest of the group following suit. It only took a few more minutes to get the simple contract written out by the guild worker behind the counter. Once it was all signed the group was on their way, walking through the city to the outer walls. The lair the group was attempting was only an hour walk from the city walls, but the guild funded a cart to go back and forth between the lair outpost and the city. Brennan found himself hanging back with Kyra, watching their temporary team mates lead the way.

"Have you run this lair before?" He asked her.

"No." She admitted. "I've run a few, but never any in this area."

"It's nothing special, just a few packs of wolves." He explained. "The lair beast is a Dire wolf."

The woman shook her head but stayed silent. It was clear she had much less experience than everyone else, and that she was nervous about filling in. That said, she did walk with a sure step, belying that she was at least confident in herself and that she could handle this, or at least thought that she did.

The cart picked them up after only ten minutes of waiting by the gate, heading out into the forest. Brennan couldn't help but watch the trees, keeping an eye out for anything sneaking up on them. The forests surrounding Primonte were relatively natural, with only a few reports of dryads in the farther reaches. The lairs had been well maintained and cleared often enough that there hadn't been an outbreak in quite a long time.

Still, Brennan had traveled through forests that were not so natural, where every shadow could be another beast, broken from its lair. After surviving through places like that it was hard

to just sit back and admire the view. Deep forests like these made his skin crawl, and several old scars itch.

When they did finally make it to the outpost, the sun was much higher in the sky and it had warmed up considerably. The cart driver made to leave the moment they stepped off the back, barely giving them a wave before flicking his reins. Brennan barely had time to pass him a single brass piece. That got him a smile and a nod, but not an extra second.

The outpost was a simple stone and wooden structure, walls about twice as tall as Brennan. The battlements all pointed inwards of course, so that they could contain an outbreak should the lair have one. It was manned by a dozen or so guards, all of them looking incredibly bored. A lair like this would never have an outbreak, it was cleared way too often. As the group walked through the open gate they finally spotted the lair entrance. A simple rock arch about fifteen feet tall at its highest, adorned with runic carvings that glowed a faint blue. At the moment the arch was empty and the five pointed star at the highest point of the arch glowed a soft red, signifying that another group was already inside.

“Hello there, are you reserved for today?” A guard asked from behind us, sitting at a counter covered by a simple wooden roof.

“Hello! Yes, yes we do, it should be under Tary...”

Tary and the healer headed to the counter and discussed the reservation while the rest of us took seats around the inside of the outpost walls. Brennan sat down and began stretching, warming up his muscles to keep them from tensing up while fighting. It was about twenty minutes later when the lair entrance lit up, the runes pulsing for a moment before the arch was filled with blue green light. After another few moments people started exiting the lair portal, until a team of five was standing in the center of the guarded area.

The new group paused for a moment to share high five and congratulate each other before walking away from the arch, which had already closed. They headed straight to the guard by the counter. The whole group was laden with packs, with the largest of them carrying a large pouch on their back as well as two leather bags with handles.

“How was the dive?” Tary called out as they walked past, getting the attention of one of the more heavily armored individuals.

“Standard fare.” The man answered. “Saw a few extra wolves but nothing we couldn’t handle.”

Brennan tuned out the conversation, focusing on his pre dive ritual of sharpening his sword, having already finished his stretches. The rest of the group followed suit, checking their armor, weapons and gear. By the time the portal reopened ten minutes later everything was all set.

“Everyone ready?” Tary asked, getting nods from everyone. “Alright then, let’s head in.”

The group made their way into the portal, with Tary leading from the front and Brennan and Krya entering last. The portal fluttered for a moment before shut down behind them, the star above the arch now glowing red.

Chapter 2

Brennan managed to not stumble in the transition through the portal, though it was a close thing. The sensation of entering a lair was always a bit jarring, no matter how experienced a diver was. It felt like stepping under water, like diving into a lukewarm pool that immediately starts to fade into a light humidity as your body adjusts to the lair interior. Eventually, once everyone had taken a few deep breaths, worked out the adjustments they took stock of where they had arrived.

Slowly Brennan pulled out his sword, looked around and studied the large clearing they had been put in, eyes following the tree line. The other members of the temporary group looked around as well, pulling out their various weapons.

“Alright, just as we discussed, I’ll be in front, Marla, Liam, and Krya in the middle behind me.” Tary said, a large metal shield and one handed ax already out. “Ward and Brennan will cover our backs and help when they need to.”

Brennan nodded and got into his general position, Ward not far from him, the smaller fighter pulling out his dual shortswords. It was a bit odd that a back liner didn’t have a shield, but everyone had their own fighting style. Instead of pointing it out, Brennan focused on keeping his eye on the treeline surrounding the small clearing. It was unusual to get attacked in the starting segment, but a lair hardly cared about rules.

“How do we know where the next clearing is?” Tary asked, looking over at me.

“The first one is almost always straight ahead.” I explained. “Then you have to walk around the perimeter and look for more clearings through the trees.”

Tary led the team forward, pushing into the tree line and crossing it into the second clearing. This one was not just an empty clearing, though the forest still surrounded it completely. A copse of trees sat to the left, while a large boulder sat along the treeline directly in front of them. The group was tense, knowing that at any moment-

“Ten O’clock!” Marla called, making everyone shift and focus to where she called out.

Sure enough, slinking out of the forest was a large black wolf, shortly followed by two more. The group prepared itself.

“Liam, Marla, left one!” Tary called, settling into a sturdier stance.

Liam shouted in confirmation before raising his hand, his spell book open and glowing a dull orange. A casting circle appeared in front of his open palm, spinning and glowing the same color as the book. The circle constricted and a ball of flame shot out across the clearing and impacted the leftmost wolf, engulfing it in flame. It yelped and stumbled, only to get hit by a crossbow bolt that slammed into its side, the wolf struggling before collapsing, still burning.

Without prompting the dual wielding back liner ran forward, while Brennan held back, raising his sword slightly, his eyes still working over the edge of the forest. Krya was doing the same, her simple dagger held at the ready. The two remaining wolves made a beeline for Tary. He shield bashed one of them, sending it off to the side where Ward finished it off with a quick series of stabs. The second one managed to slow down and run to the side, avoiding Tary all together. Seeing the large canine about to get to the mage and healer, Brennan activated his boots.

He glowed a dark navy blue as he streaked to the wolf, leaving a trail of after images that were black and wispy. The wolf had no time to react before Brennan slammed his sword into its neck, his blade biting into the wolf's fur and flesh easily. Mentally counting down the three seconds the boots took to recharge then the extra two seconds he pretended it took, he turned around, scanning the area for more and finding none.

“Nicely done, those boots are impressive.” Tary said. “Looks like we got lucky with you.”

“Thank you.” Brennan responded, flicking the excess blood off of his blade, but keeping it at the ready.

The large man nodded, before turning back to the group. Kyra was examining the still smoldering wolf while the other stood at the ready.

“The hides a loss, same with the eyes. Its teeth are fine though.” Kyra said standing from the corpse.

““We should also check that group of trees and the boulder.” Brennan pointed out. “The trees might have useful plants and the boulder might be hiding something.”

“Right, we can check them on the way back.” Tary said with a nod before turning to the group. “Everyone get back into position.”

The group formed back up before making their way to the treeline, slowly walking around the clearing until they spotted another one through the trees. They made their way through the

forest and into the next clearing. This one had a small river running along the farthest side, entering and exiting through the forest.

This time the wolves attacked almost immediately, two from the right, charging out faster than any natural wolf could. The mage did the same fire spell, this time missing as the wolf maneuvered with surprising agility considering how fast they were running at us. Ward rushed forward, standing alongside his leader while Brennan hung back, scanning around the clearing. Suddenly a third wolf leapt into the clearing, this one had blue highlights running down its back, and its jaws crackled with electricity.

“Elemental!” Brennan called out, raising his shield and rushing forward.

The lightning wolf howled, the energy in its mouth increasing, sparking and jumping to the ground around him before firing off at Brennan in a burst of electricity. He raised his metal shield and gritted his teeth, the lightning blast slightly negated by the shield but still stunning his arm.

The wolf charged, its eyes glowing as it ran straight for Kyra, its jaws already recharging. Just before it could get to her Brennan used his boots again, dashing into a tackle to knock the wolf off its path. They both stumbled from the inertia, the canine quickly hopping back up to its feet. Brennan struggled, just able to get his shield up in time, still on one knee. With a shove he pushed the wolf back, lunging out with his sword, carving a wound along the face and neck. The dog whipped his head around and clamped on his arm. Its teeth cut the armor and dug into his skin, the electricity in its jaws shocking through his body, making his hand convulse and his sword slip from his grasp. Desperately he bash the canine with his shield until finally Kyra got closer, stabbing the lightning wolf in the eye with her thick dagger. The lair beast jerked and released Brennan's arm, falling to the ground, dead before it made it.

“Thanks.” Brennan said, standing back up.

“No, thank you, for keeping it off me.” She responded with a small smile.

“How bad is it?” Marla said, getting both Kyra and Brennan’s attention as she walked closer. “Do you need healing?”

Brennans flexed and worked his hand before slowly peeling back his armor, revealing a series of bloody bite marks. However, his arm and hand worked fine, with no loss of movement he could find.

“No, I’ll just bandage it up.” He responded, reaching down into his satchel, pulling out a bandage.

“Here, let me.” Marla offered, taking the long strip of cloth. “I have something to help prevent infections.”

She pulled a vial of green oil from her own bag, drizzling it over his arm before gently spreading it out over his wounds. It stung a bit, but not nearly enough for Brennan to complain. She wrapped his arm with the bandage, clipping it tight.

“There you go.” She said with a smile.

“All set?” Tary asked, having made his way over to the three of them. “Didn't expect any elemental in here.”

“I've run into a couple.” Brennan admitted. “But it's usually just occasionally. Might mean we are in a more difficult set up.”

“Hmm well lets keep going. If things start getting too difficult we will cancel and retreat back to the portal.”

“Hey! It's fading!”

Immediately everyone turned to look at Liam, who had been poking at the elemental wolf. True to his words the wolf was slowly fading, its body turning to wispy dust that immediately disappeared into the air. When it was finally done, where the corpse had been now laid a bow, the first piece of lair equipment for this run.

“Damn, that is early!” Ward said, picking up the bow and turning it in his hands.

“Seems like we really might have gotten sent to a rough one.” Tary said, looking around as if he was worried more wolves would step into the clearing. “Okay, pack it up, we will get it identified when we get back. For now, let's keep going.”

After Ward hooked the bow onto his small backpack everyone got back into formation and once again started walking the perimeter, looking into the forest to find the next area. Eventually Ward spotted it, and the group started crossing the forest, entering into another area, a space with flowers dotting the short grass and a singular large tree in the middle.

It took a few minutes of walking around before the wolves attacked, this time with four beasts darting from all sides, converging on the group simultaneously. Thankfully the two ranged members, Liam and Marla were able to take down one target, leaving the other three melee fighters to fight only a single wolf on their own.

Arm already getting sore, Brennan focused on the rushing wolf, who leapt into the air in an attempt to wrap their jaws around his neck. He raised his shield and blocked the black furred canine, sending it sprawling to the side. The wolf was back on its feet before he could turn to face it, snapping at him and trying to get a bite on his legs. Brennan kicked the canine's muzzle, following it up with a slash with his blade. The edge cut into the wolf's leg, causing it to stumble

forward. Using his enhanced strength the diver slammed his shield into the side of the unnatural canine's head, caving it in. He repeated the blow twice more before standing and checking his surroundings.

Tary had already dispatched his wolf, with Ward landing a double bladed stab as he watched. For a moment the group just watched, waiting to see if any more wolves came from the forest. After a full minute of waiting they regrouped.

"Anyone hurt?" Marla asked after she finished loading another bolt in her crossbow.

"Not enough to need healing yet, but I need my leg bandaged." Ward said, showing off his armor-covered leg, now perforated by several teeth marks.

As Marla helped bandage Ward up, Kyra compared the flowers to a book she had hooked onto her belt. A minute later she called out to the group.

"Nobody step on the flowers!" She warned, standing up. "They are worth about an iron piece each."

The group was stunned for a long moment, scanning the clearing for a moment. There was at least a three dozen flowers around the clearing, meaning this dive just got a lot more profitable. And potentially more dangerous.

"Damn... This is a bad sign." Tary said, still scanning the clearing. "Unless we are getting really lucky... things are about to get a lot more difficult."

"It's a lot to uncover so early." Brennan admitted. "Are you thinking about turning back?"

"I am. We aren't really prepared for a higher difficulty lair."

"C'mon, let's do one more segment." Liam said, poking one of the corpses with a stick. "If it ramps up too much we will head back, clearing everything as we go."

For a moment Tary considered the options before eventually nodding.

"One more segment before we make our decision." He said, looking at everyone else, settling on me and Kyra. "Is that acceptable?"

"It works for me." Brennan answered, while Kyra nodded. "I think we can handle it."

"Great. Let's get going then."

It took the group another five minutes to find and enter the next clearing. This one was the same as the first, empty save for some patches of wild grass. The group stood in the center, anxiously waiting for the wolves.

“Five o’clock!” Brennan shouted out, sword up and ready as three wolves stepped out of the forest, directly in front of him.

He could hear the other’s shifting to get into position as the wolves charged, heading straight for him. A bolt flew past him and managed to slam into one of the wolves head, dropping it immediately. He stepped forward to meet the next one, shifting as the wolf jumped at him, managing to plunge his sword into its chest. The final one was almost completely decapitated by Tary’s ax, the sharp edge glowing green, leaving a trail of the color as it sliced.

The group paused for a moment before easing up, Tray stepping forward to nudge the wolf he killed.

“Huh... I guess it was just luck?” He said, looking back at the rest of the group. “Let’s get ready for-”

His sentence was cut off by a loud howling, slowly joined by what sounded like three more. The howl was long and unnerving, everyone tensing up immediately as Tary looked around wildly.

“What is this?” He asked, looking at Brennan. “Is this normal?”

“No, I dont think ive ever heard of this lair doing wave segments.” He admitted, looking around nervously.

Slowly four wolves pushed out of the treeline, staying close together. The two wolves in front were the standard black furred wolf, already growling and snarling at the group. Behind them were two more, these two marked by blue highlighting streaks running down their backs. Their jaws crackling with electricity. They howled again, and charged.

Chapter 3

The four wolves moved fast, the elementals hanging back and circling while the other two charged straight for Ward. The other back liner cursed and back pedaled, while Tary and Brennan rushed to meet him. The mage raised his hand, an orange casting circle already formed and spinning. Before he could release it though, a pulse of lightning arced across the

gap and slammed into him, or rather into some sort of barrier around him. It held for a moment but smashed through, electricity zapping across his body while throwing him onto his back.

The two wolves reached Ward as Brennan dashed the final distance, glowing navy blue for a moment before shield bashing the second wolf away from his teammate. The other wolf was already snapping at Ward, managing to grab him, tearing his right sword arm away and mangling his hand. He shouted out a curse before slamming his second weapon into the wolves neck. The second wolf recovered from Brennans shield bash just in time for Tary to get closer and raise his ax high, only for another blast of lightning to smash into his chest. Unlike Liam it didn't knock him off his feet, but it did make his body lock up and convulse, just long enough for the wolf to lunge forward and savage his leg before he could finally slam his ax down into the beast's back, once, twice, three times before it released him.

Marla was already healing Ward, one of her hands glowing white. The other around her necklace. As she held his hand, the wounds visibly knitted themselves closed. Liam was slowly standing, looking dazed, his light armor a little scorched. He raised his hand and a fireball the size of his head shot in a lazy arc at one of the lightning wolves, which attempted to avoid it. The ball of flame missed the wolf by a foot, impressive considering its slow speed. It sailed past the wolf, hit the ground and detonated in an explosion that rocked the clearing. It tossed the wolf against a tree, impacting with a crack before slamming into the ground and laying there, completely still.

Brennan, finishing his short countdown for his boots, ran towards the second lightning wolf, getting almost halfway to it before his boots glowed and he blurred, stopping right behind the black and blue wolf. The canine attempted to spin and bite him, only to get a face full of shield for its efforts. Brennan followed the shield bash with a kick to its head, knocking it off its feet long enough for him to lunge and stab his sword through its neck.

The group was breathing heavily, save for Kyra and Marla, the first of which was helping Liam steady himself, the latter already healing Tary's leg with glowing white hands. Tary looked around while Marla healed him, shaking his head.

"Alright, this is clearly something we weren't prepared for. The reports from this lair said we might see one elemental, and two or three wolves per segment. We are getting the hell out of here."

This time when he looked at the group no one disagreed. He nodded and stood up straight, testing his leg.

"Great, thanks Marla. Okay everyone, form up, we are lea-"

Another howl echoed through the clearing, everyone tensing up involuntarily as it was joined by quite a few others. Everyone's eyes were wide, jaws hanging open, stunned by the number of wolves.

“MOVE! We need to get back to the exit!” Brennan called out, shocking everyone into action.

The group ran, heading back into the forest the way they came, loosely in formation as they went. Liam was slowly falling behind, body still hurt from the lightning bolt to his chest. Ward slid under his arm, put his arm around his back and carried some of his weight, the two now barely keeping up.

The group kept running, pushing through the forest into the flower speckled clearing. They skidded to a stop, two normal black furred wolves already waiting for them. The wolves immediately charged, snarling as they ran directly for Tary. Marla raised her crossbow and fired, the bolt digging into one of the wolves back leg, high enough that it stumbled and half collapsed, yelping and yowling. Tary quickly dispatched the still running wolf, defending with his large shield and smashing the wolf skull in with his ax, while Brennan finished off the already crippled canine.

“Keep going!” Tary called out, more wolves howling in the forest, some stepping out of the tree line.

Tary slowed and changed position and now covered the rear as the entire group rushed across the clearing, entering the forest once again. This time they were greeted by three wolves, hiding in the shadows of the tree’s

Brennan and Ward rushed forward, fighting the four legged lair beasts brutally, holding nothing back. Ward tapped his swords together, activating some sort of ability, both blades growing red as he slashed the air. Red arcs of energy rushed across the gap, slashing into two of the wolves. It bisected one almost completely in half, dropping it without a sound. The second one managed to avoid most of the attack, only getting a few cuts along its back. They were both quickly dispatched through, the normal wolves not a true threat when it was one on one, not for seasoned divers any way.

A shout and scream, called the group's attention back to the center of the formation. They turned to find Liam on the ground, pinned there by a massive black and orange wolf, fire and smoke billowing from its jaws as it savaged the mage, the sound of a cracking femur resonating through the forest. Both Ward and Brennan rushed to attack, the latter dashing to stab the wolf in the side, carving open a grievous wound as Ward hacked at its head. After a few strikes the beast died, collapsing half on top of Liam. Tary finally stumbled back, having fought off two wolves by himself, showing bite marks along his arm.

“A second type of elemental?” He said. “What the fuck type of difficulty did we stumble into?”

Before anyone could think of an answer, more wolves howled in the distance. Marla leaned down as her hand glowed, the leg healing slightly. It was still bent at a nauseating angle though.

"I... I can't fix this!" Marla said. "Someone will need to carry him!"

"No!" Liam shouted, blood staining his face. "This is my fault, I won't slow you down! Go! I'll... I'll hold them off!"

Marla shook her head violently, starting to pull him up before Tary pulled her away, the healer sobbing before letting him.

"GO! You need time to start the portal up, you need to go!"

Liam shouted again, wincing as he sat up against the tree he had been leaning against when the wolf attacked. His grimoire was already open on his lap. His eyes were watering, whether from pain or from terror, it was hard to tell. Tary nodded, unable to speak as the group slowly left their mage, the howls drawing closer. Brennan cursed under his breath before reaching into his bag, pulling out a wax sealed bottle.

"It's... lair beast bait." He said, handing it to Liam. "It works when-"

"Mixed with blood, yes now go!"

Brennan nodded and rushed after the group, dashing to catch up. They rushed into the next clearing. The wolves circled them before sniffing the air, growling and snarling before rushing back into the woods, where they had left Liam. The sound of cursing, shouted and echoing through the forest as Liam did his best to attract the attention of every wolf he could. They had barely made it across the large clearing before the lair shook with a massive detonation. The scared group couldn't help but look back, the massive expanding explosion toppling trees, scattering dirt, rock and pieces of wolf into the air.

"Go!" Brennan shouted, all but dragging Ward forward. "He bought us time, now we need to get to the exit!"

The crew ran, as fast as they could to the entrance segment, running to the small stone plinth that marked the portal. Brennan dashed ahead to it, slapping his hand down on the small stone bulge on the top. He could feel the shift as the portal started to activate, the stone archway slowly growing from the ground.

He turned, the others finally joining him in front of the forming arch. They immediately took defensive positions, Kyra and Marla in the back. They waited, breathing heavily from the all out sprint to the portal. Brennan looked over his shoulder, cursing at how slow the portal was forming.

Before he could comment on it another howl echoed through the segment. This one was alone though, no other wolves joining in the howl. However, it was louder, much louder than any of the previous howls, causing the group to wince and cringe.

“Thats.... That's the howl of the dire wolf that's supposed to be at the end!” Brennan called out. “It shouldn't be out like this... I've never heard of it leaving its segment!”

The trees on the opposite side of the clearing shook, the sound of a barking snarl coming from the area as it got closer and closer. Finally it stepped out into the clearing.

“Oh fuck.” Brennan said, louder than he had intended to. “That's... That's not good”

The massive midnight black wolf stood a foot or two taller than your average man and easily outweighed three. It prowled out of the forest, blood dripping from its jaws as it stopped to look at them. The coat was mostly black, but along the back and sides were orange and blue highlights.

“Is that... dual elemental?” Marla asked, almost whimpering the question out.

“Marla... time for that enhancement spell.” Tary asked, pausing for a moment and turning back to Marla, who was frozen. “Marla!”

The healer yelped and mumbled an agreement, hastily pulling a thin grimoire from where it was clipped on her hip. She opened it and her hand glowed, much brighter than her healing item had done. A large runic circle formed and after a moment everyone else started to glow as well.

“What is it?” Brennan asked as the glow slowly faded.

“Speed and strength!” Marla called out, already putting the book back and pulling out her crossbow.

The dire wolf howled again before charging forward, jaw crackling with electricity. The bolt of lighting shot from its mouth and struck the ground between Ward and Tary, the former getting blasted off his feet. Tary planted his feet and tried to hold his ground, but the massive wolf barreled right through him. He managed to get a few blows in, it's stomach bleeding as it jumped back. Brennan stuck his sword into the ground, cursing to himself as he reached into his satchel and pulled out a seven foot tall spear from its massively expanded interior.

Holding his shield up he charged the wolf, stabbing forward with his spear, using the long length of the weapon to stay out of its reach. The wolf turned, growling and snapping at him, though kept at bay by the spear. To the side, Marla hesitantly stepped forward, healing the worst of Tary's wounds. Almost as if sensing this the wolf's jaws glowed red, smoke billowing

from between its teeth as liquid fire dripped to the ground. It whirled away from Brennan and opened its jaws, a blast of fire raking over the still downed heavy and the healer. Tary, seeing the blast of fire, turned while dropping his ax and shoved Marla as hard as he could, sending her sprawling more than a dozen feet away.

The spray of fire detonated and roiled, a thick black smoke spreading from where it impacted on Tarys hastily brought up shield. The stream of molten roiling spray quickly overwhelmed even the massive shield, dousing the large man with a deluge of fire. He screamed for a few moments before he slumped, dead.

For every moment that the wolf was turned away, Brennan was stabbing at it, cutting it deeply with each thrust, trying desperately to pull its attention away from the leader of the group. He plunged the spear in, and in a final attempt to distract it focused, the spear tip suddenly freezing cold, a blast of ice erupting from its tip and freezing the wolf's haunch. It didn't care though, trading several seemingly grievous wounds to finish off its already downed prey.

Satisfied that it had silenced another diver the wolf turned back to Brennan, once again snapping and lunging at him, the ice on its back haunch shattering away. The dire wolf almost jumped at him, faster than any of the other lesser lair beasts, forcing Brennan to pull up his shield to block the powerful jaws. The wolf's mouth opened wide, somehow managing to grab the entire shield, ripping it off of Brennans arm and tossing it to the side. With it went Brennan's enhanced strength, as well as one of his trump cards. Now without a way to block the direwolf's attack, Brennan dashed back half a dozen feet, shifting his spear to a two handed stance.

Before the wolf could step closer, Ward jumped and slammed one of his swords into its side, managing to bury the foot and a half long sword almost completely to the hand guard. The wolf yowled and snapped at him, driving him back and forcing him to abandon one of his swords. Brennan used the opening to jab at its neck, stabbing into its shoulder instead. He yanked it back out, the wolf snapping at him as he stepped back out of range. The wolf, now stuck between Ward and Brennan, took several steps back, almost hopping backwards. Once clear of the flanking maneuver Ward managed to set up it lunged at the now half disarmed man, all while Brennan scrambled to pick up his shield.

Ward managed to dodged, going under the bite meant to tear out his throat. He sliced the wolf's leg as he ran, Brennan stabbing at the wolf's side again. Dashing back as it whirled around. Ward kept running and managed to get back to Marla and Kyra, the former of which holding her unloaded crossbow, quaking in fear, eyes locked on to the massive wolf.

The archway, having spent the last minute or so pushing from the ground, pulsed behind the healer and the harvester, slowly filling with blue green energy, flaring before finishing its connection. Kyra started dragging Marla towards it as both me and Ward ran to the portal, the massive Wolf pausing for a moment before giving chase. The other back liner helped Kyra drag Marla to the portal, pushing them both through the archway and to the outpost on the other side.

“C’mon!” He shouted to Brennan, waiting for the filler to make it.

“Go! I’m right behind you!”

Ward cursed and jumped through the portal, while Brennan stopped, lifted his shield and with a shout, fired a blast of force out of his shield, smashing the wolf in the face, knocking it to the side. The wolf slowed for a moment, its face bloody and beaten but still angry. Its jaws slowly cracked with electricity, snapping and crackling as it prepared to fire its blast of lightning at the last diver in the lair. With a backward dash Brennan reached the archway, only for the blast of lightning to smash into his chest, driving him through the portal with a flash.

Chapter 4

When Brennan fully awoke he was laying in a bed he only vaguely recognized. When he had first arrived at Primonte he had stayed in one of the Guildhall bedrooms. It was beyond basic, consisting of a bed, a chair next to the bed and a window that faced an alleyway. Nonetheless it had served its purpose when he had first arrived in the city, and now he was waking up in it again.

With a grunt he slowly sat up, only to fall back with a groan. He felt better than he should, considering the amount of lightning he had taken. After a few minutes he pushed himself into a sitting position, leaning back against the headboard of the small bed. As he pushed out from under the blankets he finally noticed the thick bandaging around his chest. He was fiddling with it when a quiet knocking echoed through the room.

“Come in.”

The door opened to show a rather broken looking Marla, her eyes red and swollen.

“Hello Brennan.” She said, her tone empty, not surprising considering the amount of loss she had experienced.

“Hello Marla...” He responded, trailing off as he tried and failed to come up with something to say.

“It’s alright.” She said with a wet, broken sob, her eyes already watering. “You didn’t know them, I understand.”

The heartbroken woman made her way to Brennan’s bed, sitting down in the chair next to it. She struggled for a moment before holding out her hand.

“Let me heal you up some more.” She managed to get out.

Brennan nodded, and the healer leaned forward, one hand on her amulet, the other resting on the sorest spot under his bandages. Her hand glowed and he could feel the energy pushing into him, a dull pulsing that slowly released the tightness he felt in his chest. When she was done she stood, gave Brennan a small watery smile before leaving, not saying another word. As she left she walked past Ward, who was leaning on the door frame. He was looking rough as well, his eyes red. He reached out and put his hand on Marla's shoulder, who stopped and leaned against him for a moment before pulling away and leaving. After she walked out of sight Ward turned back to focus on Brennan.

"I don't know if we'll ever completely recover from this." He said honestly, his hand fiddling with the pommel of his remaining sword. "But Marla and I are done diving. This was... too much."

"I'm sorry." Brennan said, knowing it wasn't enough. "Where will you go?"

"Home. We all come from the same town, we've been friends since we could talk, we..." He explained, losing his voice for a moment before eventually recovering. "Thank you, for helping Marla and me get out at least."

"Of course."

Ward said nothing, pausing for a minute before giving him a single nod and leaving, heading down the hall and out of site. Brennan sat in the bed, looking out into the hall for a few minutes before slowly sliding out of bed and across the room, slowly putting on the under layer for his armor. His chest twinged occasionally but it was minor. When he was almost done getting ready to leave he heard a soft knock from the doorway. He turned to find Kyra standing there, looking around the room.

"I'm glad to see you up." She said, finally looking him in the eye. "How do you feel?"

"Better. I'm grateful Marla hung back long enough to heal me again."

Kyra nodded, watching as Brennan strapped his armor together in an easier to carry bundle before securing his satchel around his shoulder and waist.

"Not going to put your spear away?" She asked hesitantly, eyes looking at my satchel. "I don't think Ward or Marla put it together, but I saw you pull it out."

Brennan froze, looking at Kyra. Eventually she met his look and she held up her hands.

"I'm not going to say anything." She assured him. "I'm a harvester, remember? I know exactly how valuable storage equipment is."

“...Thanks.” He said eventually, after examining her face for a long pause.

“Could... could we talk?” She asked after another long pause. “I’ll pay for a meal if you hear me out?”

For a moment Brennan said nothing, studying her face, wondering what she was thinking. After a while he nodded, picking up his armor and his spear, nodding his head to his shield.

“If you grab that, I know a tavern close by that shouldn’t be too busy right now.”

Kyra nodded and picked up the shield, following Brennan out of the room and down the stairs to the main floor. They headed to the main desk, getting the attention of one of the workers.

“How much for the room.” He asked, already reaching into his satchel.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s covered under your membership.” He responded with an understanding look.

“Right, thank you.”

“Have a good day diver.”

Brennan nodded and made his way through the hall, Kyra in tow behind him. There were quite a few diver teams at the tables, most of them giving them pitying looks as they walked past, or at least a nod. When they were finally out of the building Brennan stopped, took a deep breath of the afternoon air and took a left, heading deeper into the city. The streets were busy, filled with carts, people and horses, going about their business. It took the two divers five minutes to get to their destination. The tavern, a small but well kept building, was marked as the Fishermans Rest by a sign hanging from the front of the building. It depicted a man with a hat over his face, leaning back in his chair, a fishing pole and bucket next to him.

The two entered the tavern, the well lit interior was clean and orderly, with a few tables filled but mostly empty. Brennan leaned his spear by the door, tucking it up with some actual fishing poles. When he was done he turned, just in time to be greeted by a waitress.

“Hello! Oh, Brennan! Welcome, it’s good to see you. Your usual spot in the back?” She asked, a genuine smile on her face.

“Yes, please.” He agreed, before following the woman deeper into the tavern, to a small table tucked up in the corner.

The waitress took a drink order and left, leaving Brennan and Kyra alone at the table. Kyra slid off her pack and leaned it on the side of her chair, leaning Brennan shield on the other side, while Brennan put his armor beside his chair as he sat. Silence covered the two before Kyra finally started talking.

“Have you ever...” She started, faltering at the end. “Was this...”

“The first time I lost someone in a dive?” He asked, Kyra nodding in confirmation. “No. But it's the first time I've been in a lair that deviated from its normal difficulty so much.”

Kyra listened and nodded, fiddling with her fork before the waitress dropped off their drinks and left again, cleaning the tables by the front. They both take a long drink, enjoying their mead.

“I've never seen that lair get even close to that.” Brennan admitted, putting his mug down. “It's the easiest out of the three here. Or it's supposed to be the easiest.”

The table went quiet again, the two divers going over the previous day's hardships.

“I... I've only run two lairs before this.” Kyra finally admitted, after a full two minutes of silence. “I was running the easiest ones I could find, trying to get more experience. I... I couldn't do anything.”

“Harvesters aren't expected to do anything.” Brennan explained. “It's too risky.”

“Why?” She asked. “I feel so useless just watching everything.”

“Well for one thing you killed the wolf who had my arm, that's not useless” Brennan pointed out, showing off the still bandaged arm. “But to answer your question, it's about knowledge versus equipment. When Ward got his hand bit, Marla was able to mostly heal it. He could fight with a slightly damaged hand, but would you be able to harvest the elemental wolves with a hand that kinda works?”

“...No, probably not.” She admitted.

“That's why. A healer can heal with a broken finger, especially if they are just using equipment, a fighter can raise a shield with his weapon hand broken, but a harvester is extremely limited if you can't harvest the difficult parts.”

Brennan paused, biting his cheek before, shaking his head.

“I hate to talk badly about them after what we went through, but Marla isn't the best example of a healer. For one thing she was shooting stuff, which drew their attention to her. Second, there is no point in having a dedicated healer if all she is using is a few potions and a healing item.”

Kyra nodded, looking down at her drink, though she was still nodding along as he talked. Brennan let out a sigh, shaking his head.

“It still shouldn't have been a problem in that lair, it wouldn't have made much of a difference.”

Before Kyra could say anything the waitress came back, gave them the few choices for lunch they had before heading back. Again the two were silent, though it didn't last very long.

“How long have you been a diver?” She asked.

“Almost eight years.” He said, getting a wide eyed look from Kyra. “I lied about my age to a group looking for a pack mule. They handed me a normal shield, a dagger and a pack full of stuff that I wasn't allowed to open. Thankfully I was smart enough to hide what my satchel was, they would have killed me in a lair and left me to rot.”

Kyra chewed her lip for a while longer, before asking what was on her mind.

“What would you suggest I do?”

“Join a group.” He responded simply. “Find some nice protective equipment, maybe some healing equipment, and find a team. A good harvester is worth their weight in gold.”

The woman sagged, looking a bit defeated, before taking a long sip of her drink.

“Is that not an option?”

“No, I just haven't found anyone.” She said vaguely. “Why aren't you part of a group?”

“I move around too much.” He explained.

“Does it have anything to do with your satchel, spear and shield?”

Brennan froze for a moment before forcing himself to move, his hand resting on his bag protectively.

“What do you mean?”

Instead of immediately answering she reached into her shirt and pulled out a small blue gemmed amulet, showing it to him before tucking it back under her shirt.

“This is an identification amulet. Two items per day. It's not perfect, but I could tell there were at least three things the spear could do.” She said quietly. “I was... curious what your

spear could do, since you pulled it out of nowhere and froze the direwolves leg. After I saw what it could do... I couldn't help myself."

"That is a massive invasion of privacy." Brennan said, trying his best not to flip out in anger and panic. "You realize I could report you to the guild? They would likely revoke your membership."

He was mostly bluffing. They would strip her of her membership, if he could prove she did it, which he had no way to do, and even if he did it would probably involve revealing what his equipment could do. Despite that, Kyra still paled considerably, looking at him with her eyes wide and mouth opened.

"I'm sorry, really I was just curious and I won't tell anyone I promise!" She said, starting to panic slightly, her voice getting louder.

"Hey, keep it down." Brennan warned her, looking around and checking to make sure no one was looking their way.

"Sorry... Just please don't report me."

"I won't." He replied. "Was going to have to move after this anyway."

"What? Why?"

"Because, what happened yesterday was a big deal. It will spread around and someone is going to realize I'm here."

"Are... Are you wanted or something?"

"No. If I was wanted the guild would have booted me." He explained, mind starting to wonder how much time he had before he had to leave.

"So what's going on?"

For a moment Brennan didn't answer, instead examining the woman in front of him. He studies her face before speaking.

"Why do you care?" He asked. "What just happened was terrible, but why are you so interested in what's going on with me?"

"I... I have no idea what I'm doing." She admitted, once again looking down at her drink. "My father was a diver, a harvester like me. He taught me everything I know, and when he died... I want to do what he did. He was apparently famous in some circles and... I want to live up to his legacy."

“What was his name?”

“Carter Garner.”

Brennan nodded, about to say something when the waiter brought them their food. A bit of small talk and the denial of refills on their drinks and the two were alone again.

“I recognize the name, which considering I know next to nothing about harvesting says a lot.” He answered. “Does that have anything to do with why you aren't looking for a team?”

“Yeah. I told the first group I worked for and they were ecstatic to have me join them.” She explained, shaking her head. “But they expected me to know what I was doing. I may have a firm handle on harvesting but I don't really know how to fight, or what to do in a lair. They assumed I was lying to them about who I was. They almost left me in the lair.”

“That's unfortunate.” Brennan answered with a frown.

“I explained I was new to the second group, and they assumed I would be rich or have some pull with important people.” She said scoffing and shaking her head. “Bastards must have thought I was an idiot, for what they tried to convince me to do.”

“I... can see that happening. I've met a few groups like that.”

“Yeah...” She said, sighing softly. “Anyway, you seem like you know what your doing, you have really good gear and you don't seem like the type to fuck up like my first two groups. I was hoping... you would let me hang around, partner up maybe.”

“I can't.” He said. “Trust me, you don't want to be connected with me.”

“Did you steal something?” She asked.

“...Yes.”

“Then why aren't you wanted?”

“Because the bastard I stole from doesn't want people to know what I have.” Brennan explained. “He would have to report what I took, or lie. If he lied I would just tell them and they would take it for themselves.”

“What did you take?” She asked. “The satchel? I've never even heard of storage equipment like that.”

“It's not important.” He said, waving her questions off. “What's important is-”

"I don't care."

Kyra cut him off, shocking him speechless for a full fifteen seconds before he finally responded.

"You don't care?" He asked incredulously. "You don't care that I have mercenaries after me, who will most certainly kill anyone I am caught with if they catch me?"

"No." She said simply. "I know it's kinda crazy, but I think you are the right person to teach me how to dive properly, and to partner with."

"I... You would not be saying that if you knew what else I had, why I use crappy equipment."

"Then tell me. If you're right I won't bother you again." She assured him before continuing. "If I'm still here after you tell me then give me a trial run. Just a few dives to show you I can learn and my skills as a harvester."

Brennan stared at her for a long while, mind going through the ins and outs. If she was hoping to steal what he had it wouldn't matter, the book and the bag were soul bound, she would have to kill him to get them. Further if she was just looking for a quick payday she would have just taken the spear and shield. Both were worth a lot. Finally he sighed and nodded.

"Fine. But finish your food, I'm not telling you here."

Chapter 5

It took the two half an hour to finish their food, pay the waitress and head off to Brennan's home, two rooms among many in a boarding house. The walk back was uneventful, though Brennan's long spear got some attention, making him more than a bit nervous. By the time they made their way inside the sun was starting to fall, the late afternoon coming quickly. The muffled sounds of the docks were still audible inside, as it almost always was. Brennan dropped his packed armor and waited for Kyra to follow him in before slowly sliding the spear into his satchel.

After the long spear disappeared into the bag he reached in and pulled out a sword, this one just as basic as the one before. He pulled off the scabbard for his old sword and hooked the new one on, nodding when he was sure it was secure. Done with that he leaned down by his armor, fiddling with the arm and pulling off the bloody and punctured arm piece.

"Take a seat." He said simply, grabbing a rag cloth and wetting it from a small barrel of water.

Kyra nods and sets down his shield, leaving it on his armor before sitting down at the small table in one of two chairs. Brennan sat down in the other, slowly scrubbing the blood off of his slightly damaged armor.

“Thank you for that by the way.” She said, watching him clean the blood. “I have no idea what I would have done...”

“Just glad it didn't get to you and didn't do that much damage to me.” He said, looking back up at her, catching her curious look. “What?”

“I'm waiting for you to explain.”

“Yeah, I'm thinking it through in my head.” He admitted, before focusing back on the piece of armor. “I don't usually use the spear, despite being way better with it, because all of its abilities are really flashy. And I'm trying to draw as little attention to myself as possible.”

“Why?”

“Because Lord Cowan's on the lookout for overpowered divers.” He explained, before shaking his head. “When I was twelve my parents died in a fire that burned my dad's business down. Lord Cowan is the one that ordered it.”

“Oh no!” Kyra gasped, her hand covering her mouth. “I'm so sorry.”

“I stole the satchel and this as payback.” Brennan said, ignoring her pity and reaching into his satchel, pulling out a grimoire. “Not what I really wanted but in the end I came out pretty good.”

The book was disguised in the same way that the satchel was. Extra leather was glued over the cover while the pages were lightly weather by grease and wax. Brennan opened out and paged through to the last spell, one out of only a handful.

“I'm not much of a mage, I don't have the mental discipline. But I do this one pretty well by now.”

He turned the book to Kyra, showing off the last spell in the book, traditionally the first spell the grimoire knew, the one that came with it. Kyra leaned forward and began reading the description, the casting process. It was complicated, as most higher end spells were, more of a ritual than a castable spell. Her eyes widened as she read, slowly understanding what the spell really did.

“There is no way that is right.” She said, voice full of doubt.

“That spell sacrifices a piece of lair equipment and uses the energy to improve a separate piece of the same type.” He confirmed before gesturing to his boots. “When I found these they let me dash a few times a day. Now they can dash once every three seconds. I sacrificed three other boots to do that. But, I had to wait until the team I got it with left town.”

“Why?” Kyra asked again, this time elaborating. “I mean if you just filled for another team...”

“And when they mention my amazing boots in earshot of the old team?” He asked. “I would get hunted down in a week. I like staying in a town long enough to dive in the same lair a few times. This is the longest I've stayed in one place for a while.”

“Why?” She asked for a third time, blushing when Brennan raised an eyebrow. “Sorry, but I did warn you I am really new to this. My dad explained some things but...”

“Some lairs have a tendency to spit out some rewards more than others.” He explained after a sigh. “The one we ran yesterday has a habit of spitting out archery related equipment. Crossbows, arrows, quivers, bows, stuff like that. It's why I like running the same one over and over. More likely to get repeat equipment types so I can combine them.”

“So why do divers travel around to visit different lairs?”

“For a few reasons.” Brennan answered. “If you're trying to arm a team then you need to move around, try different dungeons to get different stuff. The most popular lairs are ones that frequent armor, because everyone needs it. Plus the demand for certain lair beast parts fluctuates and the harder a lair is the better the harvest and equipment you find in it.”

“So that's why Tary was worried when we found the flowers.” She said, nodding in understanding. “That was too big of a reward for that lair.”

“Exactly.” He confirmed before tossing the now red tinged rag into a bin. “We both saw first hand that difficulty can fluctuate at random, but yesterday's lair is known for being on the easier side. Two, maybe three wolves a segment, easy to solve riddles if they even show up, and a lair boss that falls relatively easily if you can flank it. To be honest, I don't know if an elemental boss has ever been seen in that lair, certainly not since I've been here. That said, there are some lairs out there that you and I could run together, by ourselves.”

The two fell into silence, Brennan going over his armor before putting it back with the rest. Kyra fiddled with her amulet for a moment.

“I think you are looking at it the wrong way.” She finally said, looking nervous. “No offense.”

“How so?” He asked, eyebrow raised as he sat back down.

“Well... If you had a team that you trusted, you wouldn't have to worry about the rumor spreading. You could improve everyone's stuff and everyone would be using it. Anyone who isn't an idiot would at least understand the advantage of keeping your secret, if nothing else than for personal gain, although I think there are plenty of people out there who would do it out of loyalty to a friend.”

“And when a mercenary recognizes me? Or a bounty hunter poisons the tankard we are drinking from?” I asked. “You wouldn't be wanted by authorities but you would still be in a lot of danger. Unless of course someone else learns about the book, then we would probably end up wanted by the authorities.”

“And? We are lair divers, what is a little danger to us? A little risk for a great reward?”

Brennan stared at the woman incredulously, slowly realizing she didn't care that he was carrying something like this around.

“I don't think you realize how big of a deal this is.” He said emphatically, his emotions starting to get away from him, not all of them negative. “With the right resources, this could make people invincible! Imagine a corrupt Lord or Lady, buying dozens of pieces of equipment and combining them together!”

“That just means the team will have a second objective.” She said, waving his argument away, seemingly unimpressed. “To keep this grimoire out of anyone's hands but ours.”

“You... You really don't care do you?” He asked. “Not even in the slightest?”

“No. Well I care that this will be part of our partnership.” She said simply, starting to smile a bit. “But all you've done is convince me you're a better partner. I know you are at least slightly ethically driven, and that you've thought everything through. You just need to trust people a little bit more.”

“...Okay.”

The room was quiet for a few seconds while Kyra processed his agreement, her mouth open a little, already preparing her next argument. Brennan could almost visibly see her stop and shift her words around.

“...Wait... really? That's it?” Kyra asked after a long pause. “I thought you were going to argue more than that.”

“Why would I?” He responded, looking down at his hands. “Being a lone filler sucks. Pairing with a harvester with some decent training and good gear will increase what we can ask for. Plus traveling alone is terrible.”

"I... Yeah it is." Kyra agreed, now wearing a bigger smile. "Okay! ... so how do we start?"

"We start by you going back to wherever you're staying." He answered. "I just got zapped by electricity from an elemental lair boss, and my arm still hurts. Marla may have healed me a few times but I still need to do some healing. Go home, rest, decompress and come back here tomorrow."

"...You're not going to pack up and leave are you?" She asked after looking at him suspiciously.

"No, I'm not going to just disappear. I wouldn't need to lie to you to do that." He responded confidently, rolling his eyes. "I would just leave. You couldn't exactly stop me."

Kyra let out a sigh, nodding in agreement before slowly standing, lifting her pack back around her shoulder.

"Okay then. I'll come back tomorrow? Some time between breakfast and lunch?"

Brennan just nodded, and Kyra smiled, turning and heading out. He waited a minute or so before slowly getting up and heading to the door, locking it before resting his forehead on it. The truth was, despite how risky this would be, how much harder it would be to stay low key with another person joining him, when she offered to partner up with him he almost immediately jumped up and agreed.

The last ten years had not been completely solitary, but it had been a close thing. He had made friends occasionally, had companions and groups he filled in for more than one lair. But eventually he had always needed to leave. He had never really slipped up massively enough for people to guess he was affecting lair equipment, though he had slipped up and showed people the massively improved gear he had. That had been a mistake a few times. The spear alone, the fact that it had three abilities meant it was worth a small estate by itself, complete with furnishing. His shield was the same way.

It got people's attention really quickly, and usually not in a good way.

With a sigh he turned back and slowly walked to his bedroom, shutting the door and sliding into his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He let his mind wander over the past few days, frowning when it brought up the day before, the brutal deaths and the loss. He hadn't known the two very well, but they had died while he was a part of their team. They had seemed like good people, and decent divers. Would they still be alive if he had been using his best gear?

He knew, realistically, that it would have made no difference. There had just been too many wolves to take care of, even if he was at his best. And that lair boss had been two powerful, too determined to kill off as many of them as possible.

As the images of savage wolves, lightning and fire infested his mind, Brennan eventually drifted to a troubled and uneasy sleep, one that carried him all the way to the next morning.