

**HIDDEN
CLASS:
PACIFIST**

**VOL. 4
THE UNION**

Cássio Ferreira

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To my dear Ariana

Thank you for your order.
Consider [leaving a review!](#)



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most stories feature characters who go out on violent rampages to enact revenge on the bad guys. However, Roth just keeps sticking to his guns. I like to think there's a little Roth in me and in all of you dear readers. I'm so glad that we could all find each other and follow Roth on this exciting journey.

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Chapter 1

Time was running out. Roth ran with his full might, knowing full well that he was headed in the opposite direction of the Table. As much as he hated disappointing a digital cat or stopping the invasion of evil ones and zeros, life was more important.

That mysterious man's appearance had been a wake-up call. Roth had started this journey in this MMORPG very violently when he was ambushed and tortured by his former friends. In the wake of that day, nothing had been more present in his mind than the need to run away and get back to the real world. But after a few weeks without sleeping and without seeing the light of the true sun, Roth felt it was harder and harder to stay grounded.

Roth had researched several times whether being stuck in a pod for so long would harm his health. A human mind wasn't meant to stay in immersive VR 24-7. For all the publicity the developers put into VR technology being a perfect replacement for sleep, they also advised players to never stay more than 48 hours in the virtual reality environment. Nexus Co. recommended people leave the game and eat their meals in the real world, go for walks, and even sleep. That was ironic, considering they also advertised that the sleep induced by their capsules provided as much rest as the real thing. He wondered what condition he would be in once he got out of his pod.

30 Steps!

Ratan Dash!

Whenever the speed-boosting skills came off cooldown, Roth spammed them to move a little faster. [Ratan Form] would have been

handy here. It was too bad it was on cooldown. The extra dexterity and movement speed would have shortened the journey considerably.

After Drake ordered him to return to Hilsford, he judged the distance between the petrified forest and the next mid-tiered city to be five hours. The trip back to the northwestmost village of the Green Woods was three and a half hours. Between the two, the choice was simple. Roth couldn't believe it. Of the 24 hours given to him by his executioner, four were going to be spent traveling. Worst of all, he was traveling to where he had just left!

H has just transferred 5,000 gold to you.

With this, he had the necessary funds to teleport back to Hilsford. While Roth was stranded in the woods, everyone in the team was working at full throttle in the city, preparing for the move that would hopefully guarantee the guilds' support and protection.

The key to the plan was Roth's latest upgrade to the [Flagbearer] skill. The rest was up to the connections they had built and the little group of friends his crew had put together. He just hoped that it would be enough to escape the clutches of death. As Roth left the petrified forest, he returned to the greenery he had grown accustomed to. The green didn't soothe the black of the shadow of death looming over him.

The first larva of your colony is born.

Leafies have gained +1xp.

Lea, the Leafie queen, tends to the larva.

Roth clenched his teeth. He didn't want to feel marveled or excited about the growth of his treant colony in the small acorn he had in his pocket. No! This was no time for oohs and aahs. This all meant nothing if he didn't survive. This was the time to run single-mindedly toward a goal.

Checking the map, he found he was close to the road. Its bonus speed would hasten his journey. He ran past a bear and a pack of wolves and finally saw the tree line. As he broke through it and saw the road, he was stunned by the commotion. There were hundreds of people walking in line. They were a mix of NPCs and players, with the NPCs taking the center of the formation and players clad in complete sets of matching armor taking the flanks.

This was the busiest traffic Roth had ever seen on these roads, leading from the beginner region to the cities. What was going on? A few of the players guarding the flanks of the line approached, pointing their weapons at Roth and demanding information.

“You with the aliens?”

“Are you a hivie?!”

Roth recoiled, taken aback by the unexpected hostility. “No. I’m just returning to the beginner region for... a quest.” He spat out.

“Don’t cause any trouble for our quest, and we won’t for yours either,” one of the players warned.

“Wait a minute. What’s going on? Why are all these NPCs on the road?”

“You been livin’ under a rock or something? Don’t you know ‘bout the regional event?”

“Well... I’ve heard about it. I’ve been running a dungeon, so I haven’t participated.”

The player studied Roth, trying to gauge whether he was speaking the truth. But as he sensed the rest of the entourage continuing its march, he must have judged that he would save some time if he just gave the answer. “You know that the aliens started by contaminating the slums, right?”

Roth nodded.

“In some cities, they managed to get to the crafting districts, too. The cities’ forces don’t let things escalate more than that. Turns out that each city has these super-duper NPCs called magisters. They step in when things get to a certain point and form a barrier around the citadel and the academic district. No one can break through it.”

“Oh wow,” Roth tried to sound surprised.

“Cool, uh? Some who join the humans get all sorts of quests to accumulate tickets in those sealed-off areas. But the easiest way to get points is to escort NPCs to a safe place.”

“So, are all these from the cities?”

“Very few! They are mostly from the outskirts, running from the hivies. As we travel, more refugees join in.”

Roth looked at the many elderly and children among the marching crowd, and his heart sank. “Look at all those people,” whispered Roth.

“Oh yeah! All fat juicy event points.”

Roth's nose twitched, and he twisted his lips at such a heartless statement. "Well, thank you for the explanation."

"No worries."

Roth ran ahead of the slow crowd. These players had a quest not too different from the one that Roth had gotten with the sheep. If that were true, there would be obstacles down the road, and he didn't want to be caught in the middle of the crossfire. That would rob him of precious time. When he stepped on the road, he got the speed bonus he wanted.

The well-built road makes it easier to travel on it. You have gained a [Swift] buff of +10% running speed.

Resuming his run, Roth couldn't stop thinking about all those people. He felt a little bad about standing Oli up at the Table meeting, but seeing how many more people were suffering because of his inaction broke his heart. He forced himself to continue and soon was ahead of the crowd and alone on the road.

A few minutes ahead, Roth felt someone was watching him. He looked at his speed-boosting skills and, instead of spamming them, decided to save them as a precaution. With each step, the feeling grew. He spared a look at the tree line. Thanks to the [Farsight] skill and the [Creature of the Night] title, he could see the shadows and silhouettes of different players. It was an ambush. Those must be on the alien side.

Roth looked at the system clock and let out a deep sigh. He pretended he hadn't seen anything and kept running. Once he was sure no one was watching, he got ready for the small detour.

Camouflage!

Roth's figure blended seamlessly in the background. It looked like his new ring and earrings were no joke. He doubled back. He ran past the ambush site where players on the alien side were getting ready to attack the column of refugees and was able to find the column in time.

He deactivated his camouflage, surprising a player. Panicked, the player yapped and threw a lightning bolt at Roth.

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"Ouch! That hurts, man!"

Seeing one of their comrades scream and attack an invader, the nearby guards responded.

“It’s an ambush!”

Fireball!

Lightning Strike!

Hammer of Justice!

Shurikens of Hatred!

Seeing all the skills flying at him, Roth had no choice but to use one of his life-saving skills.

Peace Decree!

The field that broke out of Roth halted the column and canceled all skills and attacks.

Null!

Null!

Null!

Null!

Null!

“I just want to talk, guys! I’m not here to hurt you.”

An esper stepped in. Roth guessed that her level was in the low forties. “What do you want?”

“After the road curves, players on the alien side, hivies, are lying in ambush. I just wanted to warn you.”

“Thanks. We appreciate it.”

Before they could say anything else, Roth took his leave. “Goodbye!”

Camouflage!

Roth’s figure disappeared, leaving the players stunned.

“Loo, what class did that guy have?” one of the players asked the esper.

“I can’t tell. It’s weird. He has medic equipment but can go invisible like rogues and has a quarterstaff on his back like a warrior.”

“Anyway, it was nice of him to give us the heads up.”

“Tell everyone to be careful. This might be a good opportunity to earn even more event tickets!”

*

Roth heard the distant sounds of battle behind him as the hivies ambushed the column. Hopefully, no elderly people or children would get hurt. After a few minutes, he received a notification that surprised him.

Thanks to your contribution, the column survives.

+10 righteousness.

Roth felt a warm sensation in his chest, knowing he had contributed to those NPCs being safe. He had only taken a 10-minute detour, so hopefully, that wouldn't make or break his mission. As Roth ran, he got a call from H.

“Hey, Roth,” came the quiet voice from the other side. Instead of making a call from a library, he seemed to be in an inn.

Roth noticed that, compared to last time, H's equipment had received an upgrade. He now had a pair of glasses and seemed like a man who had finally been able to scratch an itch. Roth had noticed how he kept touching his nose and ears, but now those gestures wouldn't be empty anymore. “Hello, H. What's going on?”

“We're getting ready for you. Are you traveling?”

“Yes.”

“Can you run and talk at the same time?”

“I can. I still have two hours before I reach the teleportation gate.”

“Swell. Listen, I want to go through all the notes you have of Antioch with you. The idea is to put together a package enticing enough to have the guilds attend an auction.”

“OK.”

“Send me what you have.”

As Roth circled around a crowd of monkeys blocking the road, he sent H all his notes.

“Hmmm... This is alright. But we need to make some changes.”

“Like what?” asked Roth. He was curious as to what he had done wrong. He had been as thorough as possible.

“For example, when it says here that you're unsure if the equipment bought in Antioch can be used outside. Scratch that.”

“I don’t know, H. I mean... I don’t want to be dishonest.”

H kept talking as if Roth hadn’t said anything. “About the pets. Take out the part where you got your tickets from an epic quest. Just say you can gain tickets through quests.”

“B-but...”

“Share the details about the consumables, but don’t add the part about them not working outside the city.”

“H! I won’t lie!”

“You’re not lying. You’re just being selective in how much information you share.”

“No.”

H took his glasses off, cleaned them, and put them back on. It took him a few seconds to do so. Roth wondered if he had done it to calm himself down. “Tell you what, kid. If you want, AFTER someone buys the package, you can share all of this *honest* information. But put too much stuff in the sales pitch, and you might be giving too much information to the guilds. These are all bright people. If you give them enough pieces of the puzzle, they won’t need to help you anymore. Trust me on this. OK?”

Roth took a deep breath. “I agree. That sounds reasonable.”

“Look at that. You’re growing. Now, the next thing you’ll want to scratch off...”

Chapter 2

With H's help, Roth finished creating a message to send to the guilds. Hopefully, they would bite the bait. Roth and his friends would have to run one final experiment before they could send the message, but they had done all they could for now. SergeantSarg was already waiting for Roth in Hilsford so that they could test his new [Flagbearer] upgrade.

After running for a few hours, Roth returned to where it had all begun.

You have left Verdant Forest. You've entered the Green Woods.

He spotted ragged newbies hunting their first mice in the fields. As he passed them, he got a few adoring looks. Unlike the first time that Roth started playing the game, he resisted the urge to break up the fights. Right now, he was more worried about his survival. Maybe H was right. Maybe he was growing. Not going on a rampage after seeing a mouse getting hurt was a big step for him.

Roth finally arrived at Berrywood. Other than a few blackberry and raspberry bushes at the village entrance, he couldn't see much difference from the other beginning villages he'd visited. He ran straight to the teleport pad.

Before he paid the 5000 gold to go back to Hilsford, he removed his mask and put it back on again so he could assume a new persona. As the mask activated, his facial features were slightly distorted. A new tag appeared over his avatar. This time, the system had called him Bridgefinder3. He was unsure if that was supposed to sound cool. What was so cool about finding a bridge?

He stretched his hand toward the window and looked at his silver ring with a blue gem. He hoped the effect of the items he had looted from the blue caterpillar would be powerful enough to fool any pursuers. The boost it gave to camouflage, at least, was incredible. He could rest assured if it also boosted his [Witness Protection Mask] like that.

His hand hovered over the teleportation controls, trembling. Drake assured him that there were hardly any Pegasus players left in Hilsford. They had moved to nearby cities to aid the alien side in converting as many NPCs as possible.

Hilsford had become the stronghold of the human alliance. The alliance comprised the Krakens, the Ogres, the Basilisks, and the Gorgons. They all had made a pact to fight for the human side and to hunt down the Hive King that had set Green Country and Rock Canyon ablaze. With so many of the top 10 stationed at Hilsford, Roth should be OK. “You’ll be OK, Roth. You’ll be OK,” he mumbled.

Roth confirmed his destination, and in the blink of an eye, he was in Hilsford. All around Roth, people disappeared and appeared as they used the massive teleport pad. He found his bearings and, locating the auction house, ran at full speed toward it.

After he had climbed the steps of the auction house and run past the guards at the doors, he sighed in relief. No one would dare start trouble there. Thankfully, his journey had gone well. Nothing bad had happened. Feeling safer, he looked back at the city.

Met with the sight of the citadel and the busy cobblestone streets, Roth felt a slight sense of nostalgia. It was strange since he hadn’t left a week ago. It was a good feeling. It felt like he had come back home. At the same time, Roth reminded himself that he was still in a capsule designed to entrap him. He walked into the auction house, looking for Sarg.

The auction house was full today. Roth noticed how many players were clad in cool, intricate armor. Some of it was duller and more basic, but there were plenty of silvery sets that matched perfectly. These had to be the Human Defender sets. Things were busier in the city than ever. The influx of higher-level players had made business in Hilsford thrive.

Roth turned left and went to a less occupied part of the auction house. He finally found a familiar face. The man stood straight as a tree, still as a statue. When he saw his friend, Roth felt even safer.

“Sarg!”

Sarg turned around, surprised, and once he realized it was Roth, he gave him a hug. Roth felt a few ribs crack. “Roth. It’s good to see you, boy. Look at you! You keep changing faces!”

“Good to see you too, Sarg. So, what’s the plan?”

“Everything is ready. All that’s left is to test your skill.”

“Very well.”

Sarg pulled out a scroll from his inventory. “Here. This is a general agreement. If it works with this, very well. If not, we have an alternative we can try.”

“I haven’t seen these before,” said Roth.

“This is to mediate agreements between players,” Sarg explained.

No wonder Roth hadn’t seen these before. He mostly interacted with NPCs. “What kind of agreement?”

“For example, if a noob wants to hire a high-level player to carry him, they often sign one of these. Or if players form a party to hunt a wild boss, they can sign a contract about how they will share the loot, and the system imposes a penalty if anyone goes back on their word. It can be a gold fine or, in extreme scenarios, account suspension or deletion. H and Drake already drafted the gist of the agreement. Take a look.”

Roth took the scroll. It was surprisingly heavy. It was made from a parchment that looked old but resistant and durable at the same time. He unrolled the scroll and read it.

Union Collective Agreement

This General Agreement (“Agreement”) is entered into on this day [Insert Date] by and between the following parties:

1st Party:

Pax, SargentSarg, H, ArmlessShark, 14thPete, Emily, Margaret14, HandsomeBenny, DocCharlie, BessieMamma, and others collectively referred to as “Union Management.”

2nd Party:

Signatories, from now on referred to as “Unionized Craftsmen.”

WHEREAS, the Union Syndicate proposes the establishment of an alliance between all Unionized Craftsmen and the Union Collective and

WHEREAS, the Union Collective undertakes to maintain complete neutrality in guild affairs and will not come under the influence of any guild. However, players associated with guilds are welcome to join, provided they refrain from promoting their guild's agenda. The Union Collective retains the right to refuse entry to guilds, organizations, or players.

NOW, THEREFORE, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Alliance Formation

The Union Collective, being represented by the Union Management and the Unionized Craftsmen, hereby form an alliance under the terms and conditions stipulated in this Agreement.

2. Unionized Worker Status

Unionized Craftsmen shall gain the status of Unionized Workers by providing unique insights into their respective professions as described herein.

3. Access to Union Library

The Union Collective shall ensure that all Unionized Craftsmen enjoy unrestricted access to the information regarding their professions in the extensive Union Library. Members who join the Union promise not to divulge information to other parties.

4. Neutrality

The Union Collective shall remain impartial in all guild matters and shall not be influenced by any guild. Players with guild affiliations shall adhere to the rules of this Agreement.

5. Guild Membership

Players who are already in a guild can become Unionized. The Union Collective retains the right to deny entry to guilds, organizations, or players.

6. Union Collective Dummy Guild

While the Union Collective is not a guild, the bonuses granted by a guild's museum are a valuable asset to craftsmen. Therefore, whoever wants to join the Union Collective Dummy Guild, created for the sole purpose of providing stats and bonuses, can do so. Players joining from other guilds are not required to join this dummy guild, neither are the guildless players who seek only to become Unionized.

7. Order Approval and Compensation

Orders submitted to the Union Collective shall be subject to approval by senior members. Compensation for orders shall be in the form of crafting materials to be equally distributed among the participating parties.

8. Consequences for Violations

Unionized Craftsmen hereby acknowledge that the Union Collective takes the privacy and integrity of the organization seriously. Any player found to be in violation of this agreement by leaking information, acting in a manner detrimental to the Union Collective, or attempting to sabotage the organization will be subject to the following consequences:

a. Monetary Penalties: The violator shall be required to pay a fine, not less than 10,000 gold, as compensation for the damage caused to the Union Collective and its members.

b. Account Suspension: Depending on the severity of the violation, the Union Collective reserves the right to recommend the suspension of the violator's account for a specified period to prevent further harm.

c. Account Deletion: In the most severe cases where the violation poses a significant threat to the Union Collective's operations or its members, the Union Collective may choose to recommend the deletion of the violator's account.

d. Guild Banishment: In the event that information that should only be available in the Union Library is stolen by other organizations, they and all their members will be forever banned from joining the Union Collective. Moreover, in the event that a guild tries to steal information from the Union, they will be blacklisted and prevented from placing any orders with the Union Collective.

Determining the consequences for a violation shall be at the sole discretion of the Union Collective. Unionized Craftsmen agree to abide by these consequences as a condition of their membership.

Roth had to give it to the guys; they had drafted an awesome agreement. Asking for a previously unknown piece of information related to crafting in exchange for entering the Union guaranteed that the more numerous the organization grew, the more extensive the library would become.

Additionally, taking orders from players or guilds to craft items and being paid in precious crafting materials would ensure that, even if players focused on crafting and didn't go out to hunt, they could still get their hands on precious loot and drops.

However, the most attractive thing about this type of organization was that it could foster a spirit of cooperation and interchange between craftsmen —many players who focused on crafting loved learning new recipes and new techniques. Having a hub where they could share information freely and advance in their professions was something that would convince many to have the desire to join.

“What do you think, Roth?”

“It looks good. I didn't know we were creating a guild.”

“We are only going to create it because of the museum section. The extra bonuses are too precious to pass on. But no one is forced to join it. It's just a benefit the Union offers.”

“I like it. Good idea. I can get at least two items that can go into the museum. There's [Badger's Great Claw] and [Boar's Great Tusk].”

“Hmmm. Forget the [Badger's Great Claw]. We only want items that grant stats or help with crafting.”

“OK. I'll get a tusk for you as soon as possible.”

“Now, let's test that new skill of yours,” said Sarg.

Roth nodded. Although the organization's rules seemed fine and dandy, only one vital piece was missing. A hook. Something that would make players want to flock toward this organization. They had to be able to provide something that players couldn't find anywhere else.

Information was valuable, but even if the contract forbade unauthorized sharing of intel, players could easily circumvent it by going offline and making a phone call. Handing out resources was enticing, but they would never be able to compare with guilds that invested huge amounts of resources into their members. It had to be something unique, something only the Union could provide.

Thankfully, Roth had just gotten his hands on something precisely like that. Roth opened the details of the upgraded version of his [Flagbearer] skill.

Chapter 3

Flag Bearer (Rare)

Skill description: Your banner represents something greater than yourself. It has become a symbol of prosperity and peace and unites all those bound by a treaty mediated by you.

Skill Effects:

Passive. Allows you to unlock a flag's hidden properties. The deeper the relationship with the factions represented by the flag, the stronger the effects.

Stamp (Epic)

Skill description: Your flag has become a symbol that carries great strength.

Skill effects:

Passive. [Flag Bearer] and [Peace Treaty] are now linked;

Active. You can now stamp documents with your flag's pole;

Those who make an agreement with you gain access to part of your flag's power;

To obtain the flag's blessing, factions must swear not to harm those in a treaty with you.

Pax's Stamp Current Effects:

In exchange for not harming [Alligators], [Snakes], [Ratans], [Badgers], [Boars], [Corvids], [Dwarves], [Foxes], [Merchants], [Treeants], you grant others:

+6 strength;

+7 subterfuge;

+11 dexterity;

+4 intelligence;

+9 wisdom;

+6 charisma;

+5 kg carry capacity;

+5% running speed;

You can use [Ratan Stride]; [Ratan Dash].

Your charisma limits the number of those who can gain your blessing (1 per 10 charisma.) Current number: 12

This was a completely broken skill. Even though he could only pass half the stats he gained from other factions, and there was a limit based on his charisma, this could break the game. Right now, the number of people he could give this blessing to was twelve, but the more charisma he got, the more this number would increase. If he activated [Fox Form] and signed agreements during that time, the number could go up to 70 in no time.

Roth placed the Union contract on the ground. This was it. Depending on whether this worked, he could bait the guilds into saving him. He lifted the pole and smashed it on the scroll. The flag shone, and the form of a little mouse appeared in the corner of the paper. The letters in the agreement rearranged themselves, and Roth read the new line that had appeared in the agreement.

[Write here the players that receive the blessing of Pax's treaties].

Roth wrote Sarg's name, and they both signed it. Roth gulped and watched as Sarg checked his notifications. He smirked and gave him a thumbs up.

"I've received a notification saying I can not harm these factions and received all the stats and skills. The guilds will go wild."

"Does this mean it works?" asked Roth.

"It works!" Sarg shouted in triumph!

"It works! It works!" echoed Roth as he danced alone in the auction house. After a few bold moves, he found that Sarg had stopped celebrating and just stared at him wide-eyed.

"Uuh... Sorry. I got excited."

"Those were some... unforgettable dance moves, son."

“Well, thank you!”

“Cool. If it works, all we have to do is to add this segment to the agreement that H has prepared.” The sergeant waved his hand, selected the text he wanted, and dragged it to the scroll. Letters unfurled in the parchment with the adjustments.

“See how it looks now.”

7. Bonuses in Stats and Skills

The Union Collective acknowledges the exceptional dedication and contributions of its members. In recognition of their outstanding commitment to the Union Collective, a limited number of members may be eligible for bonuses in stats and skills. Eligibility for these bonuses will be determined based on the following criteria:

The number of quests completed.

Donation of rare materials to the Union Collective.

Contribution of flags, or guild items to the Union Collective.

Sharing of precious information.

Referrals of new players who join the Union Collective.

The value of these stat bonuses and the number of individuals who may receive such blessings are subject to change in the future, based on the discretion of the Union Collective.

8. Non-Aggression Pact with Sponsoring Factions

In order to receive the aforementioned bonuses, players must enter into a non-aggression pact with the following factions that sponsor the Union Collective: [Alligators], [Snakes], [Ratans], [Badgers], [Boars], [Corvids], [Dwarves], [Foxes], [Merchants], and [Treeants]. By doing so, players pledge not to harm or engage in hostilities with these factions.

In return for adhering to this non-aggression pact, players shall receive the following stat bonuses:

+6 strength

+7 subterfuge

+11 dexterity

+4 intelligence

+9 wisdom

+6 charisma

+5 kilograms (kg) carry weight

+5% running speed

Furthermore, players who have entered into a non-aggression pact with the aforementioned factions shall have the privilege of utilizing the following skills:

[Ratan Stride]

[Ratan Dash]

These stat bonuses and skills are valuable benefits in appreciation of the cooperative relationship between the Union Collective and its sponsoring factions. Those who harm the factions protected under the terms of this contract will immediately lose these bonuses and face the penalties for violation aforementioned in point 7.

All the aforementioned bonuses are not related in any way to the bonuses granted by joining the dummy guild of the association.

9. Expansion of Non-Aggression Pacts

Unionized Craftsmen hereby acknowledge and understand that the Union Collective reserves the right to enter into agreements with additional factions in the future. Players entering into such agreements with new factions shall be required to adhere to non-aggression pacts with these newly affiliated factions, refraining from harming or engaging in hostilities against them.

The Union Collective shall promptly inform Unionized Craftsmen of any new non-aggression pacts that are established. Upon receiving notice, Unionized Craftsmen are expected to respect and adhere to these agreements.

10. [Write here the players that receive the blessing of Pax's treaties].

“All looks good,” complimented Roth. “So what am I supposed to do now?”

“Now is the time to send the message to the guilds, inviting them to the auction. Tell the guilds that the auction will be held in six hours. That should give you time to host it and for the guilds to run a search and rescue op. Let’s book a private auction room first.”

After they located an NPC that worked for the auction house, Roth booked a private auction room. It cost ten gold. Roth grabbed the message from his notes, added the auction room number, and started shooting messages to all the top guilds that had contacted him when he discovered Antioch.

“Done. What now?”

“The others are waiting for us in the Rolling Hill Inn. Let’s go. It’s time to shake things up.”

*

Galatheel threw a few more [Blue Coals] into the kiln. The fire inside blazed, invigorated by the powerful fuel. He put the lump of

incandescent gray metal back into the kiln and waited patiently for it to reach the right temperature.

When the guild asked him to write a guide on how to forge, and he got to the part describing how he knew the right timing for this part of the forging process, he struggled to put it into words. He just knew. It was a combination of the scent of the fire, the heat of the flame, the color of the heated metal, and the sound it made when he hit it with his hammer. But he knew.

Once the metal hit the sweet spot, he pulled it from the kiln and brought it to his new anvil. It was the reward of one of the most difficult quests in Galatheel's gaming career. He would never have been able to make it were it not for the support of the Ogre guild.

Master Buljard's Anvil (Epic)

Description: An anvil made of starfire metal which was used during most of Master Buljard's career.

Item effects:

Improves chances of achieving a higher grade when crafting;

Reduces the energy spent on hammering skills.

Hopefully, the bonuses that this brand-new anvil granted would be enough for him to get a better crafting rate on the weapon that his guild master had ordered from him. He grabbed his epic-grade hammer and hit the lump with all his strength. Hit after hit, the atoms in the metal aligned. As the hammer hit, he noticed how the anvil absorbed the excess shock, reducing the strain on his hand.

When the metal became too hard to work with, he brought it to the fire again and waited for it to reheat. He had repeated this process countless times to harden the silver steel, and he felt the metal was ready to become a blade.

Once the metal was hot, he brought it back to the anvil and hit it with the hammer, drawing it so it became thinner and longer. He kept returning it to the fire and hammering it to the right shape. The guild master preferred broadswords, so the amount of metal he was working with was considerable, adding to the difficulty of the process.

Once he got the right shape, he flattened the edges. Even though the anvil didn't budge, the cave wasn't handling the pummeling so

well. With each hammer hit, the entire cave shook, making dust rain off the ceiling. He kept hitting the blade again, and again, and again.

He checked his energy levels. Keeping up this usage of hammer skills was taking its toll, and he was almost out. Were it not for his new anvil, there was no way he could have spent this much time in this part of the process. He called his pet, who was sleeping in the corner of the room. The mountain ray flew over to him.

“Rocky, activate [Energy Bond],” he ordered.

The ray injected his tail spike onto Galatheel. Their energy bars merged, and he gained 3000 energy just like that. Reinvigorated with a new dosage of energy, he kept hitting the blade. With each hit, his energy bar came down by a considerable amount.

Without [Master Buljard’s Anvil], he wouldn’t have made it this far. He looked at how much energy he had left and grimaced. He was almost out. Even though he would have liked to keep working the blade, he was forced to move on to the next stop. If his energy bar hit zero, the crafting process would fail, and all these precious materials would go to waste.

Fate of the Forger!

Moment of Brilliance!

Lucky Break!

Coming to the crucial point in the crafting process, he used all the active skills that slightly boosted the chances of success of his crafting or that made it more likely for him to get a higher grade.

He then grabbed the fiery blade and drove it into the oil barrel. This barrel cost a thousand gold but could aid in the quenching process and increase the chance of crafting success. The whole oil was set ablaze. As he pulled it out, he mounted the blade on the pommel he had assembled previously. And then put it into its scabbard.

This scabbard was made from the leather of a rhino wild boss. The pommel was crafted from the rhino’s bones. Drenched in sweat, Galatheel held up the finished sword and waited for the system to calculate his crafting grade.

Congratulations! You’ve successfully crafted [Silver Steel Rhino Broadsword].

+250,000 blacksmith xp.

Silver Steel Rhino Broadsword (Epic).

Crafting Grade: B+.

Two-handed weapon

Item description: A powerful sword crafted by a talented forger with incredible piercing power.

Item effects:

+84% damage;

-17 movement speed;

+23 strength;

+4% crit chance;

+9% crit damage;

+23% piercing damage;

Item skill: [Rhino Ram]. Doubles piercing damage, allowing you to ignore some of the enemy's resistances for two minutes.

Galatheel threw his hands up in frustration. No matter how much preparation he made, he couldn't make an epic sword higher than B. Not even with the help of his new anvil was he able to transcend this bottleneck.

He needed to craft three epic, A-grade treasures, to unlock the title he wanted. When Thrillian, the best blacksmith in the game, taunted him with him the details of the title, the fire of competitiveness in Galatheel's heart was ignited. If only he had more stats, he would get a few more extra hits of the hammer in and succeed. He knew it.

But how could he? He was already level 54. At this level, it took a player weeks to gain a level. He was clad in the best equipment money could buy, and he had the full support of his guild. He had acquired as many titles as he could, but even so, there was still that last abyss to transcend.

He let out a deep sigh. At this rate, it would take him two more months to gain two levels and get the needed stats. He messaged the guild master.

“Hello, guildmaster. I’ve managed to craft a B+ Silver Steel Rhino Broadsword. Please send someone to get it.

“I know I’ve asked you this before, but to start crafting epic A-grade equipment, I need more stats. Can you please procure more consumables or information on titles that will help me? I especially need strength and dexterity.”

The answer came within seconds. It looked like his guildmaster, being a battle freak as he was, was eager to hear from him. “Thank you! I’ll send someone over to get the sword. I’m sorry, Galatheel. I’ve already given you everything I could. If we find anything new that can help, you’ll be the first one to know. For now, keep up the good work.”

Galatheel kicked his anvil hard. He then took a few calming breaths and reviewed his crafting process. If he couldn’t get there with stats, he would just have to perfect his technique. He took a few more ingots of silver steel from his inventory and threw them into the forge. He would make a spear next.

Chapter 4

The Eagle Has Landed!

Goldie became a golden comet that crashed right into the middle of the group of hivies, shaving a huge chunk off their HP and sending them flying. A barrage of crossbow bolts and flashy skills from Mel's colleagues followed, finishing the last remnants of the contaminated NPCs in the fishing village. As her colleagues collected the pile of loot, Mel looked at her newly leveled armor.

[Human Defender Golden Set] has leveled up!

Mel smiled. After this hunt, her armor was level 5, and she had received one more upgrade to its stats.

Her celebration was interrupted by a message. Her mood instantly soured when she saw who the sender was. It was that stupid Roth. He had prodded precious personal information from her and didn't even bother to return the favor. When she read the content of the message itself, she was incensed.

"This should whet your appetite.

Roth.

Attachment: The Riches of Antioch."

"That's it?!" she exclaimed. "No apologies, no nothing?"

Regardless of how hard she wanted to send a message screaming threats at the brute, she still had a job as a guild elder. She opened the attachment and skimmed through it. The more she read, the more her anger dissipated.

The consumables described were insane, and the suits of armor were very powerful. They would make a fortune if they could

monopolize these unique items and recipes and sell them to the common player base.

Additionally there was also this vault thing. Now she understood why Roth had wanted to know her pet grade. The opportunity to customize a pet by using tickets gained from questing would drive the player base mad. Too bad the guide didn't specify what kind of pet it was. But, even if it were a smelly, ugly pet, for Antioch to have pets with an A grade... that place was a gold mine.

A few minutes later, she received a new message.

"Everyone who would like to participate in an auction where free stats and information on Antioch will be available, please come to Hilsford Auction Room #4 at 11 pm."

"Free stats?!" Mel shouted, drawing curious looks from her teammates. She didn't care about the attention, though. How could Roth promise free stats? Did he think she was born yesterday?

Mel looked at the clock wide-eyed. The auction would be in six hours! Didn't he have good manners? The custom was to inform others of important auctions at least a few weeks in advance. Why make such a forceful move? Who did this brat think he was to order around big shots from the top guilds like this?

Even though the promise of free stats sounded too good to be true, there was too much to pass on. She forwarded the message to her boss, and before he even responded, she was already on her way to Hilsford.

Gigantify!

She jumped onto her giant hawk and took off toward the city.

*

Roth regarded each member of their small crew and their new hideout. After Mario's lab was compromised, they held briefings in a small conference room of a shabby inn in the slums that could be rented for a few silver coins. It wasn't a cheap sum, but money wasn't the biggest worry on their minds right now.

Roth tried to hold the tears in as everyone made the final preparations. To see so many good people trying to save him moved him. If he made it through this, he would ensure he would pay back all these people someday.

“All right, everyone. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir!” Came the choir from the soldiers. The sudden shift to silence and the strength in their voice caught Roth by surprise. These old soldiers, led by an old mob captain, were an impressive sight.

“We’ve worked hard on this. Remember. We just don’t want to throw one boulder into a lake. We’re trying to throw multiple pebbles that will ripple and reverberate with each other, spreading through the player base.” Drake turned to Roth. “Roth, are you ready?”

“Ready. And thank you, everyone, for doing this. I’ll pay you back someday.”

“There’s this really expensive restaurant you could take us all to and treat us,” Benny called out, causing a wave of laughter in the group.

“That’s a deal!” agreed Roth.

“Any news from the guilds yet, Roth?” asked the sergeant.

“Only the Krakens. Mel said she’s coming.”

“It’s time to motivate them a little more, then. Get us started, Sarg.”

“One. Sent,” claimed Sarg.

After several seconds, H spoke. “Two. Sent.”

They sent messages to all the craftsmen they had met over the past few weeks. All of them were unfettered by guilds and wanted to join the Union Collective. They had already been told how the organization would work, but as a surprise, some things were left for until now. Only today did they reveal that it was possible to be awarded free stats in this organization.

They spaced each message so that they were several seconds apart from each other. They were mindful of focusing on those online who could instantly react to the announcement. The goal was to shake the forums and the player base as much as possible.

Roth stayed behind, biting his fingernails, worried about whether this would work. The better reaction they could get, the more leverage they would have in their auction with the guilds.

After sending messages to their friends, it was time for stage two. Each crew member posted on the forums, showing off the free stats they had received by joining the Union. They placed these posts two minutes apart from each other.

The first post got one or two reactions, the second five or six. And by the time the last of the posts had been placed on the internet, there were already hundreds of people asking for more information.

“Good. I can see we’re getting some traction. Time to blow this up. H, go for it.”

REGION ANNOUNCEMENT!

Are you a craftsman? Do you want to be free from guild responsibilities and focus on your craft? Then, join the Union Collective, where craftsmen are the real heroes!

Roth shuddered at how H had blown 50,000 gold to make this announcement. It was all the money they got after selling information from the Pegasus Library. The man hadn’t even flinched. If one sold this much gold for real world credits, they could buy a nice apartment. Roth felt bad for holding back information on the library. After this was over, he would share absolutely everything with these people.

“Roth. Start adding the names now.”

Fox Form!

Congratulations! Your charisma has reached 550.

[Well Spoken] has been upgraded to [Grand Persuader].

[Charm] has been upgraded to [Irresistible].

Your strength is under 50.

You’ve lost [Healthy Bones].

Your wisdom is under 100.

You’ve lost [Strategic Thinking].

Your intelligence is under 50.

You’ve lost [Inner Calm].

Your dexterity is under 50.

You’ve lost [Fast Hands].

Your endurance is under 150.

[Horse’s Gallop] has been downgraded to [Cat’s Sprint].

[Stone Skin] has been downgraded to [Bark Skin].

In [Fox Form], the number of players he could grant stats to rose to 57. Roth started adding the players picked by the 14th as good candidates to receive the bonus stats but didn't fill all of the slots. He would need some of them later.

"How did you get the list? Are these the best craftsmen?" asked Roth as he filled their names on the Union contract.

"No. We focused on those that seemed more charismatic or socially active," answered Maggie.

"I see." That was smart. Right now, what they needed was more social reach.

"Mrs. Bessie just messaged me," H shared with everyone, excited. "She's getting multiple messages asking for information on the Union."

"Any guilds?" asked Drake. Everyone leaned in. Catching the guilds' interest was the whole reason behind them doing this.

H grinned from ear to ear. "Oh yeah! It's a huge success!"

Everyone started hugging each other and shouting in celebration.

*

Mrs. Bessie sat in a small coffee shop in Hilsford. If she had known that she could eat whatever she wanted in this gaming world and not put on any weight, she would have joined much, much sooner.

Maggie and Emily had coached her on what she had to do today. She had read her notes on what she had to do many times. This was an important day for her baby, and she would do what she could to help her son.

She felt a tingle of excitement. Before she married Robert, she had worked in many different jobs. She had waitressed, cleaned houses, cared for old people, and worked as a cashier in the supermarket. But after Nathan was born, Robert insisted that he would provide for them and that she could stay home with her children. God bless Robert. He was a good man. A very good man.

After Roth went to jail, she had no choice but to start working again. But it was all menial jobs. She had never worked in a call center like they had her do.

She got the first message. The AI filters the soldiers had installed for her earlier read the message and identified it as a request to join.

She didn't have to do anything. The system automatically sent them a copy of the contract for them to sign.

A counter on her window showed that the Union already had 400 members—another message popped up. A representative from a third-tier guild based in Hilsford had tried to make a video call. In these cases, they received an automatic message saying that they would be contacted soon by one Union representative and for them to make any queries in writing. Those landed in a different folder, which she would respond to later.

What she was waiting for was the big fish. They were the top 100 teams in the game that had the resources to help her family. She answered the call.

“Hello, this is BessieMamma from the Union Collective. How can I help you?”

“Hello, ma'am. I'm with the Street Rats. I'm sure you've heard of us. We have a very talented carpenter in our team. We need you to grant the bonuses that you advertise to them. What do we need to do.”

“Your name, sir?”

“Ratsy.”

“Mr. Ratsy, if your carpenter is interested in becoming a Unionized worker, all they have to do is sign the contract and join in. As for guaranteeing they are awarded free stats, the information is there in the contract as well.” She picked up her notes and read this bit directly from the script.

“The Union Collective acknowledges the exceptional dedication and contributions of its members. In recognition of their outstanding commitment to the Union Collective, a limited number of members may be eligible for bonuses in stats and skills. Eligibility for these bonuses will be determined based on the following criteria:

The number of quests completed.

Donation of rare materials to the Union Collective.

Contribution of flags or guild items to the Union Collective.

Sharing of precious information.

Referrals of new players who join the Union Collective.”

“We're willing to pay 1000 gold.”

“I'm sorry, that is impossible, sir. The Union Collective doesn't care about money. All we care about is crafting. If you are willing to

donate rare materials, flags, or guild items to display in our dummy museum or share valuable recipes or insights into crafting, please put together a proposal and send it out. If your offer is generous enough, we'll consider securing a place for your carpenter."

"2000 gold."

Mrs. Bessie got another notification. There was someone else in line. When it was someone else from the top 100 guilds, she was supposed to just keep them waiting, but this was a representative of the Ogre guild, one of the top 10. She grabbed her notes and read the appropriate sentence from the script.

"Mr. Ratsy, I'm sorry, but I must cut this meeting short. Someone from the Ogres' guild is calling me, and I need to take this. If you have any further inquiries, don't hesitate to call us. Thank you for calling the Union Collective, where craftsmen are the real heroes."

She hung up the call and answered the next caller.

"Hello, this is BessieMamma from the Union Collective. How can I help you?"

"Greetings, madam. My name is BlueFire, and I'm from the Ogre guild."

Chapter 5

Mrs. Bessie studied the man on the screen. He had long brown hair and intelligent blue eyes. The way he spoke showed he knew how handsome he was. Her brows furrowed as the man stared at her for a long, awkward moment.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so.”

The man seemed unsettled. Mrs. Bessie checked a mirror. *Is there something on my face?*

The man shook his head and went to the point. “It has been brought to my attention that you’re offering free stats. How does that work? Are these consumables?”

“No, sir! The free stats we offer are a unique advantage of joining the Union Collective. They have nothing to do with consumables, guild museum bonuses, or flag bonuses. These are unique to us.”

“Our guild is interested to know more. Can I speak to the one who runs the Union?”

“You can talk to Roth directly.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Roth Taylor?”

“That’s right! Didn’t he invite you to the auction already, Mr. BlueFire?”

The man stood speechless for a long time. “That’s where I recognized you from. You’re his...”

“Mother. Yes.”

“I was going to say, sister.”

“Your attempt at flattery is noted,” she said with a smile.

“You have an interesting son, *BessieMamma*.” He said the tag with a smile, now seeing its humor.

“He used to be a handful, but he’s changed a lot. He’s a good boy with a good heart, just like his late father. If you want these free stats, all you have to do is go to the auction and talk to my baby. OK?”

“OK, madam. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

She hung up the phone. This man had to be very observant to be able to tell the similarities between her and her son despite their changed features. Hopefully, he would use some of that intelligence to help her baby.

There was another caller. The filter identified them as being from the Phoenix guild. Mrs. Bessie put on a professional smile and answered the call. “Hello, this is *BessieMamma* from the Union Collective. How can I help you?”

*

“Guys, I just received confirmation from Mrs. Bessie that the Ogres and the Phoenixes are coming to the auction!”

Another round of cheers and celebration went around the room.

“Okay, Drake. So what’s next?”

“Now, all you have to do is to go to the auction.”

“And you guys?”

“We’ll keep working on the Union. You go ahead.”

Even though Drake kept a perfect smile, Roth caught the soldiers exchanging worried looks. Catching the exchange, Roth got a sinking feeling in his stomach. “OK, guys. What is going on? What are you not telling me?”

Drake and the sergeant looked at each other and seemed to reach an unspoken agreement using only their eyes. Drake nodded, and the sergeant stepped up. “Roth, we are all going offline. You’ll have to be alone in the game for now.”

“What do you mean? I thought we were going to get the Union started.”

“We already have. All that’s left is to get new members and have them join us. We can leave your mom to do that. She’s doing a fantastic job.”

“Okay. But why are you leaving?” demanded Roth.

“We can’t guarantee that one of the guilds will step up and save you. We haven’t told you this, but all of us are staying in a hotel in your city.”

“What? But don’t you all live far away? I don’t...”

“In case none of the guilds step up, we will,” said Charlie. His friendly, neighborly tone was gone. He was speaking as a soldier, not a medical man.

Roth felt his heart skip a beat and a knot forming in his throat. “You came to New Lisbon for me?”

“And for that dinner you promised!” tried Benny. This time, no one laughed, and Emily even punched him in the arm.

“Read the room,” Roth heard Emily say to the chef.

“I can’t let you do this. What if Loki has guards on standby? What if he finds out you freed me?”

Drake jumped back into the conversation. “The soldiers will be OK. You can’t go around killing decorated veterans and expect the government to sit quietly. They will be okay.”

The idea of his friends going into that dingy apartment where Wilson had made him enter the pod and being ambushed by mercenaries or assassins was too much for him to handle.

“But... I... You guys... What if...” Roth’s brain went haywire. It wasn’t just that he worried about his friends. Having to wait for hours on end alone, not knowing if his real body was about to be shot or stabbed, was terrifying. He felt the urge to vomit, and the corners of his vision darkened.

Drake grabbed Roth’s shoulder with his iron arm and held it tight. The pain brought Roth back from the spiraling emotions. “Listen to me, Roth. You have to be strong. This is almost over. I want you to go to the auction and do exactly as planned.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can, son.”

“But, Drake, you’ll do a much better job at the auction than I ever would. Am I not always messing up when I talk to the big shots? You said it yourself. I’m slow and stupid.”

“No. Of course not. Listen to me, you’re someone special. Look at all that you’ve done in this place. There’s something about you. You reach people. Even animals and bugs like you. That’s something I don’t have. None of us do.”

“What good does that do? This is just a game.”

“No. For you, it isn’t. We are what we do, Roth. Out there in the real world, or here.”

Roth managed to look up and found that the other soldiers had drawn in closer, and all looked at him with concern.

“You are special, Roth. The guilds must see this in you. Make yourself more than just a number, Roth. Make them see you as a person. Even though they have black hearts that only care about credits, they still have hearts.”

“OK. I’ll try.” As he calmed down, his mental faculties returned to him. “Wait, is that why you’re having my mom answering the guilds’ calls?”

Drake nodded.

“I see. Good. That’s for the best. If she knew about this death sentence, she would be worried sick.”

“You see? How could someone *slow and stupid* see that?”

Roth smiled weakly.

“We need to appeal to their emotions. For that, I want you to put yourself out there. Wait for the guilds reps by the door of the auction. Shake their hands. Look them in the eye. Thank them for coming. Let them see you.”

All this information was making Roth dizzy.

“Remember, we don’t want gold. All we want is to save you, your brothers, and your mother.”

“What about you guys? You guys are putting yourselves in danger. And you’re doing this for a stranger. You shouldn’t, you...”

Maggie spoke up. “Don’t worry about us, brat.”

H added, “The guilds will hesitate to accept taking you and your family in. What will happen if we demand they protect a squad of old soldiers? If they see that even soldiers like us are afraid of Loki, there’s no way they will stick their necks out to save you. Do you get it, Roth?”

“What about Brian?” Roth asked. “He’s still in our house, right?”

“Don’t worry about Brian,” explained Drake. “We have him covered.”

Roth felt dizzy. It was all happening so fast. Pete, the quietest in the group, stood up and walked toward Roth. “You’re already saved. One way or another, you’re already out of that apartment. Get it?”

Roth couldn't hold it anymore and began sobbing. "Thanks, guys. I'll never forget this."

"And don't worry about your family," said Drake, "I'll take care of them."

"Look!" shouted Benny. "We thought it was the sergeant who was interested in Roth's mom. But it looks like it was the captain instead!"

"Shut up, Benny! Me and Bessie have nothing going on," screamed Drake, with a red face.

Roth's ears perked up. "Wait a minute. Bessie? Since when are you on a first-name basis with my mom, Drake?"

The whole crowd started laughing. Roth felt his worries wash away. It was like Pete said. He was already saved. These soldiers sure knew how to lighten the mood.

"Very well, guys. I'll make the finest auction the world has ever seen."

"Now you're talking, boy!" shouted Maggie across the room.

"We'll all log out and get ready to intervene if needed. Even if the auction doesn't work, we still have a few hours to run a rescue operation. Even if they say they'll help us, we'll stay around just in case they go back on their words," declared the sergeant.

"If everything goes well, ask Be... your mother to give one of us a call."

"Thank you for not telling my mother."

"You got it, champ."

Everyone's bodies faded into light, and suddenly, Roth was all alone.

*

Galatheel studied the guild's blacksmithing library, looking for insights he might have missed. The top was a very lonely place. The more one progressed in a profession, the harder it became to make further progress. To worsen it, he was the best blacksmith in the guild. He had no rivals to freely compare notes with.

Being in a guild provided him with the resources that he needed to pursue his passion, but he wished that there would be a free flow of information between craftsmen from different guilds. If he were to share the guild's secrets with craftsmen from other guilds, he would have to pay a fortune to the guild in fines, not to mention being kicked

out of the guild and going on its blacklist. All these agendas and politics stood in his way as a blacksmith more often than he would have liked.

Galatheel received a message from his cousin and opened it. He had joined the game recently, and Galatheel promised to help him as much as possible if he decided to become a blacksmith. He had a knack for it. Perhaps it was something that ran in their family. The message was very simple.

“Hey, cous! What’s up? I’m nearly done with changing races and becoming a thumber.” Galatheel nodded approvingly. Thumbers were one of the best races to pursue crafting. He would have recommended he change into a dwarf, but that was a unique quest he couldn’t share. *“Check this post out. Is this legit? Do you think I should become a Unionized craftsman?”*

“Unionized? What in the world is Kevin talking about?” Galatheel opened the post.

In the forums, he found the hashtag ‘Union’ trending. He selected it and was met with hundreds of posts about a new organization exclusive to craftsmen.

“Union?” He chuckled. As far as he knew, there was only the cyborg Union. He hadn’t heard about a player-made Union before. How would they encourage the players to join? The guilds hogged all the resources!

Galatheel found the most upvoted post. It contained the Union contract. As long as someone signed it, they could become a member. At first, Galatheel saw it as a joke. Once his eyes landed on the part of the contract that required players to exchange one new piece of information to the library to join, he raised an eyebrow.

This was an excellent way of fostering competition and innovation among the craftsmen player base. Even though it would be easy to share something that wasn’t in the Union’s libraries initially, the longer the game went on, the more difficult it would be. If the organization kept growing, in time, only the best craftsmen could join.

Additionally, it was a bold move to stipulate in the comments how guilds could have their members join but not interfere with the Union’s agendas. It made the Union something untainted by guilds and a haven for the common players. Galatheel liked it. He wished someone had thought of this sooner.

Probably someone had but had been squashed by the other guilds. There had been previous attempts at starting craft-only guilds. They would often just become a normal guild after a while. Since many craftsmen also enjoyed hunting, and craftsmen needed to acquire materials for crafting somehow, after a while, the guild would splinter into the normal model for a guild with a team of craftsmen sustained by a team of explorers.

He was sure that would happen with this one, too. But then he came to the end of the contract and read about additional free stats. His eyes almost came out of their sockets. The amount of dexterity and strength was just what he needed to cross the bottleneck he was stuck on.

Guilds gave access to extra stats via the artifacts on display in their museums. The better the guild, the better the artifacts, and the better the stats. Then, extra skills were awarded to guild members through the flags. The assortment of stats that the Ogres granted was incredible, albeit more tailored for warfare.

But to be able to gain stats without being in a guild? This was something impressive. That meant players from different guilds could join this organization and receive exclusive benefits. Although some of the stats were useless to him, dexterity and strength were vital.

He told his cousin, Kevin, to join. Then, he messaged his guild master, requesting permission to join the Union and asking for help in getting these extra stats.

Chapter 6

Loki looked at his character sheet and smiled. At level 78, he was an unparalleled giant among men. At this rate, he would be the first player in the game to reach 3rd class advancement. Last he heard, Jaw-Long hadn't even reached level sixty.

His joy was only soured by the movements of the enemy guilds. Losing Hilsford was regrettable. It was a blade close to his heart. He had expected the guilds to eventually unite, but he wasn't counting on them doing it so quickly. The Krakens had that ColdHand fellow, and the Ogres had BlueFire. These were two men that he would gladly pay mountains of gold to poach. Unfortunately, they were out of his reach. He suspected those two had seen through his movements. Despite their brilliant moves, there was no immediate threat. He would just have to keep building his strength and brace himself for the invasion that was coming.

He felt his legs hurt, and his thoughts turned to the Slayer. He checked his messages to see if Zin had finished him. Nothing. Should he insist? He typed a message simply asking, *"Is it done?"*

A few seconds later, Zin responded, *"Can't leave the game. I suspect the Dragons are planning to ambush you in the Dark Abyss. Will follow up on the lead and complete the IRL mission tomorrow."*

Loki stood up. He had purposefully kept his distance from the sleeping beast that was Jaw-Long. Although individually Loki was now stronger than him, he couldn't deal with the Dragons. That's why he had only targeted areas far from their scope of influence. If Zin had stumbled upon intel suggesting they were about to attack, it was important to act promptly.

"Follow the lead. Report to me as soon as there is news."

Loki then sent a message to Yillian and asked him to activate a code red in their defenses. Although he knew this event would eventually end, he still wasn't done making full use of it. He checked the time and thought of the Slayer. He had waited many months for his end, he could wait one more day.

*

Sergeant Sarg looked out the cracked window of the apartment they had rented. Outside, winter was pummeling the earth with its cold, heavy rains and frigid winds, enveloping the night into the shroud of dark uncertainty.

He spared a look at the crew of old-timers sitting in the living room. He nodded approvingly at how clean and tidy their boots and gear were and how they sat with their backs to a wall facing either a door or a window, alert and prepared in case someone dropped in uninvited.

The sergeant squeezed the stun gun in his hand. Even though he had a quantum dematerializer at home, he had decided to keep the specs of this op non-lethal. Hopefully, this was enough firepower to break that kid out. He would make sure of it. There was no way he'd let this Loki fellow do what they had done to ol' Stuart. He wasn't going to leave this boy behind.

His taut nerves made him abruptly turn toward the short man with a bald head who had approached him and joined him in looking out the window. Sarg had been spending so much time in the game that he was always startled whenever he saw Charlie's bald head. The doctor had ensured his avatar had hair rivaling Rapunzel's.

"It looks like we left the war, but it didn't leave us," Charlie quoted.

The words rang true. "You're right. People say they can't teach old dogs new tricks. They leave out how you can't make old dogs forget old tricks."

"And we are dogs of war," completed the doctor.

"Bloodhounds."

Both smiled. "Let's hope there's no blood tonight, though."

The sergeant nodded.

"Any news from Roth, Sarg?" asked Charlie.

"Nothing so far."

"How long are we going to wait?"

“Two more hours. If by 03:00 we hear nothing, we’re storming that place.”

Charlie rested his hand on the Sergeant’s shoulder for a moment and then returned to his position facing the window.

The sergeant clicked his tongue. The trickiest thing about being a good commanding officer was never losing one’s cool, never admitting how scared or reluctant one was. But that was hard when a squad knew you for decades. Charlie’s little pep talk to distract him was no accident. The troopers felt his apprehension.

How could he not be apprehensive? They had no backup and were away from their turf. Worst of all, he cared about the kid—they all did. And this cursed weather was just like the night Stuart passed.

He strolled toward H and tapped on his shoulder. The man had spent so many years looking at screens and reports that he could hardly see anymore. His glasses were so thick that the guys often joked they could stop a bullet. That didn’t mean he had slowed down, though. He could do stuff that went right over the sergeant’s head by relying on his sense of hearing and the computer’s dictation software. He put the headphones down so that he could hear the sergeant.

“Hey, H. How is the perimeter?”

“The apartment in front of where they’re holding the target and the one below and above are all compromised. I’ve already deployed bugs to deactivate the building’s sensors and cameras.”

“What kind of gear do they have?”

“I found no quantum fluctuations. They probably have soundswords and stun guns.”

“Keep me posted.”

The sergeant returned to the window, looking at the front of the building where the kid was being held. He couldn’t put his finger on the reason for it, but something felt wrong. He had a bad feeling about tonight.

*

“His mother?!” exclaimed Ogre.

Even as they spoke, Ogre and Taran were wreaking havoc in the fishing village.

“That’s right, sir.”

“This kid’s name keeps popping up recently. He’s an interesting character.”

“Do you want us to take him in?”

“Into the guild? Sure! Send him an invite.”

“No. That’s not what I mean. He wants protection in real life.”

“Are you talking about making him a guild elder or a core player? We can’t. We’re tapped out. We have no free places right now.”

BlueFire let out an exasperated sigh. He knew full well about this issue. He had warned his guild leader about it months prior. “He doesn’t want guild shares or a guild elder salary. He just wants a condo and a security detail.”

“That we could arrange, right?”

“Right. But we’re talking about nothing less than a three hundred thousand credit investment a month. Not to talk of the costs of hiring mercs to go save him.”

“That’s too much.”

“Hence my question.”

“The kid is only level 30, right? He isn’t worth such a big investment. We’ll be making a loss. Not to speak of Pegasus. Loki is a pain in the neck. That team of assassins of his is the stuff of nightmares.”

“I’ve heard the rumors.”

“It’s because of thugs like him that we need to spend so much of our money on security. I would rather not get into a life-or-death feud with the man.”

“So what do we do?”

“Try to get Galatheel in that Union thing, at least. He doesn’t stop sending me messages and even threatens to leave the guild if I don’t get him a premium spot. Also, find out how the kid gives free stats and about the new region.”

“And how much are we willing to pay for this?”

Ogre kept swinging his sword as if he were a harvester sickling wheat. “There’s too much we don’t know. You go. You decide, Blue. I trust your judgment.”

“Very well, sir.” BlueFire sighed and stood up from the table where he’d been playing Terramon. It was a quick walk from here to the auction house. It was time to meet Roth Tailor.

*

Roth stood at the door to the auction room and looked at the clock. The auction was scheduled for 23.00. There were 20 minutes left. They had thrown forth as many bones as they could. Hopefully, those would be enough to convince one of the guilds to stick their necks out for him and his friends.

He wasn't sure how much of a difference it would make for him to appear in person. He had already removed his [Witness Protection Mask] and was keeping busy dismissing messages from guilds asking for information on the free stats and reining himself in so he wouldn't start pacing or showing impatience.

Auctions could be automatic and made impersonal through the system. They were going for the absolute opposite of that.

Off around the corner came the first person to arrive. It was a girl. Now that he saw Mel in person, his first impression was how short she was. She had a graceful walk and had her golden brown hair tied up in a ponytail. She walked with poise and confidence, and there was a golden hawk on her shoulders.

"So we finally meet in person!" she said confidently, walking toward him with a beaming smile.

"S-so we do," Roth mumbled. As soon as he did, Roth frowned at how pathetic he sounded. What was up with him? Then it hit him. It had been a long time since he had spoken to a girl his age. No wonder he was lacking in confidence.

The girl seemed to enjoy seeing Roth making a fool of himself.

"And I suppose this is your little sparrow."

Mel's smile faded. "Hawk. H-a-w-k!"

Roth stretched out his big hand toward the hawk. The bird reminded him of the chick he had cared for in prison.

"Wait! Don't! Be care..."

The golden hawk flew off Mel's shoulders and landed on Roth's arm. Roth scratched the bird's head, and it seemed to like him. As soon as he drew his hand away, it gently reached for the hand again with the beak, asking for more.

"Oh, you like it? Your little sparrow is such an affectionate guy!"

"How did you do that? This is the first time Goldie let anyone but me touch him!" she exclaimed.

"Because he's just a tiny little sparrow. Aren't you, baby?"

The hawk issued a series of pitched whistles and piped notes. Roth frowned. He recognized one of the sounds. The ravens also used it when speaking. He ran his fingers through his beard and spared a look at Mel, who had an open mouth and widened eyes as her hawk behaved like a puppy for Roth.

If the logic was the same with wolves and foxes, maybe the hawk spoke some Corvish. Was it OK if he showed this to her? He shrugged. He was very likely going to die soon anyway. It would be wrong not to use this opportunity to impress such a pretty girl.

Turning to the golden hawk, he asked, “Squawk. Caw. Caw?” which in Corvish meant, “Do you speak Corvish!”

Hearing Roth address him in Corvish, the hawk beat his wings excitedly. “Kaw, Kaw, Skuak,” which translated as “I learned at Falconry School.”

Goldie’s accent was slightly edgy, but Roth could still understand him clearly. He sneaked a peek at Mel. The girl’s jaw was touching the floor. Roth chuckled and turned to Goldie.

“My name is Pax. What’s yours?”

“Goldie.”

“I love the golden sheen of your feathers, Goldie. You are such a cool hawk!”

+4 reputation with the golden hawks.

“Are you friends with the corrvids?” The golden hawk stressed some sounds in Corvish a little but spoke the language perfectly otherwise.

“That I am.”

“Who among the crows do you know?”

“I’m friends with Count Crow.” Roth twisted his mouth. “Even though he can be a little annoying at times.”

“He surrre can. He cheats at Terramon all the time.”

“You play the card game?” Roth didn’t know that NPCs also played it.

“A few of us do, every week.”

Roth looked at Mel. Her expression had gone from surprise to annoyance. She wasn’t enjoying seeing her hawk partner getting so chummy with Roth.

He ignored her and kept chatting with the hawk. “By the way, Goldie, Have you heard of the crow emperor?”

Chapter 7

The golden hawk left his arm and jumped over to Mel. Even after landing on Mel's shoulders, he kept flapping his wings.

"Goldie, what's up with you? Why are you acting out like this?" protested Mel.

Goldie just ignored her. "The Crrrow Emperrrrrr! Who hasn't hearrrd of the king of the night sky? He is one of the thrree grrreat birrrds."

It looked like the crow emperor was a big deal. "Cool. Do you know where he lives?"

"Oh, I couldn't. I rreally shouldn't."

"Come on, Goldie. I received an invitation to go see him."

"You what? What an honorrr, human!"

Roth felt his chest puff up with pride. Maybe he was special like Drake said. "The thing is... Count Crow gave me a few riddles to find the location, but I can't figure them out."

"What an honorrr! This means that his darrrk highness trrrreasures yourrr wisdom and wit"

Mel cleared her throat and tapped her feet furiously. She reached for her crossbow while staring daggers at him.

"Maybe we should stop chatting. Your human looks mad."

Hearing this, Goldie turned to Mel, catching her by surprise.

"Goldie, why are you looking at me like that?"

Goldie just pecked her in the face, conveying its displeasure.

"Ouch!"

"She's my human pet. I'm still training her, but she can be quite emotional."

Roth laughed. "You got yourself an excellent friend here, Mel."

Hearing this, Goldie puffed up his feathers and stood a little straighter, making himself look bigger.

“How are you friends with my hawk?” she demanded.

Seeing the girl get so mad made Roth happy for some reason. Even though it was thin ice, he couldn’t resist teasing her a bit more. “Don’t be so mad, Mel. I used to have anger management issues. If you like, I can teach you some techniques to help you learn how to control your temper.”

“You brute! You... Ouch!”

Goldie pecked her again.

“OK, Goldie. I get it. Stop doing that.”

“Thank you for coming, Mel. Why don’t you show yourself in while I wait for the others?”

“How many did you invite?”

“So far, we only have four other confirmed presences. But let’s see how it goes.”

“Fine.” Mel turned her back to him and walked into the auction room. Roth laughed. Something told him that Goldie and Mel were about to quarrel.

Seeing no one else arrive, Roth felt nervous. Good thing Mel had arrived, though. The noise she and Goldie made as they squabbled was a good distraction. A few minutes later, the temperature in the hallway rose. For a moment, Roth wondered whether the pressure he was under made him feel hot or if the Auction House had turned on the heating system for some reason. It wasn’t until he heard the echoes of boots in the corridor that he knew it was the prelude of a newcomer.

Two people walked toward Roth. The one in front was a woman clad in red and silver armor. Two axes hung from her belt, and she had an eyepatch covering one of her eyes.

“Haha. Finally, I meet the guy who has been giving our little Blue a run for his money.”

BlueFire, behind her, remained unperturbed.

“Hello. Roth Taylor. Nice to meet you,” Roth greeted.

“Cyclops.” Turning to her partner, she spoke, “Blue, you weren’t kidding. This guy isn’t afraid of throwing his real name around!”

“Mr. BlueFire,” greeted Roth.

“Roth. It’s an honor to meet you in person. Now, where is that shark friend of yours?” BlueFire asked, as if afraid of running into someone he owed money to.

“He won’t be here today.”

Hearing this, BlueFire smiled radiantly. “That’s too bad! You’re full of surprises, aren’t you, my boy? A Union... a very interesting idea, very interesting, indeed.”

“I’m glad you can see its potential.”

“And how is it that you can award stats beyond what a guild can?”

Roth smiled but didn’t speak.

“It looks like Mr. Shark is a capable teacher. By the way, I must say, Roth, it’s very interesting that you are out here greeting us in person. This is not usually the norm in auctions such as these.”

“I know.”

“And to have your mother answering the phone calls of the top guilds. That’s very interesting too.” BlueFire’s eyes lingered on Roth for a few more moments. “Oh, well. I guess we’ll go in.”

As the door to the auction house opened, the sound of Goldie and Mel’s bickering went up, and he could hear Mel clearly. “Listen to me! That is a bad man! A bad, bad man. I don’t want you to keep bad company like that. Isn’t it enough that you disappear every Friday night to go who knows where?”

BlueFire looked back questioningly at Roth, to which he just shrugged. As the door closed, he let out a snort he couldn’t hold in anymore. In their short conversation, Roth had already learned Goldie had a card game with his friends every week. It looked like Goldie didn’t bother telling Mel where he disappeared off to every Friday.

As the time passed, Roth started to get worried. It wouldn’t be much of an auction if only two guilds decided to attend. The last batch of arrivals came in when there was one minute left. Even though they arrived together and formed a little group, Roth was pretty sure that they represented different guilds.

They all mirrored BlueFire’s surprise as they saw Roth welcoming them to the auction in person by the door.

“Hello. My name is Roth Taylor. Sorry for organizing this auction on such short notice.”

“Greetings. My name is Jaila, and I come on behalf of the Phoenixes.” Roth observed that even though this was a mismatched group of players, the others had still deferred to the woman. No wonder—the Phoenixes were the third most powerful guild in the game.

Jaila seemed to be in her thirties. She wore a simple one-piece dress with two pearl earrings and a pearl necklace. Were it not for everyone else wearing armor and weapons, he wouldn’t have been able to tell she was in a game. She wore attire that could be easily worn to a business meeting in the real world.

“Nice to meet you, Jaila. Thank you for coming.”

“You have me curious. I wanted to see what this Antioch place was about.”

He greeted the Gorgons’ representatives and one of Cerberus’ guild elders. After making sure there wasn’t anyone else. Roth entered the room and headed toward the stage. As he climbed up the stairs, he received a notification.

You have failed to attend the meeting at the Table.

[Vanquish the Darkness] failed.

-100 reputation with Oli, the cat.

-300 reputation with the ratans.

Roth sighed, disappointed. The backlash of missing the appointment was huge. It would be OK. He would make it up to them later. Right now, it was all about making sure he lived long enough to repay them somehow.

Roth stood before a podium and surveyed the attendance for this auction. The audience was very small, but nothing to scoff at. Five of the top ten were represented. These were people with prestige and weight within the most powerful gaming organizations in the world. The wealth these five gaming corporations had could buy countries.

More than that, they were the only ones he was positive weren’t in Loki’s pockets and had enough resources to keep him safe. Roth took a deep breath and pictured his mother. He recalled memories of him playing with his two brothers and then of his conversations with Drake in prison. He had to be strong for them.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the little buzz of conversation quieted down among the small audience. “First of all, I thank you for coming. My gamer’s tag is Pax, and my real name is Roth Taylor. This auction will be different from what you are used to. There’s only one lot for sale, and we want no gold in exchange.”

As Roth mentioned that no gold would be traded, everyone exchanged confused looks. “Believe it or not, as I have told you before, I am currently being held hostage. Loki, the guild leader of Pegasus, hates me and has kept me locked in AstroTerra as a plaything. I’m stuck in a capsule that has no log-out button with my pain settings locked at 100%. I know for a fact that if I don’t do anything about it, he’ll get rid of me in less than 15 hours. I know the address where I’m being held in New Lisbon, and I need to find sanctuary with one of your organizations for me, my brothers, my sister-in-law, my niece, my mother, and my friend, Drake.”

Roth still didn’t know what kind of solution his friends had concocted to keep Brian safe, but he did as he was told and didn’t include him in the list of people to be rescued. Observing the crowd, he noticed that not one of the guild reps even blinked at the mention of his life being ended. He felt some anger bubble up in his chest but didn’t let it show.

“If you bid in this auction, you commit to rescuing me and providing safety for me and my friends for at least a month. If I ask for less than this, I’m sure Loki will go after my loved ones.”

Roth caught a few people frowning or shaking their heads.

“I know this is a very costly endeavor. I don’t expect you to do this forever. Therefore, what I’ll be auctioning today is how long you want to keep me safe. If you bid, you commit yourself to saving me in real life. Remember that you will have less than 15 hours to evacuate us.

“And after the stipulated period of time ends?” asked the representative from Cerberus. He wore blue leather armor, and his voice was so deep that it made some objects in the room reverberate. “Suppose we spend thousands of dollars rescuing you and keeping you in a safe house away from Loki and his goons. What happens when the time is up?”

Roth faced the elder from Cerberus squarely. “Well, I’m sure I have other things to keep you interested in the future. So we can renegotiate things by then.”

The Cerberus representative shook his head. He didn’t believe him.

“Let’s explain what’s included in this lot. Let’s start with Antioch. Antioch can provide permanent bonuses to players’ weight-carrying capacity and offers you a chance to get A-grade pets. It is also a paradise for craftsmen. We’re offering a guide that shows you how to access Antioch and circumvent the imposed ban on trading that the city has on visitors.”

Hearing Roth speak of an unheard obstacle to trade with Antioch, Roth caught BlueFire smiling wolfishly. He seemed to be having fun for some reason.

“As you might have heard, my friends and I have started a new organization today. The Union Collective.”

Some people frowned or sneered. Most of the guilds tried to poach as many talented craftsmen as they could get their hands on. They didn’t want to see the appearance of an organization that gave craftsmen a place to run to other than their arms.

“In this package, we’ll include ten premium Union slots. They will all receive the free stats mentioned in the contract I sent you earlier. Here. This will jog your memory.”

Roth waved his hand, and the list of stats appeared in front of everyone in the room. One could hear a pin drop. Even Goldie was silent.

“I don’t have to say how valuable an opportunity this is for a guild.” Roth paused to let it sink in and waited for someone to ask the question.

“How can you provide so many levels worth of stats?” asked one of the Gorgons.

“We have our secrets.”

“And do the players who get these stats have to be craftsmen?”

“As long as they can fill the contract terms, anyone can become Unionized.”

Roth caught the flare of greed in the eyes of the Gorgons. After seeing so many guilds go crazy for the power truffles that offered ten strength, he knew how badly these guilds wanted these bonuses. First

of all, it wasn't just one type of stat. Also, the amount of dexterity he could provide was considerable. It would help talented craftsmen perform significantly better at crafting or, potentially, cross a threshold that allowed them to have a better stat bonus.

“This is what I have to offer. The auction starts at one month of sanctuary for me and my family.” Roth grabbed the little gavel in the pulpit and hit it, signaling the auction's beginning. “Who would like to get us started?”

Chapter 8

The hesitation in the air was palpable. Roth could see the gears turning in the heads of the guild representatives. They ran the numbers, possibly even consulting with their leaders or colleagues but hadn't placed a bid yet. It wasn't a matter of whether they had the means to save Roth and shield him from Loki, but of whether the benefits outweighed the costs.

Any respectable guild had the means to protect its elders and star players from harm. Safety protocols, such as apartments in secure condos, trustworthy bodyguards and drivers, and other measures, were commonplace in the industry.

Gamers had left their athlete counterparts in the dust decades ago. Their salaries went up to millions of credits, and when more famous players signed a contract with other gaming companies, it wasn't uncommon for it to make the local news.

If guilds couldn't protect their VIPs, the whole pyramid would collapse. These measures were necessary, especially when dealing with unscrupulous guilds like Loki's. However, these safeguards were expensive and only given to top guild members. Guilds didn't run charities. They only provided these perks and safety to whoever was worth their investment.

Roth had pushed the guilds against the wall and was strong-arming them into giving him treatment only afforded to guild elders. And that was when he was only level 30. Additionally, taking Roth in could be seen as a declaration of war against Pegasus. This sort of decision couldn't be made lightly.

Roth's heart thumped heavily. Several seconds had passed, and none of the bidders had raised their hand. Was this it? Were the benefits he was giving out too little? Or was it Loki that was too scary? Maybe the 14th and Drake would have to roll up their sleeves and rescue Roth, in the end. By the looks of it, Roth and his friends were on their own.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The loud noise alarmed Roth. Where was this sound coming from? He paused and looked around. Was it a skill? Was this the signal that he was being forcefully logged out of the pod? He paid attention to the guild representatives and saw no reaction in them. What was this about?

Your pet egg is about to hatch.

Roth looked at the notification. Had the Leafy Queen laid more eggs? He thought she was still nursing the first litter of larvae. Why would the eggs beep anyway? He had only gotten notifications about his pet ant colony so far, never this kind of sound.

Blinding light burst from his inventory bag, and smoke started coming out. The people in attendance stood up, alarmed.

“What is this? Is this part of the auction?” Roth heard Mel ask.

“Blue, this kid is awesome. Look, he's even brought special effects to the auction.”

Roth felt his face burn. What was this? Just as he was trying to make these millionaire organizations take him seriously, his inventory had rebelled and started acting independently. “I'm sorry, everyone. Just give me a moment. Something funky is happening with my inventory. Just bear with me.”

Contrary to his promise, his inventory window opened unbidden, and the machine Mario had fixed for him materialized in his hands, vibrating and glowing red. The beeping sound now could be heard by everyone.

“What in the world is happening?” He turned the machine over but couldn't figure it out.

The guild representatives, all high-ranked players, now stood up from their seats, trying to get a better look at the machine creating this kerfuffle.

“Oh, Blue. This guy is so much fun. Bid so that we can have him for a few months,” begged Cyclops.

“Hush, Cyclops. It’s too soon.”

“Roth, what machine is that? Where did you get it?” asked Mel, voice laced with curiosity.

Another notification appeared before Roth could understand what was happening or answer any of them.

Congratulations! You’ve cloned Oli, the cat.

The Table watches you.

What would you like to call your cloned kitten?

Roth looked at the notification in front of him and gasped. Cloning?! Was that what this machine did? Smoke came out of the machine, and the sphere at its core opened. As the smoke faded, the players in the room let out a collective aah.

“Oh my goodness! It’s so cute!” he heard Jaila say.

“It’s my first time seeing one in the game!”

Roth carefully reached into the sphere and picked up the little furry creature. It had scruffy fur, and its eyes were glued shut. It looked so fragile. At the sight of this baby, it was impossible to feel anything. He held the cute kitten in his arms.

“Aren’t you the cutest thing?” Roth petted the little fur ball and brought it to his chest to keep it warm. “I’ll call you... Lin.”

You’ve named your pet Lin.

+2 affection with Lin.

Lin (Pet)

Pet rating: S+

Lvl. 1

Affection: 2/100

Subterfuge: 5

Skills: [Nine Lives]; [Owner]

Nine Lives (Pet Skill)

Description: Your pet has suffered a special mutation and has nine hearts. Every time it dies, it loses one of its hearts, unlocks a new stat, and gains incredible powers.

Effects:

1st life - No bonus.

If you die, your pet dies. If your pet dies, you die.

Your pet can only respawn eight times. After that, it'll die for good.

Owner (Pet Skill)

Description: Humans don't own cats. Cats own humans.

Effects:

Your pet doesn't occupy a pet slot.

Roth gulped. An S+ grade pet?

“What's its grade?” asked Jaila in a message.

The Phoenix representative's question startled him. It was as if she had read his mind. Other messages came pouring in. All the other guild representatives wanted to know Lin's grade.

“Oh... Sorry, everyone. I did this quest, and this... uh... egg was hatching, and I didn't think it would come out during the auction. Please take your seats, and we'll get back to the auction.”

“Is it B?” probed Jaila in a message.

“Is it A?” tried BlueFire.

Roth was sweating profusely now. If a level A pet was so rare, what would these people do to him if they knew he had an S grade one? He paused. Wasn't he trying to get their attention? Maybe this was what he needed to tip the scales in his favor.

“Everyone, please stop sending me messages. It's just a measly S-plus-grade pet. It's nothing worth stopping this auction for?” Roth bit his lip, hoping he hadn't sounded too cocky.

“Just an S plus? *Just?*” complained Mel loudly. Everyone's eyes turned greedy. This was it. None of these guilds would ever get off his back. Maybe it was for the best that things had worked out this way. At least he'd piqued the guilds' curiosity. He was getting more private messages asking for a glimpse into the pet's stats and skills.

“Please, if you could all take your seats, we can return to the auction. And please stop sending me private messages!”

All exchanged angry looks, more aware of the competition. As everyone returned to their seats, Roth regarded Lin and thought about what Oli would do when he found out he had cloned him. He could see the same fur pattern in Lin, with the grays and the whites. He was

in trouble with the cat burglar, but what could he do? He had never suspected that the cat kept a cloning machine in his garbage!

Additionally, when he gave Mario the gray hair, he never imagined that this was what he would use it for. This wasn't Roth's fault! But none of that mattered now. If he didn't survive, nothing would matter.

"I apologize for this interruption. So, returning to the bidding, we were about to ask who would make an offer-" *BOOM!*

Everyone jolted upright. There was a massive explosion somewhere outside.

What was it now? Roth just didn't seem to be catching a break. *BOOOOOM!* Another large explosion. This one made the whole auction house tremble. *BOOOOOM!* It sounded like there was a natural disaster happening outside, something between an earthquake and a bombardment. The doors to the auction house burst open, and a tiny creature stepped through the doorway.

"MARTYR!" roared Oli. "What have you done?!"

With each step, the tiny cat cracked the floor of the auction house.

"I-I can explain. It's all a big misunderstanding."

Oli approached Roth, showing none of his usual nonchalant relaxedness. This was a cat that had turned into a beast. His fur was all erect, only a sliver of his pupils was visible, and his claws were fully drawn.

"Explain to me what has happened. What has made all my fur stand up like this? You've done something. It's causing ripples all over the Table. What?"

"Meow," came the small whimper from Lin. Oli's ears immediately honed in on the source of the sound, and his eyes fixed on the kitten hidden in Roth's arms. Oli's pupils dilated, his ears drooped, and his fur shrank back down. He sniffed the air and approached Roth.

"Impossible. A kitten."

Roth spared a glance at the big shots he had summoned and saw that they were all petrified, afraid to move a muscle lest they attract the attention of the cat who had just barged in. Outside, explosions kept shaking the city.

Roth worried the guild representatives would be furious with him, but instead, all he could see was fear and respect. They looked like

obedient toddlers in a classroom, not daring to speak. Roth received a message.

“How do you know this NPC? Who are you?” came a private message from BlueFire.

Roth was hopeless. They were going to think that Roth was some kind of big shot. This was all just a big misunderstanding. Roth started writing a message to explain himself to BlueFire but was interrupted by Oli. “Let me hold him,” commanded Oli.

Roth coiled, shielding the kitten. “Will you hurt it? It’s just a baby.”

The cat’s tail made an erratic movement, flushing the frustration at Roth’s comment. Roth studied the cat and saw no violence in its eyes. “Fine. Be gentle. Here.”

Oli grabbed the kitten and smelled it. “It smells just like me.” The cat started licking it, and a deep sound came from him. It was like a pneumatic hammer on a construction site. Then, another similar sound, but higher-pitched, joined in. The cats were purring!

Lin appreciates the bath.

+3 affection.

“Martyr?”

Everyone turned toward the source of the voice. A woman in her fifties in white robes was standing by the door. Even though her sharp facial features and gray hair revealed that she was aged, her skin was flawlessly soft and supple. She stood by the door.

“Magister Mildred!” exclaimed Roth.

“Hello, peacemaker. It looks like you’ve made a commotion with the Table,” she laughed. “They would have leveled the city if I didn’t let them in.”

“HOW DO YOU KNOW A MAGISTER?!” came the messages in capital letters from the guild representatives.

Mildred turned back toward the corridor, “He’s here. Come on in.”

A parade of cats entered the room, stopping the message inflow once again. One was a cat slightly larger than Oli but with long ears and legs. He had never seen anything like it. There was a spring to its step that betrayed swiftness and speed. A panther, black as night, followed it.

After that entered the biggest cat of the group. It had black stripes striking his otherwise orange fur. Unlike Oli, who had a certain playfulness to him, this cat was all hunt and death. Its drooping whiskers and the patches of less pristine fur gave him away as an old tiger, but it sported a warrior's heavy muscles. Whereas Oli and the other cats cracked the marble they walked on, the tiger left powdered sand in his wake. Roth noticed how even Mildred seemed nervous when the tiger passed her. She hadn't revealed any nervousness when the other cats entered but seemed wary of the tiger.

Finally, the last two animals entered together. Even though they were slightly smaller than the tiger, their presence was the most impressive thing Roth had seen in AstroTerra. When they walked in, the air became so thick that Roth felt he could cut it with a knife.

It was a lion and a lioness. The lioness moved with the sway of a huntress, but the lion was a creature that exuded majesty. Its magnificent mane looked like a sea of rolling hills. The moment the lion entered through the door, his presence transformed the auction house into a regal palace.

The hawk on Mel's shoulder flew down to ground level at the sight of the lion, opened its wings, and bowed its head. All of the guild's big shots looked pale before the parade that Roth had gotten started. Oli, too, sensing the lion's presence, kneeled and bowed.

Its black eyes focused on Lin and then on Roth. The lion turned toward the magister who waited by the door. "Mildred, thank you for showing us in." Its voice was deep and strong but pleasant, and it spoke without an accent.

"Not at all, your majesty. You honor us with your presence."

All the cats lowered their heads as the lion passed. He ignored everyone and walked straight toward Roth.

Chapter 9

Roth's worries about his life or death, concern for little Lin, and embarrassment for causing trouble to the top guilds vanished the moment the lion entered the room. He could only see or think about the eyes that looked at him from within that swaying mane.

"Do not worry, peacemaker; King Zion just wants to talk to you," came a telepathic message from Mildred. The message acted like a needle that burst a bubble in Roth's mind. Was she helping him deal with the mental pressure of Zion's gaze?

"Thanks," he sent back.

"But next time you plan to bring Zion's court to my city, a heads up would be nice," she explained.

"Thanks. Sorry about that," he answered in kind.

As Mildred took her leave, the many cats jumped onto the stage and approached Roth with the grace only felines possessed, forming a circle around him. Roth felt as if he was in the middle of a hurricane. Even though the most impressive presence was that of the lion, his flight or fight instincts were all in overdrive. The tiger, in particular, felt dangerous.

"Oli."

"King Zion," greeted Oli, none of the usual cheekiness in his voice.

"And this is the human who stood us up at the Table," spoke King Zion as he sized up Roth.

Even though Roth wanted to speak and apologize, the words didn't come out. He strained his lungs and throat, but they didn't respond. He didn't know if it was just his imagination, but it felt like he couldn't speak because the lion hadn't invited him to do so. Was

this the result of overwhelming charisma? Or was it a game-imposed restriction?

“Let me see the little one,” he commanded Oli. Roth’s heart almost stopped when Oli bit Lin’s head. He wanted to scream, but he held on his voice was still there. He managed to relax when he noticed Oli was just picking Lin up by the scruff of the neck. The lion smelled the baby. Lin, unaffected by the regal presence of King Zion, twisted in protest at the noisy commotion disturbing his sleep. Roth could swear the kitten had just farted. The little payback his pet had delivered made him happy.

“Finally... a tiebreaker.”

[Vanquish the Darkness] has been reactivated.

+100 reputation with Oli.

+500 reputation with the ratans.

A tiebreaker? What did the king mean?

Zion took a deep breath sucking in all the air in the room. Just by breathing, this beast could create hurricanes. The golden king then released all the air he had sucked into his mighty lungs and unleashed a powerful bellowing roar. It was the loudest, most powerful sound that Roth had ever heard. It felt like the moon had crashed on Earth.

Damage numbers in the hundreds of thousands appeared over the guild representatives, all fading into motes of light.

“No!” Roth screamed angrily at the lion. He was too angry to be grateful for getting his voice back. “What did you just do? You killed them?” asked Roth in disbelief.

“It seems that way,” the lion answered.

“Why did you do that?” Roth couldn’t believe his bad luck. Those people were the only ones with the means to ensure his long-term safety! No matter how powerful this NPC was, it was just a computer program. It could do nothing to help him outside or save him from Loki’s assassin.

In response to Roth’s demand for information, the cat with long ears and legs hissed at him, and the lioness snarled.

Startled, Roth spat an apology, “I’m sorry, I mean no disrespect.”

“Sawabi, Nira, peace. He’s at the Table now. He shall speak and be heard.” Turning to Roth, the lion explained calmly, “The Table is

a sacred gathering. They had to go. That was supposed to be a polite request for them to leave us, but I overestimated their strength. You humans are such fragile things.”

Roth looked at the lion, slack-jawed. Was this the lion’s version of a polite request? Roaring people into oblivion? He had made the guild representatives go up in smoke just by speaking. He remembered the explosions he had heard outside. Could the lion’s roars have been what had rocked the city?

The lioness stood up, picked up Lin, and set him comfortably beside her. The kitten, smelling the lioness, woke up and searched desperately for milk. Finding it, he drank contentedly.

Lin has consumed [Lioness Colostrum].

+42 strength;

+81 dexterity;

+20 wisdom;

+13 intelligence;

+56 subterfuge.

[Level up!]

+1 subterfuge.

[Level up!]

+1 subterfuge;

+1 strength.

Roth stared stupefied at the little kitten rascal with its mouth all dirty covered in milk. The kitten let out a little burp at the injection of dozens of stats he had received. Roth was tempted to ask the lioness for a glass of that milk, but he was sure he’d be killed where he stood if he dared. Just for this increase in Lin’s stats, this whole ordeal was already worth it. That provided he survived to see tomorrow.

“I now declare the Table open for proceedings. First order of business. We’ll have the human judged. He has committed the crime of cloning one of the members of the Table.”

The joy at seeing his kitten be fed miracle food all vanished. Roth gulped. “What? Crime? B-but I...?”

“Martyr, you will explain to the Table how you found this kitten.”

What did this mean? Was he on trial? For what? Why in the world was he on trial? And what would happen if he was found guilty? Roth wiped the sweat off his brow and skimmed through the many messages he was receiving.

“Mr. Roth, I would love to know how you know the Tree Hunter. And do not worry, we will keep you safe from the bad man from Pegasus in return for this information,” was the meek request from the guild elder from Cerberus.

“Don’t worry about what the lion did. What is a little gold spent on physiotherapy among friends? When will the auction resume? We have much to discuss,” was the message from the Gorgons.

“Roth! Who are you? How do you know a Magister?! Only our guild leader has had the chance to interact with one, and it was only a brief meeting. And you’re friends with her? What about that lion? Who was it? My hawk has gone nuts. You have to tell me. Come on! Please! Please, tell me!” was the relentless wall of text that came from Mel.

The messages were a breath of fresh air. All wasn’t lost. He had no idea who these cats were. He couldn’t even say they were friends; otherwise, he wouldn’t be standing trial here. As for Magister Mildred, he had only met her once. But the guilds had only seen everyone coming here to chat with him. Being killed by the lion’s roar while Roth remained unscathed only cemented their suspicions that Roth was close with these god-tiered NPCs. At least the guilds were taking him seriously now.

“I will resume the auction shortly,” he messaged back. He turned his attention to the lion, whose tail gently wagged as it patiently waited for the information it demanded.

Roth put on his gamer’s hat. Memories of almost killing Loki and the police showing up at his door rushed through his mind, and he took a deep breath. This was not the first time he had been on a trial, but this time it was different. It would be OK. This time, he knew he was innocent.

“King Zion, I stumbled upon a broken piece of machinery in Oli’s house. I didn’t know what it was, but one of the dwarves told me it was a precious item. He began repairing it, and then an alligator from the Cyborg Union finished fixing it for me.”

“Oli, where did you steal this machine from?”

“I don’t recall,” said the cat dismissively.

“Typical! The *domestic’s* memory inconveniently fails the Table,” chastised the tiger. Oli hissed at the tiger but didn’t explain it any further. Roth grimaced at the cat’s lack of interest. Lin was his clone! He’d found the machine in his house, in his garbage! Was that all it was going to say? He thought they were friends.

“And then?” prompted King Zion.

“The alligator cyborg asked me for a DNA sample, and then I showed him the only one I had. It was a gray hair found by the foxes when someone took one of their sacred tomes. The alligator put the hair into the machine, pressed a few buttons, and a few days later, Lin came out.”

“Shadow, go and verify his story,” commanded the king. The black panther stood up and took off, as fast as lightning, out of the room. As it made it through to the door, Roth heard a few screams and then silence.

*

BlueFire and Cyclops stomped their way toward the auction house. A few adoring looks from guild members and others who had seen videos of their gameplay were thrown their way, but BlueFire ignored them.

He couldn’t believe it—he had died twice on the same day! Why were those cats so hostile? All he and Cyclops saw was a black blur, and they were in the graveyard again. Two levels were no small matter!

He felt someone punch his arm. He played with 20% pain settings on, and it hurt. “Blue! Speak to me!”

“Ouch! What is it, Cy?”

“You spaced out. I hate it when you do that.” Cyclops didn’t have her joking disposition about her anymore. She had shifted gears and now had the stony disposition of a seasoned general. BlueFire could tell she was incensed about her consecutive deaths inside an auction house, no less.

“I’m sorry. What was it you were saying?”

“What do we know about those NPCs?”

BlueFire took a deep breath. What did he know? He didn’t know anything. That’s what. The highest NPC their guild knew about was the giant under the mountain. But after rummaging through the tons of messages, reports, and memos in the guild’s database, there was no

mention of tigers, lions, or panthers—not even of a small cat! There were no felines in AstroTerra, and no one in the Ogres had heard about them either... at least until now.

“We got nothing. What did you think?”

“Both times, I couldn’t react. I felt no danger. None of my life-saving skills triggered,” she said, frustrated.

“How do they compare to the giant?”

“The lion’s on the same level. The tiger is stronger.” Cyclops had the uncanny ability to gauge people’s fighting prowess by looking at them. It wasn’t a skill or a title. It was just her freakish woman’s intuition tempered by several life-or-death battles in the Water Wars. For her to judge the cats’ strength to be this high was unsettling.

“And the magister?”

“The caracal and the cat are slightly weaker than the magister. The panther is at the same level, and the lioness is slightly stronger. This guy is the luckiest duck I’ve seen. How on earth does he know all these unknown powerful NPCs?”

“I don’t know. But it has to be connected to Antioch.”

Cyclops nodded. “We have to take the kid in. He’ll be a good asset to the guild.”

“An expensive one, too.”

“Blue, there’s something you didn’t ask.”

“What?”

“You didn’t ask how strong the kid is.”

BlueFire halted his march and stared at Cyclops. “He’s just level 30.”

“I know.”

Cyclops’ statement intrigued him. He’d forgotten how this was the first time the general had met the boy. “And what do you feel about him?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Cyclops resumed her march, silent for a few moments. “The kid’s special. But his strength is different. It’s as if I feel everyone’s strength as different shades between white and black. I look at you now and see a light gray, and when I looked at the tiger, I saw pitch black.”

It wasn’t the first time she had explained it to him like this. Cyclops was the intuitive type. Sometimes, it was hard for him to understand what she said. “And Roth?”

“That’s what confuses me. When I look at him, it’s like I see blue.”

“Blue?”

“Blue. A very bright blue.”

“I like blue,” said BlueFire.

“You’re not funny, Blue.”

“I’ve been told. Come, let’s go place a bid.”

“You are not going to talk to Ogre?” she asked curiously.

“He told me to do as I see fit. He’s too busy trying to get his armor to level ten.”

“Alright.” Cyclops was already operating the invisible console in front of her. “I’ll summon a search and rescue in New Lisbon. I’ll get in touch with our city law enforcement contacts, too.”

“Careful. That’s Pegasus’ backyard. Don’t rock the boat too much,” warned BlueFire.

“Got it. Oh. And Blue?”

“What?”

“Tell the kid we’re not going anywhere near that auction house until he gives us the all-clear, OK? I’m not feeling like losing a third level.”

Chapter 10

Roth checked the flurry of messages from the guild representatives while he waited for Shadow to return. They were mostly accounts of how the guild reps had come running back to the auction house, only to be sent to the graveyards again. All they saw was a black blur, and they were dead. The consensus among the guild reps was that they would wait far away until Roth could promise them that the auction house was safe.

Roth clenched his teeth and observed the cats, who were now all licking each other or yawning. These NPCs didn't care at all about manners! For them, humans were nothing but a bug they could squash. Were they any different from the guilds that only cared about money? Maybe not. Roth looked at the clock, helpless to move things along. Time was of the essence here. His survival was at stake!

Roth tapped his foot nervously. How long would it take the panther to verify his account? Thankfully, the panther was back in less than ten minutes. Shadow entered through the door as if he had gone out for a stroll and leisurely rejoined the circle.

"The human's story checks out." The panther's voice was hoarse and raspy. "The dwarf, the fox baroness, and the alligator all confirm it." Roth gulped. Had the black panther made it to the sewers and the Green Woods and returned this quickly? What sort of trickery was this? And how had the panther known which fox, alligator cyborg, and dwarf Roth had spoken to?

The black panther made a few more raspy exhalations, which Roth couldn't understand. It looked like they had their own language, too. The Lion responded in kind and then turned to the rest of the table in the human tongue so that Roth could understand, "It appears that

cloning Oli was an unintentional sin,” rumbled the bass voice of the lion.

The tiger stood up.

“Speak, Maudib.”

Even though the tiger was the biggest of the cats, his voice was a soft tenor. “Prohibiting cloning was not a decision that the Table has made lightly in the past. But, nonetheless, we made it knowing that it would lead to our extinction. This is a capital offense. Even though the sin was unintentional, it’s far too grave to overlook. The human should be banished and his cloning device confiscated.”

Sawabi intervened with a growl, and then Shadow. Soon, the conversation in human tongue devolved into a series of roars and vocalizations that shook the building, possibly the city. It looked like the facts had been established, but his sentence was causing disagreement. Why were they taking so long? He didn’t care if they banned him from Hilsford or Green Country. He was planning to go to Sapphira anyway. Roth looked at the clock. When were they going to wrap this up and go home?

After a few moments of discussion, King Zion finally hushed the others into silence and took the reins of the Table. “All have been heard. All in favor of banishing the human from the world of the living?”

Roth gulped. He had misunderstood the cats. It looked like when they spoke of ‘banishment,’ they meant ‘execution.’ Considering how easily they had killed all those guild reps when they referred to killing him with such severity, it had to be more than just a normal death. Could it be something that crippled his account? Roth wasn’t sure whether the [Martyr] title could shield him from these cats’ wrath. If he had been so helpless when the injured Prince Piglet had used [Curse of the Hogs] on him, what kind of curse or penalty could these cats give him?

The tiger, the panther, and the slim feline whose species Roth was yet to discover raised their paws, calling for a harsher sentence. Half of them wanted Roth *banished*.

“All those in favor of acquitting the human?”

Oli, the lioness, and the king raised their paws.

“It’s a tie,” lamented Zion.

Roth witnessed the exchange with interest. Although Zion was called king, he seemed more like a chairman at a board meeting, with no power to make decisions independently. Roth sighed in relief at hearing that there had been a tie. But then he realized he didn't know whether he should feel relieved. How did the cats settle ties?

“We'll hear everyone again and call for a new vote.”

Another round of roars and violent sounds followed. Roth guessed that the different cats were arguing about what they should do. Being in the middle of a roaring contest was making Roth a little dizzy. It looked like it wasn't all bad, though. After a few minutes of this, Roth got a notification.

You start making sense of the sounds around you.

Progress in learning Felinian: 1%.

It had been a while since he got this kind of notification! His [Polyglot] title had kicked in and triggered learning the cats' language. Only one percent of the language didn't help him make out anything in the conversation, but once the progress bar appeared, it slowly began growing. By the time this round of discussion ended, the progress bar was sitting at three percent.

The lion gave a particularly short roar that quieted the others. Then, a show of paws was called. Oli, Sawabi, and Zion voted for Roth's forgiveness, while Maudib, Shadow, and Nira were against it. They resumed the roaring contest. This was not going to end anytime soon. Roth looked at the clock. Now, his whole back was drenched in sweat. This cursed condo meeting was stuck in an infinite loop! At this rate, he would be stuck here forever.

*

It was the fourth round of discussion, and Roth was starting to make out loose words in the arguments.

You start understanding more of what the cats say.

Progress in learning Felinian: 9%.

“Roar, chuff, growl, roar, human, chuff, Lin!” exclaimed Nira.

“Meow, innocent, grunt, hiss, fault, hiss,” responded Oli.

It was all jibber-jabber to him since he could do nothing about it. Still, he tried to make out as much as possible about this exchange. There had to be something he could do to expedite things.

Zion spoke, and Roth picked up what could be vital information.

“Roar, growl, tiebreaker, roar.”

Hearing the word *tiebreaker*, Roth paused. When Zion first saw Lin, he had called him a tiebreaker. At the time, Roth hadn't understood what the lion meant. But after seeing how the Table worked, he understood why they needed a tiebreaker so badly. Assuming that cats were a dying breed, as Maudib had mentioned, these could very well be the last six cats left in this world.

Gears turned in Roth's head as he puzzled together all the hints he was given. The cats had given him all the clues. All of these high-end NPCs had come out here in person because of Lin's birth. They would only do that if the kitten's birth meant a lot to them. Yes! That could be it! Finally, Roth saw some light at the end of the tunnel.

“Silence!” roared Zion. “Growl, growl, grunt, vote, human.”

Roth had to do something; otherwise, these cats would sit roaring all day. “Excuse me?”

All the cats turned to him, annoyed. “What?”

“Does Lin get a vote?”

“No. He does not,” spoke the tiger. “He's a kitten.”

“He does,” countered Sawabi. “The Table statutes are clear. All cats get a vote. Kittens are not excluded.”

Unlike when discussing his innocence, the tiger promptly accepted Sawabi's argument. “You speak the truth, Sawabi. If the kitten wants to vote, it can.” An evil grin came into the tiger's features. Roth had a sinking feeling in his stomach. The kitten only knew how to burp and poop. How was he going to take the initiative to vote for his owner? No. He couldn't leave it at that.

Roth cleared his throat and went for it. “Since Lin is too small, and I'm Lin's guardian. Can I vote for him?”

“How dare you, human! This is the Table! A sacred place!” Maudib immediately protested.

“But he is the kitten's guardian,” protested Oli.

“Shush, domestic, roar, roar, roar.”

The discussion soon shifted to Felinian. The argument that followed made previous discussions feel like whispers. Zion had to

put the hammer down to regain control of the gathering. “The statutes are clear. Each member of the pride can vote for themselves and their kittens. The human is not a pride member, but his kitten is. He can vote for Lin, but not for himself.”

Maudib tried to protest, “But King Zion, the statutes here don’t encompass the possibility of a human guardian voting for a kitten.”

“There’s a precedent,” interrupted Oli. “Bergelmir accompanied me to the Table once. His voice was heard in the Table.”

“But this human is a criminal. He...”

Zion roared fiercely at the tiger, giving him pause. “I won’t have any cat go against the statutes of the Table. Oli speaks the truth. If his old master was heard, so will Lin’s.”

The tiger locked eyes with Zion briefly but finally looked away. “Fine,” he spat.

“Anyone else who dares to refute the statutes and precedents of the Table?”

All the cats looked down. Not one dared to look Zion in the eye.

“Let us call a new vote then. All those in favor of banishing the human?” Shadow, Maudib, and Nira raised their paws.

“All against it?” Zion, Oli, and Sawabi raised their paws. Roth walked toward Sawabi, gently took Lin away from her, and raised its paw.

“The Table forgives the human.”

Using wit and insight, you can sway the vote of the Table.

+3 charisma

“But Zion, the machine! At the very least this machine has to be confiscated and entrusted to the Table,” protested Maudib.

Another round of roars echoed in the auction room. After a bout of discussion between the lion and the tiger, the lion turned to Roth. “Human, do you promise not to clone any more cats?” asked Zion, turning to Roth, intensely.

Roth didn’t want to cause any more trouble than he had. “I so swear.”

“There. It’s done, Maudib. He won’t clone any more Table members. He’ll keep the machine.”

The tiger stared at Roth so intensely that he felt he would catch fire. It was terrifying. Roth felt as if he were a steak on the tiger’s plate.

At the same time, he felt somewhat relieved. Finally, he could wrap things up here and return to his auction. Zion's next words soon burst his bubble, though.

"Now, it is time to discuss the next order of business. Another race seeks to usurp us as the apex predators." Turning to Roth, he continued, "Human. I believe you have something you wish to show us."

Roth slumped his shoulders. When was this Table going to end? He had better stuff to do. Sighing, Roth opened his inventory and grabbed the black egg. As he did, the surrounding cats let out some hisses and roars. Roth noticed that several of them had drawn their claws.

"Such vitality," commented Shadow.

"What a nasty smell," added Sawabi.

"This is a plague that fell from the heavens and, if allowed to grow unimpeded, can scare away all our game and make prey scarce. What does the Table suggest we do?"

Maudib was the first to speak. "Even though this lifeform is repugnant, I don't see why the Table has to interfere. Let the circle of life turn its wheel. Whatever is left standing will be edible."

"This race doesn't belong to earth. I say we destroy them all," suggested Sawabi.

"Why don't I go in?" proposed Oli. "I can go there and steal all their hearts away. Literally."

Roth shuddered at Oli's violence but listened to the cats' opinions with interest. Drake was right. This quest would play a part in the regional event. After all cats had spoken, Zion's eyes rested on Roth.

"Lin's guardian, what do you have to say?"

All the cats turned to him.

"M-me?" mumbled Roth.

"Yes. You're here representing the kitten. You have a say."

Roth hadn't expected it to turn out like this. Here he was, in a gathering of some powerful NPCs, being asked for his opinion on what direction a regional event should take. This would impact millions of players and NPCs. He had to think quickly. What should he do? Did he want to get himself involved? Did he want to do something to help the humans along? Or did he want to do something to harm Loki?

He didn't even know much about how the event was going and who was winning. He didn't even know just how Pegasus was involved in it. All he knew was what he had seen in the city's sewers. He remembered seeing the oozing ratans and the terrified pups hiding in the nest. He remembered the constrictors holding an infected snake and sacrificing themselves to let the gatorbot end it. He also thought of the column of refugees he'd seen on his way to Hilsford. This event was causing a lot of suffering to the game's NPCs. Should he ask the cats to blast them all into oblivion?

Then, Roth paused, thinking about all the guilt from throwing that grenade in the sewers. He wished Drake and the others were online to ask them for an opinion. What should he do? He took a deep breath and decided to speak from his heart.

Chapter 11

Roth looked into the eyes of each of the cats and began, “I have seen what these parasitoids can do if they spread. Trust me. It’s not pretty. I can see that some of you don’t want to get involved in this at all. “ Roth glanced at the tiger, who showed him its teeth in response. “Some of you want to dive head-on into this conflict.” Now, he looked at Oli, who showed no reaction. “As for me, all I want is for this war to end quickly. If you, powerful as you are, can help this conflict end with as few casualties as possible, I think you must do so.”

“So you want the Table to kill off these creatures?”

“I don’t want anything to be *killed off*.”

“What do you want then?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that I want peace.”

After Roth said it, he realized the last remark wasn’t just about the war with the alien parasites. He felt Zion’s heavy gaze on him for a long time. The lion then turned to the other cats.

“The proposition is to move forward this war’s inevitable conclusion. All those in favor?”

All the Table members exchanged looks and, one by one, raised their paws. Roth also helped little sleeping Lin raise his paw.

You’ve made a proposition that every single member of the Table accepts.

+10 righteousness;

+40 nature affinity;

+10 reputation with the Table.

Roth was impressed by the boost to his nature affinity. Getting all these cats to agree on something was a big deal.

“All are in agreement. It’s been a long time since this last happened,” commented Zion. “So be it. The Table will make it so that peace comes sooner.”

Zion bellowed a roar, and all the other cats joined him. They weren’t saying anything in particular. This was a roar made for the sake of roaring alone and marking the importance of the decision.

King Zion stood up and walked toward Roth. Seeing such a powerful animal head toward him like this made his heart race. Were it not for the cats telling him he had been acquitted, he wouldn’t fight the instinct telling his legs to run in the opposite direction.

The lion approached and exhaled on Roth. The breath was warm and moist but, thankfully, didn’t stink as Roth assumed it would. As Zion’s breath landed on him, his light affinity responded, and his skin began glowing. After a few moments, it went back to normal.

You’ve temporarily learned [Lion’s Breath].

Lion’s Breath (Legendary)

Description: You can realign the atoms in the air and create a wormhole. King Zion has loaned this skill to you temporarily.

Effects:

Active. Opens a portal that leads to the Hive King;

One-time use;

Up to 100 players can use the portal;

???

???

This was the first time that Roth saw a legendary skill. After reading its description, he realized how the cats moved so fast. They could open portals! Roth furrowed his brow as he saw the interrogation marks. Why didn’t the skill show its cooldown or energy cost? Was this skill way too powerful for someone of this level and had been partially locked? After receiving the skill, the quest received an update.

[Vanquish the Darkness] has been updated to [Surgically Remove the Darkness].

Surgically Remove the Darkness

After you've shown a parasitoid egg to the Table and expressed your wish for peace, the Table extends a helping hand.

Objectives:

Lead a team of players to hunt down the Hive King.

Roth felt butterflies in his stomach as he read the quest's objective. "Are you telling me to lead a troop of players to hunt the Hive King?"

The king nodded.

"But this is not what I signed up for. I'm a peacemaker! I don't harm others."

"What did you sign up for then?" asked Zion.

Roth noted how the other cats recoiled at the tone in the king's voice. What was up with them? He was just asking a question! "I signed up for there to be peace."

"Don't you want the conflict to end quicker?"

"Well, yes."

"Do you want to drag out this war? To make it so that one side has to pay for every step they take on the battlefield, to spend many days in muddy trenches soaked in blood?"

"No, but..."

"Do you want the Hive King and the humans to send out their troops to fight in battlefields where they just become numbers while they stay as far away as possible from each other?" the lion's voice became graver and mightier with each question.

"Of course not."

"Then accept the gift, and quiet down, kitten!" roared the king. "You are a coward! You ask for peace but fear letting war run to its bitter end. Let them fight and finish their business."

Roth stared speechless at the king. It looks like he had angered the lion. "But I thought you would step in and..."

"You said you didn't want the Table to kill off anything," riposted King Zion. "We merely acted by what you asked."

While Roth recovered from being reprimanded by Zion, the lioness stepped in. “Martyr, this way, we don’t get ourselves too involved, and the conflict will end more quickly.”

“But beware, human. The fluctuations we’ve been feeling in the Dark Abyss indicate that the enemy has grown powerful,” added Shadow.

“Thank you,” mumbled Roth, embarrassed after being chastised by the king.

“One last thing,” said the lion. “The egg.”

Roth threw the cantaloupe-sized egg to the lion, but in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

You’ve reduced a parasitoid egg to smithereens.

+30 light affinity;

+10 righteousness.

Roth couldn’t catch any movement and didn’t know who did it. Were it not for the notification he received, he would have doubted that the egg really was gone.

“I declare the Table closed. We will reconvene again on the next moon,” the lion declared. The cats headed toward the door.

“Where?” asked Roth.

“Just follow the compass. We won’t be coming to meet you every single time,” explained Sawabi. Even as she did, the other cats were already leaving. Maudib was already out the door.

“And what if I don’t show up?”

“Well, we’ll come to meet you then. But you won’t like it,” spoke King Zion.

Hearing the lion’s threat, Roth paled. “Very well. Thank you all for your trust.”

All the cats were gone as quickly as they had appeared. The only one left in the room was Oli. He was licking Lin and smelling him. Roth watched the usually apathetic cat shower love on the kitten.

“Are you mad at me for accidentally cloning you?” asked Roth.

“How can I stay mad after seeing this little furball? It’s okay. Even though we’re the same, we’ll be different.”

“And is that a good or a bad thing?”

“Time will tell.”

Roth was having trouble figuring out what Oli was thinking. He pressed, “What will make Lin different?”

“You will. I had a master. He’ll have you.” Oli jumped off the stage. “I’ll see you around, human. Make sure you use the opportunity the king granted you. Otherwise, this war will last for a very long time.” In a blink of an eye, Oli had left, too.

After the cats left, Roth realized how heavy the air had been. Only now he could breathe comfortably. Or could it be that it was his imagination, and he was just nervous about how this had delayed the auction for his freedom?

Right now, the priority was to call the guilds. He sent them a message saying the coast was clear and they could come without being randomly killed by one of the cats.

While Roth waited, he thought about the last part of the Table meeting. This was not the outcome he expected. Roth recalled King Zion’s words to him and felt his cheeks burn. Had he really been that out of place? Was he too naive? What was he expecting? For the cats to step in like a primary school teacher breaking up a fight between two naughty kids? That wasn’t going to work.

He then looked at his new skill. Was this portal thing the best way to solve the problem? It’s true that if the guilds could hunt the Hive King down, there would be peace. But at the same time, did he want the guilds to do to this alien creature what the treeants had done to the blue caterpillar? He shuddered at the memory of the squirming illusionist being torn to shreds by the treeant soldiers.

On the other hand, bringing forward this battle could prevent many deaths. Instead of dragging millions into the conflict, only a few hundred would settle the matter. Roth wiped the sweat off his forehead. The battle between the Hive King and the guilds would happen sooner or later. All he was doing was making it happen quickly. Even though he didn’t enjoy the idea of arranging a battlefield for them to settle their differences, King Zion was right. It was the best solution.

As Roth made a decision about whether to tell the guilds about the portal, the Cerberus guild elder entered the room. He peeked around the doorway to ensure the terrible, scary cats were gone. Realizing he was again the most powerful person in the room, he smiled, relaxed, and headed toward Roth in large strides.

“Mr. Manny, welcome back,” greeted Roth amicably.

“You are a surprising fellow,” the representative of Cerberus said. “Not only do you know the cat burglar, but also the tree hunter.”

“You know Oli?”

“Our guild leader has done a quest that made him cross paths with it. Nasty little pest. He steals what he wants, and you can do nothing about it.”

Roth laughed. “That’s Oli.”

“Anyway, Roth, I have to say: I’m impressed.”

Well, then show it when you bid for my freedom, thought Roth. Outwardly, though, he maintained a diplomatic smile. “Thank you for your compliment. Now, please take your seat. We’ll resume the auction.”

Roth climbed the stage to ensure that others who arrived didn’t come and chit-chat with him. He wanted to resume the auction as quickly as possible. He watched from behind the pulpit as BlueFire and Cyclops came in, then Mel, Jaila, and finally the Gorgons. Although none of them had been impolite to him when they had first arrived, Roth could see a new level of respect in their eyes. They were taking him more seriously now.

As soon as all had sat down, Roth picked up where they had left off. “Well, before everything else, I apologize for this interruption. I just had to settle a small matter with some good friends. They keep dropping in unannounced like this. You know how it is with friends. Who’s going to send the king of all predators away? Haha.” Roth cringed at how obvious his humble brag sounded. “Before we return to where we were when the auction was interrupted, I have to announce that I have a new listing to add to this auction.”

Roth didn’t miss the eager look on the guild representatives’ faces. All of them thought that it was something related to his visitors. They weren’t wrong.

“I can open a portal whenever I want that leads right to the Hive King’s doorstep.” Roth was sure he would hear a pin drop in the room. Even Lin’s tiny breaths sounded loud right now. “I’ll auction front-row seats on the expedition to kill the Hive King. I can’t stress enough how many rewards there must be for hunting it.”

He saw some nervous looks, fidgeting fingers, and feet tapping in the crowd.

“I have 99 seats to offer. And I am willing to give all of them away to the one guild that sets me free.”

Immediately, screams of protest rang out in the room. “Why don’t you split them? That way, all of us can bid.”

“I don’t care for splitting it equally, ladies and gentlemen,” answered Roth, annoyed. “All I want is to make a big juicy package that warrants me and my loved ones as many days of safety as possible. So be it if the guild that secures all the slots in this expedition wants to sell them off to other guilds. All I care about is keeping my family safe.”

Guilds were so used to diplomacy and stepping on eggshells that Roth’s blunt remark caught them unguarded. Some of the people in attendance exchanged embarrassed looks. He was sick of seeing these people only care about profit and not his welfare.

Making an effort to put a warm smile back on his face, he continued, “So, in sum, we’re selling ten exclusive slots at the Union Collective, granting several levels worth of stats, access to Antioch, a new and unexplored world region, and, finally ninety-nine slots to hunt down the Hive King. Do I hear 30 days?”

Chapter 12

Roth didn't have to wait this time around. As soon as the bidding started, BlueFire raised his hand. Roth fought a tear that threatened to form in the corner of his eye. He had just been given a new breath of fresh air. If at least one of them was willing to shield him and his family for a month, he would be OK. This was no time to break down crying, though.

"Do I hear 35?" Roth forced himself to shout.

The representative from the Phoenixes raised their hand.

"40," screamed Manny.

"45," Mel spoke up.

It was an otherworldly auction where people bid days of human life instead of money. Roth's joy at being saved quickly dissolved into disgust. How sad that he had to buy his life like this.

The bids kept going up by a factor of five. Once the bidding got to 80 days, things slowed down. Only the Ogres and the Phoenixes were still fighting for the prize.

"85," said BlueFire, without batting an eye.

Jaila countered, "90".

"95."

"100," said Jaila hesitantly.

Sensing hesitation in the only bidder left standing, BlueFire spoke up confidently. "120!"

No one else raised their hand.

"Going once, going twice, sold. Thank you, Ogres. Thank you for saving me and my family." Roth put the hammer down, thus concluding the auction.

As soon as the auction ended, Roth ran to BlueFire and Cyclops. He didn't want to get caught exchanging pleasantries with the other guilds. All he cared about now was his safety. "Thank you, BlueFire."

"It's OK. We're not doing this for free, either."

"Ouch! How can someone with 'fire' in their tag be so cold?" Cyclops berated him playfully. She then turned to Roth and asked, "How do you want to do this?"

"Provide me with the names of the craftsmen you want me to give free stats to. Before doing so, ensure they agree to submit themselves to the rules in the contract we drafted. I'll give them the free stats first. As soon as I know me and my family are safe, I'll give you the guide to enter Antioch and will open the portal for you," fired Roth as fast as he could.

"Uuh? Another cold, calculating brute? You still don't trust us!"

"Of course not," admitted Roth.

"Fine. Send Blue your address and the addresses of your brothers and mother. We'll send our people to get you."

"Regarding the Union Collective's VIP list, please add Galatheel for now. He's already joined the Union Collective, but he's been pestering our boss nonstop about getting those free stats. We'll give you the rest of the names later," said BlueFire.

Who was this Galatheel? He had to be very capable to have such influence in the Ogre guild.

"Very well." He adjusted the controls and added Galatheel's name to the Union's VIPs. He then sent the message he had previously prepared with his and his brothers' addresses. "Done!"

"Will you want to become a member of the guild? To get our bonuses?" offered Cyclops.

Roth thought for a moment and shook his head. "No, thank you. As a member of the Union Collective, I think it will be bad rep if one of the senior members joins one of the top 10."

"I see," lamented Cyclops.

"I think we're all done here. We'll be back for our prize. See you around," said BlueFire.

Roth watched helplessly as BlueFire and Cyclops left him alone to mingle with the other guild reps. Shortly after joining the others, they were joking and laughing aloud. It looked as if they were all at a social

gathering! How could they be so chilled about this? Didn't they know what was at stake? It was his life! HIS LIFE.

Sickened by the whole thing, Roth left the room. He didn't want to stay here with these cruel, calculating people.

"Roth, wait!"

Turning around, he found Mel with her hawk on her shoulder.

"What?" he asked sourly.

"Were you going to leave without saying goodbye? That's kind of rude."

Rude? Was she calling *him* rude? No. He was not a rude man. Rude were these greedy know-it-alls who had the means to help but hadn't thought of extending a helping hand until Roth and his friends had forced them to pay attention. He didn't know why he was so angry. He should have felt happy about being saved, right? Why was he so mad about these guild reps? "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to congratulate you! With this, you and your family are safe. Right? I'm truly happy for you."

Mel's radiant smile disarmed him, and he felt some of his annoyance melt.

"Thanks. Sorry. It's been a long day."

"No worries. I understand. You poor thing, you must be under so much stress."

Hearing someone finally express sympathy, Roth's eyes teared up, and he felt a catch on his throat. "Thanks for saying that."

"Anyway, I was wondering... didn't you have a pet already? How did you get the kitten? What happened to your other one?"

Roth raised an eyebrow and didn't respond.

"Silly me, asking you about personal stuff. Sorry about that. By the way, if you need anything, feel free to come to the Krakens. We're here to help with whatever we can," she winked.

Seeing where this was going, Roth's face hardened, and he locked his jaw.

"Please put in a good word with the Ogres! We would love to help hunt the Hive King, and if you..."

"Get lost," said Roth quietly. He turned around and walked away.

"Wait, Roth. I didn't mean to sound like that. Come on. We're just talking shop."

Roth took a few deep breaths and whirled back to face her. Dr. Hilstone had taught him that when angry, instead of lashing out, one should calmly express why they were feeling this way. He now spoke to the girl as if they were both in one of the rageaholic meetings. “I’ve been tortured, and my family is in danger. I’ve asked for help from many people, including you,” he said, pointing at her. Mel was frozen like a deer caught in the headlights. Now that he had started venting, he couldn’t stop. The words just came out unimpeded. “Did you help me? Or did you just care about money?”

“I...” she started but stopped.

Seeing that she had nothing to say, Roth pressed. “I had to move mountains to get your guild’s attention, drag you here, and make you give me and my family sanctuary. This,” he said, gesturing with his big hands to the world around him, “might just be a game to you, but to me, it’s much more than that. It’s my life. Get lost, little girl. You big guilds sicken me.”

Roth stomped away. As soon as he spoke, he regretted unloading his frustration on the girl. After all, this really was a game to her. But he was so mad at the whole thing that he had to speak his mind to someone, and she had been the last straw.

He walked to the shopping area and sat next to a fountain, trying to focus on the gurgling sound of water and nothing else. This was it. It was out of his hands. It had been twelve hours since that mysterious man had appeared to announce his execution. Fortunately, their plan had worked. He just hoped that the Ogres didn’t go back on their word.

The walk here had woken little Lin up. He felt like this little kitten. Completely helpless and at the mercy of others. Roth tried to rock the baby to sleep, wishing someone could do the same for him.

Roth slapped himself on the cheek a few times and summoned his inner strength to turn his downcast face into a happy smile. He petted Lin gently, “Hey, my cute baby. Let’s call your grandma.”

Lin loves to hear your soothing voice.

+1 affection.

Now, with a smile on his face, Roth called his mother. “Hey, Mom!”

Just looking at his mother made him feel a little better. She was smiling and brimming with vitality. She looked like a woman on a mission. Drake had done well bringing her to AstroTerra.

“Baby! How are you?”

“Good, mom. You?”

“I’m good!”

“Listen, can you send a message to Drake, telling him I’ve done what he asked?”

“OK!” she clumsily waved her hands around. “How do I send a message to the real world again?”

“Click the little envelope icon. It should be on the upper right corner of your vision.”

“I don’t see an envelope.”

“It’s a little rectangle with a triangle.”

“Oh, I think I got it.”

Roth waited patiently for his mom to finish putting the message together.

“It’s done!”

“Thanks. So? How’s your day going?”

“This Union thing has picked up, uh? I feel like I’m running a company! The phone calls just keep coming in, and we already have fifteen hundred people in the Union! Isn’t that great?”

“That’s great, mom!” As soon as he said it, Roth paused. That had been a bit too forced.

His mother instantly reacted like a shark drawn to blood on the water. Furrowing her brows, she leaned into the frame, studying Roth. “What’s wrong?”

Shoot. She knew something was wrong. He shouldn’t have called. “Uh? What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean, Roth James Taylor.”

“Nothing’s going on, Mom. I…”

“Spit it out. Don’t make me pull it out of you!”

Roth clicked his tongue. Mothers and their uncanny superpowers to see through their sons’ pretenses. What should he say? He didn’t want to worry her. He gave her a half-truth, hoping it would be enough to make her stop prying. “Nothing much. It’s just that I’ve been talking to some of the guilds, and it’s gotten me frustrated.”

“How come?”

“These games should be a place where people can come and relax and get a break from their problems. But it’s just the same thing all over again. I just wish there were more nice people here.”

“But haven’t you met Sergeant Jazzinald and the other veterans here?”

“I have.”

“Then? Why are you focusing on those greedy people when you have such nice friends?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Besides, weren’t you just like them a few years ago?”

The remark cut him like a knife, even though he knew it wasn’t meant to hurt him. “Yes...”

“Then, maybe all they need is for you to show them how they can improve, baby. Don’t let what others do get you down like that.”

Roth took a deep breath. Even though he had just spoken about the guilds to deflect his mother’s query, she was right. He had to be the better man and count his blessings. Roth changed subjects. “How is Nathan doing?”

“Oh! Let me show you the cutest video I made of your niece.”

Roth smiled sadly and just focused on his mom’s voice. On the off-chance that things did go wrong, there was nowhere else he would rather be. Dying while chatting with his mom wasn’t a bad way to go.

*

“Sarg! There’s movement at four o’clock!”

The sergeant jumped to H’s side. The camera feed on the screen revealed a group of muscled men arriving in a nondescript van. The cameras they installed in front of Mrs. Bessie’s home and Roth’s brothers’ apartments showed similar teams.

“Finally!” exclaimed Pete from across the room.

The sergeant nodded approvingly at their neat gear and how efficiently they moved. The feed went dark.

“What do you think, H?”

“It took them less than 10 seconds to find my bugs. They’re good.”

Maggie spoke up, “The captain just texted. They’re taking them out of Mrs. Bessie’s. They stunned the two men Loki had posted there. Everything went without a hitch.”

Sergeant Jazzinald now looked out through the window as troopers stormed the building. A few yellowish flashes told him that they were using flash grenades and stun guns on the guards posted near Roth's location.

Now that the walls hid them, and with the bugs they had installed disabled, all that Sarg had to guide him was time. They had estimated that this search and rescue op would take two minutes to make it in and out. Looking at his wristwatch, they should be coming out anytime soon. Two minutes. Nothing. The sergeant felt his heart racing. Three minutes. Nothing.

"What's going on? Why aren't they coming out?" asked Charlie, leaning into the window. "Were they ambushed?"

The sergeant felt a knot in his stomach. The guild should have sent more troopers. "Everyone! Get ready to storm the building on my command. Emily, equipment check!"

Just as the squad was about to follow through on the sergeant's command, Charlie called out again, "Wait, Sarg! Look!" he said, pointing out the window.

The troopers who had stormed the building were coming out. Instead of seeing Roth walking among them, the sergeant only saw them carrying something. For a moment of panic, he thought it was a body bag, but upon closer inspection using the binoculars, he saw they were carrying a gaming capsule instead.

"Why didn't they let Roth out of the capsule?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know," answered the sergeant. He had a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling.

Chapter 13

Roth sat by the fountain, rocking Lin as he listened to his mother's voice. It had been a while since he spent hours on the phone with her like this. He chuckled at the thought of guild leaders waiting to hear back from the Union Collective because their *secretary* was chatting with her son.

"It's been fun to experiment with all these new ingredients," she spoke in a high register, excited to share her baking adventures. "You'll have to taste my new pie. It's to die for."

Hearing the verb *to die* made Roth shudder, but he kept his smile.

"Uh?" His mother looked surprised.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"Why does it say I'm being forcefully logged out? Baby, there's something wrong with this computer hat thing. Give me a second, OK?"

The call dropped, and his mom was gone. Roth leaned against the fountain, looked up, relaxed, and smiled. That meant the Ogres had already sent some people to get his mother. After a few moments, he felt his muscles tense at the thought that it could be the other way around. What if her being forcefully logged out meant Loki had gotten to her?

Without his mother around to distract him, his anxiety was becoming harder to manage. He stood up and paced. Whatever the case, he was about to find out soon if the Ogres were good for their word.

His nervous pacing had woken Lin up, who now squirmed uncomfortably in protest.

"Hush, now, lil' Lin. It will all be OK. It will..."

Roth's vision suddenly went dark.

*

Roth opened his eyes and found a message he had never seen before.

Welcome back to AstroTerra!

“What’s going on?” He looked around, confused. He was back inside the auction house in Hilsford. “Why am I still in the game?”

This wasn’t making any sense. He should either be dead or out. Waking up inside the game should have never been an option. The last thing he remembered was talking to his mother. Then his kitten had woken up, and, all of a sudden, his vision went dark.

A cascade of notifications filled his vision.

Bucky, the Husky, has run a trade between Solomon, the Gardener, Mario, the Alligator, and Golden Mountain Inc.

Broker 12,000XP; 3%(x75%x15%) of the profit (1 gold, 21 silver);

+18 reputation with the Cyborg Union;

+13 reputation with Golden Mountain, Inc;

+16 reputation with the snakes.

Bucky, the Husky, has run a trade between Antioch and Golden Mountain Inc.

Broker 300,000XP; 3%(x75%x15%) of the profit (431 gold, 84 silver);

[Broker Level Up!]

[Level Up!]

Roth dismissed these and several other notifications about his peace treaties and pets.

How long had he been out? The notifications suggested more than a few hours. He looked at the system clock, and his eyes widened. “Two days?!” His yelp irritated several shoppers around him, who shot him an annoyed look. Embarrassed, he quieted down, looking at the clock and trying to understand what was happening.

His vision was drawn to the flashing message icon. He had received several messages, mostly from the guilds that had come to

the auction. He ignored those for now and opened the one message from Drake.

“Roth, don’t worry. You’re OK. We’re OK. I don’t know where you were when they unplugged your capsule, so I couldn’t be there to welcome you when you returned. When you see this, meet me at the Rolling Hill Inn. I’ll be waiting for you there.”

Although he had many questions, knowing that his family and Drake were OK took a huge weight off his shoulders. Now, all that remained was to figure out what had happened to him and why he was still in AstroTerra. Thankfully, it was a short trip from where he was to the Rolling Hill Inn.

Roth left the trading plaza and crossed the lobby. Just as he was about to leave through the auction house’s massive doors, he paused. He had taken the [Witness Protection Mask] off for the auction. After so many weeks running around, always looking over his shoulder, walking out in the open like this felt unwise. He looked for an empty corner inside the auction house. It was easier said than done because the building was packed. Fortunately for him, it was also a huge building.

Once he found a little corridor with no one in it, he looked left and right and put his [Witness Protection Mask] back on. His features twisted until he became the slightly shorter and uglier BridgeFinder. He then tugged little Lin into the folds of his toxicologist jacket. The little kitten was meowing, and Roth could tell it was hungry. Even though he wanted to rush toward Drake’s location, he couldn’t endure the pleading look the kitten gave him.

He returned to the trading square in the auction house and looked for things to feed Lin. He hastily sorted through the listings, chose pet-related items, and found something the kitten could eat.

Colostrum Baby Bottle (Pet Consumable)

Milk that helps babies grow strong.

Item effects:

Satiates baby pets for a while.

Roth bought a stack of 99 bottles for one gold and, grabbing one, pushed it into little Lin’s mouth. Smelling milk, the little kitten bit into

the baby bottle excitedly and started to suck the bottle. In a matter of seconds, the bottle was depleted.

Lin appreciates the snack. But it's not nearly enough! More milk!

+1 affection.

The kitty stared at him with famished eyes and his mouth dirty with milk. Roth pulled out another bottle and brought it to Lin's mouth. Just like the first one, he drank it dry in seconds.

Lin appreciates the snack. But it's not nearly enough! More milk!

+1 affection.

What a hungry kitty! He grabbed another bottle and gave it to the cat while taking off toward Rolling Hill Inn, his identity now hidden.

The auction house was strategically situated at the border of the crafting district and the academy grounds. Its main roads also provided quick access to the citadel and the slums, thus serving well all main classes of the game and their hangout places.

From the last time Roth had been here, he noted that more players wore those human defender sets. Moreover, unlike what he'd seen two days ago, when the majority had brass equipment, there were many more silver sets everywhere and more golden ones too.

The stench and the dilapidated brick walls told him he had just entered the slums. He checked his map, and after a few turns, he found the inn with the sign board dangling in the wind, causing a rusty squeaking sound that Roth wasn't sure was meant to attract customers or scare them. It had taken him 10 minutes to get here, and Lin had already drunk thirty-five bottles. Fortunately, it looked like he'd finally had enough. His eyes were almost shut. He would fall asleep soon.

The moment Roth walked in through the door, he spotted Drake wearing the same equipment he had two days ago: a mustard-yellow leather vest and cargo pants. His cybernetic arm, however, looked shinier than last time. Maybe he had upgraded it or something.

"Roth!" he exclaimed. He jumped from the armchair in the inn's lounge and ran to him to give him a hug. Roth stretched his arm to keep him away and showed him the little kitten.

“Sorry, you’ll hurt the baby,” explained Roth apologetically.

“Uh? You’ve got a kitten now? Where did you get one?”

“Well, I was in the middle of the auction when... Never mind. That’s not important. Drake. What’s going on? Why am I still in the game?”

“Let’s go into the meeting room,” he said quietly, looking over his shoulder. Seeing Drake display this level of caution did little to put Roth at ease.

Drake took a coin from his pocket and threw it at the innkeeper, a man whose body was shaped like a barrel of ale and smelled like one, too. They made it through a corridor and opened the door to a side room, which Drake promptly closed after Roth got in.

“I’m glad you’ve kept your head on your shoulders and put on the mask before coming here. Well done, boy.”

“Thanks?” Roth said, confused. “What’s going on, Drake?”

“Sit down,” Drake invited.

Roth chose the seat that looked the most comfortable and the least stained. Lin had fallen asleep now. Roth tucked him into his jacket while studying Drake’s tense expression. Butterflies in his stomach, Roth asked, “What happened?”

Drake took a deep breath and looked at Roth right in the eye. “First things first. Your mother, brothers, sister-in-law, niece, and I are safe.”

“So you told me. Where are you?”

“We’re in one of the Ogres’ safe condos.” Drake leaned his back against the door and folded his arms together.

“Are they treating you well?”

“Oh yes. Like kings. We have access to a gym, swimming pool, and spa. All the works. Your family’s outrage at being forcefully relocated vanished as soon as they saw you had brought them into a resort like this.”

“And is it safe?”

“Very. Very, very safe.”

Roth sank into the chair. Despite the chair’s creak and the room’s moldy scent, his mood lifted. His family would be safe for four months. It all worked out.

“Wait. What about me? Am I not with you guys?”

“Yes. You’re also with us.”

“Then why am I still here?”

“When the Ogres’ security staff got to you, they ran into a complication,” Drake explained. “They found your capsule was boobytrapped.”

“What?! *Boobytrapped*? As in armed with explosives?”

“Nothing so bombastic, but lethal to you anyway. They hooked the capsule to a battery, suspended it, and brought you here. Getting you out of this capsule won’t be as simple as we thought.”

“What? But can’t they disarm the trap?”

“They tried. But whoever did this is good, Roth. And don’t forget that this thing is plugged into your brain. The techs say it will fry your brain at the slightest sign of tampering.”

Roth gulped and felt his heart race. His vision fogged, and his breath quickened. He was having a panic attack.

“Calm down, Roth. You’re safe, don’t worry. You’re not in any immediate danger.”

“But I’m still trapped,” whined Roth.

“I know, son. I know. But it’s not all hopeless.”

Roth hung to the words of hope. “No? Can you get me out?”

“This is where things start to get tricky. According to the Ogres’ tech staff, there seems to be a backdoor programmed into the trap. They still don’t know what it is, but they’re working on it.”

“A backdoor?”

“Yes.” Drake searched for words, trying to explain. “Something that can help you unlock the trap from inside. A secret condition. Kind of like a hidden quest.”

Roth gasped at the memory of arriving in AstroTerra and being surrounded and beaten by the IronIre squad.

“What?” asked Drake.

“When my teammates tortured me. At the end. They said I could get out if I reached the top 10.”

“Top 10 what? Top 10 players?! Of the whole game?” Drake exclaimed.

A part of Roth’s mind noticed how Drake had gone from someone who didn’t know anything about gaming to someone who understood how difficult getting into the top 10 was. Roth nodded. “Could that be the condition included in the programming?”

Drake shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’ll pass that intel on to the tech staff. Maybe it will help them,” Drake said bitterly.

Hearing his friend’s tone, Roth raised an eyebrow. “Wait. You don’t trust the Ogres’ tech staff?”

Drake shook his head. “When we discovered the trap, I asked BlueFire to contact Nexus and have them look at your capsule. For some reason, they won’t let us do that.”

“Uh? Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

Even though Drake feigned ignorance, Roth didn’t buy it. His friend was holding back on him.

“Do you think they want to keep me in the capsule?” tried Roth.

Drake looked away.

“Come on, Drake. Level with me.”

Drake sighed. “Look, Roth. This is a multi-billion credit industry. Having a guy trapped in a capsule raises a lot of concerns and issues. I don’t know why they are blocking me from getting to Nexus. It could be that they think it’s unsafe to reach out to Nexus because they suspect Loki has people there. It could be that they fear what this will do to the gaming industry. I just don’t know. What I do know is that I don’t trust them, and neither should you.”

Roth shuddered at the memory of trying to call Nexus through a passerby and being given the cold shoulder. “Can’t you call Nexus yourself?”

“I tried. At least, I think I have. They ignored me.”

“What do you mean, *you think you have?*”

“How can I be sure, Roth? This is the Ogre’s safe house. They control the phones, the internet, and all the VR equipment we use here. How can I be sure that my calls are getting through?”

Roth frowned at the thought of the Ogres having a team of actors posing as Nexus’ customer service. “Now what?”

Drake unfolded his arms and sat in a chair near Roth. “Now, we wait. I’ve been talking to the 14th. We’ll come up with a plan. Whatever the case, we have to look on the bright side.”

“Which is?” prompted Roth.

“The bright side is that you’re alive and well for now. So is your family. We’ve also bought enough time to figure things out.”

Drake was right. Ultimately, they had guaranteed their safety, albeit temporarily.

“By the way, what happened to Brian?” asked Roth. “You never told me what your plan was for him.”

“Oh, that? The 14th put him in a safe house. Don’t worry about him.”

“So, what do I do now?”

“What else? Play the game. We don’t want the Ogres to keep us here forever. If that condition really is what unlocks the traps from within, then you have no choice but to give it your all.”

Chapter 14

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE’S GONE?!” screamed Loki, picking up the heavy table at the center of the observatory and throwing it at Zin. Zin calmly sidestepped and avoided the table, annoying Loki even further. The massive piece of furniture kept flying and shattered the cases displaying the guilds’ artifacts.

“Zin, this is completely unacceptable. I demand an explanation! Didn’t I tell you to post guards?! And how did they even find the place where his capsule was?”

“I suspect that Brian, the missing member of the IronIre squad, informed the slayer somehow.”

“That’s why I told you to find him!” Loki hissed.

Zin continued reporting, immune to Loki’s threats and menacing tone, “As for the guards, they were all found unconscious, sir.”

“Who? Who helped the rat?!”

“The Ogres, sir. He seems to have cut some kind of deal with them.”

“The Ogres?” The second Loki said it, he regretted it. He had lost control of his emotions, and his voice sounded pathetic and shrill. Loki cleared his throat and tried to regain his bearings. “How?”

“I can’t be sure, sir. But it was a massive operation. Several vans and dozens of troopers. Other guilds might be involved, too. They’re keeping the slayer in one of their safe condos.”

How had the slayer convinced others in the top 10 to help him like this? This changed things. That explained how Zin failed to find Brian and finish the slayer. Not even Zin could single-handedly take on a powerful organization such as the Ogres.

Loki felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. The slayer was now beyond his reach. “I should have had you get rid of him sooner,” he spat. “How did that brute convince the Ogres to invest so much in him?”

Zin remained silent, showing he didn’t know.

The last two days had been going amazingly well. The gold and XP kept pouring in, and he could carry his guild through difficult dungeons, granting them resources beyond everyone else’s grasp. At this rate, reaching the top 3 after a week wasn’t a distant dream. It was just around the corner.

Fortunately, the slayer hadn’t yet left his web. There was something he could still do to get back at that brute. “Good thing I had you boobytrap the capsule,” he told Zin. “He can’t leave the game, and I have his game tag. Go get his brothers and beat them black and blue. Then I’ll send him a picture of them toothless. Oh, and have his mother evicted. Push our connections in the New Lisbon Bank.”

“Sir, his family is also gone. They’re also with the Ogres.”

Loki squinted his six alien eyes at Zin. The man stood stoically, his face cloaked in shadow, his posture relaxed. The slayer had arranged for his family to be protected, too? Loki felt his maw go dry. This level of resources and operation should be beyond the slayers’ ability. Someone was helping him from the shadows. Who? And why now? It was as if whoever was helping him knew Loki had given the order to kill the slayer.

He hadn’t told anyone about his order to get rid of Roth except Zin. Was he the traitor? It couldn’t be. Why would Zin be helping the slayer? And why would he sit here tall and relaxed if he was the culprit? Could the timing be just a coincidence? He smelled a conspiracy. Someone was using his obsession with the slayer against him.

As incensed as he was that his nemesis had escaped his grasp, nothing frightened him more than betrayal. He resisted the angry urge to ask Zin directly. No, that would give his thoughts away. He had to play the part. “We can only get to him in the game. Make it so. Issue a kill-on-sight order.”

Loki summoned a map of Green Country and located the fishing village where he knew Ogre was camping. “Also, get an excursion

ready. I want you to level the fishing village to the ground. The Ogres must know they have disrespected Pegasus, and we won't let this act of aggression go unanswered."

"Consider it done, sir."

*

Roth considered everything Drake had told him. By the looks of it, Roth was still enjailed, but at least he had gotten an upgrade to his accommodation. "Has Loki found out I'm gone?"

"Probably, Roth. Just to be safe, keep a low profile. Loki can only reach you in the game now. He probably won't let you have it easy."

Roth nodded. He regretted not taking Cyclops up on her offer to join the Ogres' guild, which would at least have granted him some safety. But he was used to playing while being hunted. He would make it work. "Speaking of which, did they manage to at least solve my pain settings problem?"

Drake smiled sadly. "Sorry, Roth."

"Oh well..." Roth stood up. "What are you going to do, right? It's time to get back to business. How goes the Union?"

Drake smiled, and some of the heaviness in the air was dispelled. "The first two thousand people came in like an avalanche, but the more people get in, the more difficult it is for them to think of something we don't have in our library yet. The people getting in right now are all heavyweights. Especially after that Galatheel blacksmith fella entered, many of the other guilds' top craftsmen have been applying."

"Awesome. Any good tailors?"

"Oh yes. There's a very good tailor from the Basilisks. And another tailor who's managed to stay solo all this time. Their names are Leanne and Rhapsody."

Roth found it very enticing to have some tailor pros to touch base with. He would have to chat with them later.

"What are you going to do now, Roth?"

Roth considered it for a few moments. "I guess I have to send the Ogres a message asking when and where they want to open the portal."

"Very well. Do you want to see the Union Collective's guild tent in the meantime?"

“I will. But first,” he said as he looked down at his clothes, “it’s time to get a change of clothes. I’m going to go shopping. I’ll drop by later.”

“The location of the tent is in the Union’s chat. I’ll see you later.”

*

As Roth left the Rolling Hill Inn and walked out of the slums, he examined his emotions. He felt he should be more nervous. After all, he had just discovered he was living inside a bomb. Why was he so calm?

Roth took a long detour to give himself time to think. After several minutes of walking and soul-searching, he felt he had an answer. Previously, he was at Loki’s mercy. Not knowing when that deranged lunatic would pull the plug on him was one thing. It was quite another to rely solely on himself to get out.

Also, even if Drake’s exacerbated fears proved true and the Ogres, or even Nexus, were in some kind of conspiracy to keep him and his family from spreading what had happened to him, the fact was that his family was safe and taken care of.

After sorting out his emotions, he reviewed everything that had happened over the past few days and started thinking of his plans. After Loki’s assassin had appeared as if he were Death itself and announced he had twenty-four hours to get his capsule out of the apartment, all his worries about equipment, stats, levels, pets, and skills had all gone out the window. From the looks of it, these were the things that could potentially hold the key to freedom.

Therefore, it was time to get some upgrades. He was level 30 and had unlocked a critical threshold. It was time to switch out his equipment and invest in better gear. Moreover, he had gold coins burning a hole through his pocket.

Also, since he was last here, many different things had happened. He had gained new titles and new skills and now had pets. He had to evaluate where his character was heading and how he could become stronger.

As Roth made his way back to the auction house, he checked all the notifications he had missed.

Peace prevails among the ratans, snakes, and Mario.

+239,000 XP

There has been a skirmish between the ratans and the snakes.

They pay a 100 gold fine. You gain 2.3 gold.

It looked like it wasn't just his commercial routes that had kept generating XP and income when he was out. His peace treaties, too, had remained active when he was offline. No wonder that he had gained one more level.

His pets also seemed to be growing. He filtered out the never-ending cascade of notifications he had received about his colony and just checked his pet stats.

Leafies (Pet)

Pet rating: A+

Lvl. 2

Eggs: 0

Larvae: 15

Affection: 4/100

Weight Lifting: 10.5 kg

Dexterity: 3

Intelligence: 6

Skills: [Tiny House]

The colony's queen had been able to help the eggs hatch and was now tending to the larvae. Once these larvae underwent metamorphosis, they would become the colony's first workers and help the queen tend to the next generation of ants.

This pet was quite low maintenance for now. Lin, on the other hand, scared him. The little kitten had drunk 35 bottles of milk in minutes. What kind of appetite would it have once it grew stronger?

Once he had checked what was happening with his pets, he moved on to catching up on the messages he had received from the guilds. Most of them were rubbish.

"Greetings, Pax. I'm Grey, supervisor of the craftsmen division of the Gorgons. We have a few promising craftsmen we believe deserve a VIP place, just like the one you gave Galatheel. The Union Collective keeps refusing our request, but since you are one of the managers, we were wondering if you could talk to your friends and accept our request. We are willing to pay a handsome amount."

Roth just deleted it.

"Mr. Pax, I'm Cerberus, the guild leader of Cerberus. Manny told me about the auction and how you're familiar with the tree hunter. I was wondering if you

could introduce me to the NPC. In return for this small favor, we'll let you choose any item in our guild's safehouse."

Roth appreciated this man's straightforwardness. It wasn't too over the top. Unfortunately, he didn't think he could help. He responded swiftly, saying that he wasn't that close with the panther, but if things changed in the future, he would let Cerberus know.

Finally, he came to a string of messages from Mel.

"Hello, Roth. I was thinking about what you told me after you left the auction house. I feel like I'm a horrible person. I'm sorry for being so insensitive. I hope everything turns out well for you and your family."

"Why aren't you responding?"

"Oh, my goodness. They did kill you! Oh no! Oh no! There's blood on my hands! I'm such a terrible person! Please forgive me."

"So... I just got off the phone with BlueFire, and he tells me you are OK. Ignore the previous messages. Again, I'm sorry."

Roth paused and sighed. He had been too strung up and blunt with the girl. It turned out that she didn't have an evil heart. He put a message together, apologizing. *"Hey, Mel. We are okay. Thank you for your concern. Sorry if I took my stress out on you. You're not a terrible person. See you around. Roth."*

Finally, he came to the one message of BlueFire.

"Hello, Roth. Call me when you come online," was the dry message.

He wondered why BlueFire was so dry and cold to him. Maybe it was because he was his boss now and wanted to keep things professional. Or was it because Roth and his friends had been able to lead him by the nose? He couldn't tell.

First, though, he had to ask for permission. *"Hey, Drake. BlueFire wants to talk. Do you want to be present?"*

He waited a few moments, and the swift response soon came, *"I can't right now. I'm in an important Union meeting. It's OK, though. The results you had in the auction show you can hold your own with the guild reps. Just be careful not to give anything away. Think twice before you say anything. Remember, even though we're technically under the Ogre's protection, they are NOT our friends."*

Even though Roth felt a little scared at the block of text containing all these fatherly recommendations, he was happy to see Drake put that much trust in him. Roth took a few deep breaths and clicked on

the name in his friend list, and the blue-eyed middle-aged general of the ogres appeared.

Chapter 15

Roth studied the face of the tactician of the Ogres, who had been willing to invest in his freedom more than anyone else. "Hi, Pax. It looks like you're doing well."

Roth frowned at how BlueFire chose to address him. Why not just say his name? His impression that BlueFire wanted to create some distance between them only grew. "Hey, BlueFire. Thank you for taking us in."

"The Ogres just stuck to our end of the deal," he replied coolly. "Now, it is your turn."

Roth grabbed his guide on Antioch and attached it to a message. "Here's the guide."

"Please, wait a moment." BlueFire opened Roth's guide and began reading through it. "Ants?! So that's what it was." As he skimmed through the guide, he widened his eyes and bobbed his head. Surprised, he looked at Roth more than once and returned to reading.

"All good?" prompted Roth.

"Hmm... It seems that you are worth our investment. This city is a gold mine."

Roth saw a smile on the man's face for the first time in the conversation.

"I never expected such a powerful entity to be hidden in the beginner region," BlueFire said, trailing off.

"I'm glad you're happy with it."

"I wouldn't say *happy*. Your guide fails to mention two vital pieces of information, Pax. One is a specific way for us to get through to the shield," commented BlueFire.

Roth gulped. When putting together the guide, he carefully left out any references to his unique playstyle. He couldn't divulge all his secrets. If he were to tell the top 10 guilds how he gained a reputation with all the different factions of the woods and all the quests he'd done to get there, he would put his livelihood in danger. It wouldn't take long before every guild had a zoomorph broker running around and encroaching on his turf.

"I can tell you that the treeants need a lot of food. You'll find a way in with this piece of information."

"Was that how you got in?" pried BlueFire, more friendly now that he wanted something from Roth.

"It's a unique quest that I can't share. That's why it isn't in the guide," lied Roth.

"And tell me, Pax, how am I supposed to," he looked at the guide and quoted a line Roth had written, "*miniaturize twice?*"

"Well, the first bit is easy. All you need is a [Miniaturizing Potion]."

"Go on," BlueFire said through clenched teeth. Roth didn't blame him. Those potions were worth a fortune. After Roth had messed with the [Miniaturizing Potion] market, the prices never came back down. A potion sold for no less than 170 gold the last time Roth had checked. Even though guilds had access to vast wealth, 170 gold was no small sum.

"As for the second part, it's easy. An item for sale inside the city lets you miniaturize a second time. I can sell a batch of this item to you."

BlueFire frowned. "How much?"

"Let's say... 10,000 gold?" tried Roth.

BlueFire had a fit of coughing, and his whole face reddened. "You can't be serious. Isn't that included in the package we bought at the auction?"

"I only said I would sell you a guide. I never said anything about giving you precious consumables for free!"

"This is preposterous!"

"I'm sorry. Do you have a better way of *miniaturizing twice?*"

"I thought we were friends," said BlueFire.

"Oh, please, BlueFire. Do you think I'm a child? We're not friends. All I am is just a number to you."

BlueFire regarded him coolly, admitting the truth in Roth's statement. "10k is way too much."

"Come on, BlueFire. After you get in, you'll get all this stuff, including the item I'm selling. What's 10K for you?"

BlueFire stayed silent for a few moments.

"You clever boy," he complimented. "You know what? I do respect it when someone pulls one over me. I'll give you 1k."

"You're forgetting this is a one-time trade, BlueFire. This item that lets you miniaturize a second time is available in Antioch. From the moment I sell this to you, you'll have access to the city. Think of how much money you can make reselling this to other guilds or the common player base."

"2k."

"10k," countered Roth, noticing how BlueFire was starting to sweat.

"3k."

"10k," replied Roth.

"4k," BlueFire had changed color by now. He was living up to his tag because he was close to becoming blue.

Gauging that he was close to reaching his limit, Roth decided to leave him a way out. "5k, and you stop calling me Pax and call me Roth."

BlueFire slumped into his chair and nodded weakly. "Deal."

"Pleasure doing business with you. You can send someone to the auction house in Hilsford to collect the items."

"Fine," said BlueFire, exasperated.

Roth quickly changed subjects before BlueFire could ask more questions about his secrets or try to go back on his word. "Now, tell me when and where I should open the portal."

"When would you be ready?"

"Whenever. I'm in Hilsford."

"Good. We go in at noon."

Roth checked his clock. That was ten hours from now. "Why at that time?"

"Statistically, that's when the least number of players are logged in. It will increase our chances of success."

"Very well. Where should we meet?"

BlueFire sent him a pair of coordinates. “This is a small farming village on the outskirts of Hilsford. We’ll meet you there. Don’t be late.” BlueFire hung up.

After Roth got off the call with BlueFire, he shook his head. He wouldn’t have felt comfortable pulling an underhanded move like this on him a few days back. But being in that auction and seeing repeatedly how heartless these people were had removed any vestiges of pity for them from his heart.

If BlueFire had reacted like this at the idea of spending 5k gold on a stack of [Miniaturizing Honeydew], he would die when he found out that all that was needed to buy this item in Antioch was to trade the honeydew for a few berries. Trading a handful of berries worth a few coppers for five thousand gold wasn’t such a bad deal.

If he was just a number for them, he would ensure he was very expensive. Besides, the only way to miniaturize twice that Roth knew didn’t involve using [Miniaturizing Honeydew] was to use the [Miniaturize] skill. If he had sold it instead of learning it when he received it from King Ratatouille, he could have made tens of thousands of gold. 5k gold was cheap by comparison.

Not thirty seconds had passed when he got a message from someone in the Ogre guild.

“I’m Giganto, and I’m with the Ogre guild. I was asked to retrieve some items from you at the auction house. I’m in the trading square next to fountain number 34. I’m wearing black robes.”

Roth whistled, impressed by BlueFire’s speed. In the time it had taken him to finish responding to everyone and talking to BlueFire, he’d made it back to the auction house. He climbed the stairs through the columns, past the lobby, and into the massive trading square. He hadn’t realized that there was a small sign hanging over each fountain with the number to make rendezvousing more convenient.

Once he located number 34, he swiftly found the representative from the Ogre guild. He was the only player sitting near the fountain wearing black robes. Despite the pretentious game tag, the player was barely tall enough to reach Roth’s waist. Approaching him, he found that it was a kid. He couldn’t be older than 12.

“Giganto?” confirmed Roth.

“Pax, uh?”

The kid meant business and skipped over all the pleasantries. A floating trade window appeared in front of Roth. Giganto added 5k gold to the trade, and Roth, in turn, added a stack of 50 [Miniaturizing Honeydew]. Just like that, the trade was over.

“Thanks. Bye now.”

Roth looked at the kid’s departing figure and wondered how good a player he must be to be playing with the Ogres so young. He checked his inventory, pleased. With this, he had 6k gold to shop with. He left the fountain and looked for a quiet corner to sit and shop in peace.

With this trade, the Ogres now had access to the underground treeant city. Roth hoped that the Ogre guild wouldn’t try to attack Antioch. It wasn’t that he was concerned about the ants. What he was concerned about was what would happen to the poor players who tried to assault the city. The treeants soldiers would tear them all to shreds.

Roth found a pleasant spot within earshot of a babbling fountain. It was a worked wooden bench under a structure of latticed metal through which vine trees climbed, providing a quiet, peaceful corner in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the auction house.

Comfortably installed, Roth pulled out the small notepad app to organize his thoughts. First, he wrote down his avatar’s assets. He was a peacemaker, a broker, an ecotailor, and a zoomorph. He also had an established light affinity and a progressive nature affinity. He had many powerful titles, one of which empowered voice-related skills.

He had also already established that his skills were upgraded when they resonated with one of his forms or had a light element. Therefore, one of his goals for this shopping spree would be to guarantee that all his skills had either a light element or could resonate with one of his forms.

In terms of stats, things had become clearer to him after hiring Bucky. He had previously depended on strength to increase the weight he could carry around. After hiring help to run his trades, he realized he didn’t need to invest more. Hiring someone like Bucky, who could move several tons of cargo, was more profitable.

Perception, endurance, subterfuge, dexterity, and insight were all nice stats, but the ones he depended on the most were charisma, intelligence, and wisdom. His high charisma was the key to his quick

progress in the game. Additionally, it was important for [Stamp]. He opened the skill description and reread the final line: *Your charisma limits the number of those who can gain your blessing.*

Wisdom was the stat that dictated how many factions he could be in a treaty with. Finally, intelligence helped with crafting as an [Ecotailor] and also bolstered the power of skills like [Screeching Terror] and [Peace Decree]. Its bonuses also slightly boosted cooldown reduction, which Roth sorely needed.

Previously, he had focused on improving his wisdom. But after experimenting with his skills and getting to know his class better, that appeared to have been a mistake. When he and his crew started the Union Collective, using [Fox Form] allowed him to include more players in the Union's VIP roster. By the same token, his [Crow Form] would allow him to include more factions in a peace treaty.

If he only needed high wisdom to sign contracts, he would do better to invest in intelligence instead. Not only would it allow him to change forms a little quicker, but it would also help him in crafting.

Besides skills and gear, he had to replenish his stock of scrolls, grenades, and other consumables. Now that he'd seen how much milk Lin drank, he had to ensure he bought enough food for his pets. He could also afford a ride and some consumables offering permanent stats.

In the end, Roth ended up writing different entries in his notes.

1 - *New Gear - Intelligence and CDR*

2 - *Skills - Light and Zoomorph Synergy*

3 - *Ride*

4 - *Pet related items*

5 - *Profession-related items*

6 - *Consumables to increase stats*

7 - *Consumables to get out of sticky situations*

The more he thought about his character's development, the smaller the amount he had mooched off the Ogres felt to him. Even though his avatar had some powerful attributes, he developed it in many different directions. This essentially meant more maintenance and more money.

Roth reviewed the equipment he currently wore.

EQUIPMENT

Right Hand: [Plumber's Torch] | +5 intelligence

Left Hand: [Flag of the Rat Cave] | +10 wisdom; +6 dexterity; +10% speed; [Ratan Stride]; [Ratan Dash]

Shoes: [Plumber Boots] | +20% speed

Bottom: [Black Toxicologist Leggings] | +5% poison dur.; +4 wisdom; +1 intelligence

Top: [Dark Toxicologist Jacket] | +1% poison dur.; +3% damage red.; +5 wisdom; +10ep

Gloves: [Plumbing Gloves] | +5% damage red.

Head: [Black Toxicologist Hood] | +2% poison pot.; +3 wisdom; +3 intelligence

Cape: [Wool Poncho] | 5 intelligence; +3% status resistance; +5% speed

Roth proceeded to call up the auction house's window, opened the advanced options in the filter of the auction house, and programmed it to display only equipment that his avatar could use.

Thousands of items appeared, many of which were exclusively for medics, and others had no class limitations and could be worn by all players. After going through the first few entries in the list, Roth nodded approvingly. The filter also excluded all items that weren't made of natural fibers and couldn't be equipped by an ecotailor like himself.

Roth rubbed his hands together. It was time to splurge on some new items.

Chapter 16

Eager to buy new equipment that suited his needs, Roth checked all the items for sale in the auction house window. His excitement soon dissipated.

“That’s it? No more items?” He was surprised to go through the listings so quickly. Why was there so little on offer? He turned the filters on and off and quickly found the reason. It seemed that his ecotailor profession didn’t just block materials such as skins and leather. It also blocked other materials depending on how they were harvested.

For example, Roth found an item that, at first glance, he should have been able to wear.

Yeti Yak Wool Jacket (Rare)

Description: A jacket made from the finest wool of the Yeti Yak that terrorizes the villages of the cold mountains out west.

Item effects:

3% cooldown reduction;

+12 intelligence;

+50hp;

+100ep.

Even though this jacket was made of wool, it seemed that it was harvested from a wild boss’s corpse and, therefore, blocked by his ecotailor profession. He clicked his tongue. Most of the better equipment in the game was obtained from hunting bosses and wild

bosses. If the ecotailor profession prevented him from wearing that equipment, he would struggle to find suitable gear at later levels.

Out of curiosity, Roth decided to conduct an experiment. He left the tab in the auction house that contained pieces of equipment and went to the one that featured crafting materials. An unending variety of fruit, vegetables, herbs, timber, ores, computer chips, rocks, gemstones, gears, and gizmos appeared. This was Roth's first time browsing this market section, so he took his time browsing the items. There was so much stuff that if he weren't careful, he would spend the rest of the day exploring this brand-new world.

Using the filters, he made it so that only crafting materials for tailors appeared. He could only see bundles of wool, leather, hemp, cotton, linen, silk, and even plastic fibers. He narrowed it down even further to crafting materials that could be used by tailors level 10 and below. He simultaneously opened the Rescue Library and looked for the bestiary section where common monsters, elites, and bosses were featured.

Roth finally found one crafting material that would work well for his experiment.

Alpaca Leader's Wool

Description: Soft wool that has been harvested from a wild alpaca.

According to the Rescue Library, there was a mixed biome map with high hills not far from Hilsford. Players went there to hunt alpacas. Among them was an elite monster, the alpaca leader, who granted this valued crafting material. This would work fine to confirm his theory.

With his eyes on this material, Roth went to the filters and toggled the option to show items he could use on and off. His hunch was right. Whenever he turned the filter on, the item disappeared. Seeing where this was going, he could feel a headache brewing. As a pacifist and an ecotailor, he probably had to meet with all these animals personally and form a relationship with them.

He didn't mind making new friends, but the time factor worried him. When he climbed his levels further and needed to find new equipment, he would have to personally harvest the wool from the animals.

Fortunately for him, he could also use plant fibers in the meantime. Up to level 20, most options were made of hemp, but for level 30 medics, most options were fashioned from linen. This begged the question, should he abandon wool and just focus on plant fibers? This was something he would have to think about more later.

After this slight detour, he returned to studying the items available. Now that he better understood how his special profession limited his choice of equipment, he quickly came to another realization: practically all the items he was looking at had been crafted by players. The frustrating thing was that he was a tailor and could craft these items himself.

Should he just drop the whole thing and try to craft some equipment himself? He shook his head. The expedition to slay the Hive King would happen very soon, and he needed to boost his stats immediately. Knowing that he was about to spend gold on the work of a craftsman competitor ignited his desire to progress in his profession as an ecotailor.

Following his earlier decisions, Roth looked for items that granted intelligence and cooldown reduction. Acceptable secondary stats were wisdom and charisma, followed by subterfuge and dexterity. Eventually, he was able to narrow it down to two possibilities.

Firstly, there was one of the few sets of equipment crafted from wool that he could wear. It offered slightly less intelligence but a little more cooldown reduction.

Lambswool Cap (Uncommon)

A cap from a lamb's first wool. It captures and reflects ambient light, providing an otherworldly appearance.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+7 intelligence;

+2 wisdom.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

Lambswool Robes (Uncommon)

Item description: A soft robe that will keep you warm and comfortable in the coldest weather.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+10 intelligence;

+40 hp;

+6% damage reduction.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 29.

Lambswool Mitts (Uncommon)

Item description: Soft gloves made from a lamb's first wool.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+3 intelligence;

+10 ep;

+2% status resistance.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 28.

Lambswool Leggings (Uncommon)

Item description: Leggings made from lambswool. Perfect to keep you warm.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+20 hp;

+8 intelligence.

Restrictions: Lvl. 31.

Lambswool Hooves (Uncommon)

Item description: Boots that allow you to walk around quietly.

Item effects:

+3% running speed;

+5 subterfuge;

+5 wisdom;

+2 intelligence.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

It provided an overall bonus of 4% cooldown reduction, which wasn't bad. Now that he was more familiar with crafting, he wondered what crafting grade these items had gotten. He selected all [Lambswool Caps] for sale and compared the listings. There were ones that were most likely Ds and Es for sale at 50 silver.

Lambswool Cap (Common)

A cap made from a lamb's first wool, which captures and reflects ambient light, providing an otherworldly appearance.

Item effects:

+5 intelligence;

+2 wisdom.

Restrictions: Lvl. 25.

Then there were caps like the one he saw earlier for sale for one gold. He guessed that those were B grades. Sadly, he found nothing beyond that. Why was that? Was it that difficult to get an A and above grade when crafting these items? Maybe there was a high demand for A and S-grade equipment, and it was sold as soon as someone listed it.

He then turned toward the other set, which granted a little more intelligence but less cooldown reduction.

Linen White Hood (Uncommon)

A hood made from coarse linen with a beautiful white finish that makes the wearer look more distinguished.

Item effects:

+10 intelligence;

+5% healing power;

+30 ep.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 30.

Radiant Robes (Uncommon)

Item description: These white and shiny floating robes, albeit beautiful, offer little to no protection.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+14 intelligence;

+8% critical healing;

+50 ep.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 30.

Linon Light Gloves (Uncommon)

Item description: Gloves made from linon that won't restrict your movement.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+7 intelligence;

+2 dexterity;

+10 ep.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 28.

Linon Shiny Trousers (Uncommon)

Item description: Trousers fashioned out of linon that provide a comfortable choice for adventurers and warriors.

Item effects:

+8 intelligence;

+5% damage resistance;

+20 hp.

Restrictions: Lvl. 31.

Linon Shoes (Uncommon)

Item description: Very light boots that won't hinder your speed.

Item effects:

+5% running speed;

+5 dexterity;

+2 intelligence.

Restrictions: Medic, lvl. 30.

Sadly, neither offered a set bonus effect.

If AstroTerra was like other games Roth knew, obtaining sets from running dungeons or hunting bosses was much easier than crafting them. In New Earth, recipes for sets of equipment had been extremely rare drops.

There was more than one account of how a lucky player became rich after finding a recipe for set equipment and selling it in an auction. There were other tales of how guilds had made fortunes purchasing these recipes, teaching them to a team of skillful craftsmen, and selling them to the masses, bringing vast wealth into their coffers.

Even though none of the choices available to him had a set effect, they still had good stats, better than the ones Roth had now. They also were reasonably priced for equipment of its level. The lambswool set was on sale for 30 gold, and the linen one was for 34 gold. He had bought the [Black Toxicologist] set for a tenth of this, but everything inevitably became more expensive as one progressed in the game.

He weighed both options and ultimately decided to get the lambswool set of equipment. The reason for this was simple: the [Wool's Will] skill.

Wool's Will (Profession)

Skill description: You have spent a long time in the presence of sheep and have worked with their wool. You understand how the molecules of its fibers align and can better utilize wool to its fullest potential.

Skill effects:

Passive. Whenever you're wearing wool equipment, +1 intelligence per piece;

If you're only wearing wool, +3 dexterity.

By only wearing wool, he gained a bonus to his intelligence and a little dexterity to boot. It was like his profession offered him the set effect that these pieces of equipment lacked. Just as he was about to purchase all the equipment, he stopped himself. He stood up and paced in front of the bench. Why settle for crafted equipment with a B grade?

He remembered his early conversation with Drake and hurriedly checked the names he had added to the VIP section in the Union Contract. He grinned. He hadn't remembered adding the two names Drake had mentioned, but he just wanted to be sure before contacting him.

He opened his list of friends and sent Drake a message.

"Hey, Drake!"

"What's up, Roth?" came the swift response. No matter how busy Drake was, he always answered Roth promptly. Seeing his friends' concern for him brought a smile to Roth's lips.

"Remember those two tailors you told me about?"

"Rhapsody and Leanne?"

"Yes. I can see neither of them are on the VIP roster. Would it be OK if I placed an order with them?"

"Sure," he answered.

Roth smirked. He went to the Union chat. Things had picked up since he had last visited this private post in the forums. There were different channels dedicated to different professions, and even as he opened it, lively discussions were going on about crafting techniques, materials, and recipes.

He went to the orders section. There weren't many orders yet. Even though a normal Union member would find this section empty, Roth could see the orders in progress as one of the founding members. One was issued by a third-tier guild asking for a batch of polearms, and another by a group of adventurers asking for fire-resistant equipment to run a dungeon. In exchange, both customers putting in the requests were offering precious crafting materials. Hopefully, more orders would pour in as the Union became more famous.

Roth added his order:

Customer: Union Collective.

For: 1 Tailor

Request: A medic or non-class equipment made of lambswool for a level 30 player. The crafting grade has to be at least S-. The main stats required are intelligence and CDR. Secondary stats are wisdom and charisma.

Deadline: 10 hours.

Payment: The craftsman will become a VIP Union member and have access to extra stats.

Roth pondered whether he should offer the materials, a monetary reward, or add more requirements to his commission. However, considering the extra stats' value, he decisively hit send. The order appeared in the Union's forums, and he also received a message.

There's a new order for tailors in the Union Collective!

He chuckled and nodded approvingly at how H had programmed this. Since he was also registered as a tailor, he received these notifications. Seeing nothing happen immediately, Roth shrugged. He would have to allow the Union's tailors to check the order. Hopefully, one of those two big-shot tailors would be interested. He couldn't wait to see what kind of equipment they came up with.

In the meantime, he turned to his accessories.

ACCESSORIES

[Crow Feather Earring] | +1 intelligence; +1 energy regen

[Blue Caterpillar Earring] | +5 subterfuge; +10 wisdom

[Witness Protection Mask]

[Crow Feather Necklace] | +1 wisdom; +2 intelligence; +5 ep

[Utility Belt] | +10 kg

[Blue Caterpillar Ring] | +8 subterfuge; +5 intelligence

[Ring of the Wanderer] | +2 wisdom; +5 ep

Although [Blue Caterpillar Earring] and [Blue Caterpillar Ring] were good accessories, several others needed an upgrade. Curious, he searched for any other Blue Caterpillar items for sale, writing 'blue caterpillar' in the search bar.

There are 0 results for your query.

As he suspected, these accessories were rare and valuable. As he researched different accessories, looking for anything that reduced cooldowns or granted intelligence, he received a message. He eagerly dropped what he was doing and read it.

Leanne has picked up your order.

Roth threw his arms up in triumph. He would get something better than anything available in the auction house and do so for free! That was a good thing, too, because some of the stuff he still had to buy was crazy expensive.

He spotted the pair of epic earrings he'd seen before still for sale. Was 10,000 gold for the [Sun of the Mountain] and [Moon of the

Mountain] too much? If only he had unlimited funds. Just as he was about to purchase his selection of jewelry, Drake called.

Roth frowned. Why was Drake calling him all of a sudden? When Drake came into the call, he had an exasperated look.

“Hey, Drake. Are you OK? You seem annoyed with something.”

“Hey, Roth. The little order you put on the Union’s website has started something.”

“Uh? What do you mean?”

“Leanne and Rhapsody haven’t stopped bickering since you posted it. Do you mind coming over? If we don’t do something, these people will turn the Union into a battlefield.”

“Uh... fine. I’m going.”

Roth left the call confused. What had he done wrong? Was putting an order for equipment something so controversial? He stared at the floating market window wistfully. He couldn’t catch a break! It was as if there was a curse preventing him from shopping! He sighed, slumped his shoulders, and followed the coordinates on the map. Hopefully, he would still have time to buy the rest of what he needed later.

Chapter 17

The guild camp was north of the city, conveniently near the gate and the citadel. The proximity to the first was especially important because players had to keep running back and forth between the camp and the city. Although establishing their headquarters inside the city would be much more convenient, no guild had yet figured out how to convince the city management to let them do so.

The proximity to the white garrisoned fortress was also important because soldiers often came down to settle disputes between guilds. Roth wondered if any of the soldiers of the citadel had ever jumped down from the citadel walls to get to the reported skirmish sooner.

Roth felt the proximity of the citadel to the tent camp was no accident. It was as if the NPCs were mocking players for being unable to afford a nice castle of brick and mortar and reminding them that all they had were drabs hung over sticks.

After seeing how the camp hugged the north wall but was encircled by a palisade of sharp wooden logs everywhere else, he realized mocking players wasn't the only reason the city wanted the guilds here. The city was using the players as a meat shield. Anyone who tried to invade the city would have to attack this camp first, giving the city plenty of time to react.

Even though it was the dead of night, Roth could see as clearly as day thanks to the torches on the walls and throughout the camp and his [Farsight] and [Creature of the Night] titles. Roth was sure that visiting a tent camp was something entirely unremarkable for the average AstroTerra player, but this was all new to him. In New Earth, guilds had owned castles and buildings inside cities. They didn't set up camp like this.

The camp's ground was all thin, dried dirt. The passing guild players had trampled the once-thriving grass until it was turned to dust. As a result, as thousands of horse hooves and running players moved about, they kicked up dust clouds, which, together with the torches and moonlight, gave the camp a mysterious look.

Entering the camp, he gasped at the size of the tents at the camp entrance. There was a downright castle made of cloth, two or three *circus tents*, only lacking the red and white catchy stripes to fit the bill fully, and a black tower covered in cloth. Did his colleagues in the tailor profession make these? How many tailors had been needed to make these giant structures? Walking further into the camp, he saw that not all tents were as impressive. Some tents were so basic that Roth suspected they would be sent flying if a gust of wind hit them at the right angle.

Despite the mismatched structures, the camp was kept in good order. Signs marked the streets, and as soon as Roth entered the camp, his world map was updated, and he could zoom in and identify each of the guilds camped here.

He zoomed into the camp entrance and, non-surprisingly, discovered that the imposing castles of cloth belonged to five guilds from the top 10. Finding this, Roth couldn't help feeling his face, making sure his mask was on, and tucking the sleeping Lin, hiding him in the folds of his jacket.

Thanks to the clear directions on the forums, Roth quickly found the Union Collective's tent. The cloth structure was tasteful, albeit not as fancy or imposing as others. Several poles sustained what looked like a stretched-out boat sail that would provide a cool shade when the sun was up. The lack of walls and the many torches gave the place an inviting look. At the tent's center, Roth spotted Drake and Sarg trying to break apart a fight between two girls.

As soon as Drake spotted him, he gestured for Roth to join them with his cybernetic arm. Roth approached cautiously and started to make out the screamed insults and the reason for the argument.

"You had no right to take that order, you crooked stitch! I arrived at the Union first!"

"Finders, keepers, Picasso! Besides, I don't think your abstract stitching skills are considered fashionable anymore. Oh, wait... they never were!"

“Asymmetric idiot!”

“Two-left-handed subpar needler!”

The two girls were surprisingly young. Roth guessed they were 13 or 14. Rhapsody had a tall turtleneck and bangs so long that he could only get a good look at her nose. As for Leanne, she was short and had a round nose and a clean face that was kept fully visible with the help of a cutely tied ponytail.

“Ladies, ladies,” said Drake loud enough to stop the girls from bickering. This is Pax. He’s one of the senior members of the Union and the one who placed the order.”

The wrath Rhapsody had been unloading on her fellow tailor was immediately diverted to Roth.

“I want that quest, mister. Leanne has sold her soul to the guilds. She doesn’t even deserve to be here. But I’m a pure craftsman. I deserve the VIP spot more than she does!”

“Oh, please. You’re such a drama queen. And I haven’t sold my soul. I just cut a deal with the Gorgons.”

“What do you even know about cutting? All your fabric seems like it’s been torn from the bundle without even using a pair of scissors!”

“Oh yeah? Your clothes look like a cry for help!”

And the bickering was back in full. Roth looked to Drake and Sarg for help, but they had disappeared. Did they have stealth or something? Realizing his friends had just thrown him under the bus, he messaged them immediately.

“Drake, get back here.”

“Can’t. Important meeting with the bathroom guild.” Roth stared wide-eyed. Drake was playing the game in the toilet?! That was gross. He tried Sarg.

“Hey, Sarg. A little help here?”

“A wise soldier knows when to retreat. I’m gone.”

Roth put his hand on his face, not knowing what to do.

“Meow?”

The bickering suddenly stopped. The commotion had woken little Lin up, and the two girls looked like two deer caught in the headlights. Roth chuckled and pulled the kitten out of the fold of his jacket.

“Hush, baby. Hush,” he said quietly. “The girls are just friends having an argument. They will stop yelling so you can go back to sleep. Right, girls?”

The girls nodded promptly, entranced by the sight of the little kitten.

“Can I hold him?” whispered Leanne.

“Sure. But first, let’s talk.”

The sight of Lin had turned the two snarling wolves into two meek lambs. Roth wondered if Lin’s cuteness was a hidden superpower. What would happen if a fire-breathing dragon was chasing him and he held Lin up to it? He imagined a dragon screeching to a halt and stopping its attack, entranced by the sight of Lin’s adorable eyes. No living creature would dare hurt a cute kitty like this, right?

“So, I get that you want a crack at the order. Right?”

Rhapsody nodded.

“And you, Leanne, believe that since you got to it first, it’s your right to finish the order. Correct?”

Leanne also nodded.

Roth took a deep breath. “Leanne did get to the order first, Rhapsody.”

“It doesn’t seem fair that, just because I was offline, I missed out on an opportunity to enter the VIP roster.”

The girl was right. That did sound unfair.

“I have a solution for this. However, for this to work, Leanne has to be OK with it. She has every right to turn down my proposal.”

Leanne raised her eyebrows, signaling she was open to hearing him out.

“What do you say we hold a tailor battle? You two try to craft the equipment I requested, and whoever crafts the best set becomes a VIP in the Union.”

This was the only solution Roth could think of. But for it to work, Leanne had to agree to it. He doubted that would be the case. She was guaranteed to have the order. Why would she ever agree to his proposition? The girl proved him wrong.

“I agree. Honestly, I think that’s what you should have done in the first place. If you want the Union to be a place that promotes crafting, settling scores like this is the way to go.”

“I agree. You should add a rule that other craftsmen can compete for an order. Competition fosters progress.”

Roth coiled, impressed at the girls’ maturity. He hadn’t been this mature when he was their age. It looked like them being considered

heavyweights in tailoring wasn't for naught. He seriously considered adding both of them to the VIP roster but shook his head.

"Very well. In that case," Roth checked the system clock, "You have two hours to craft what I ordered. Whoever does best gets a seat at the VIP table."

The two little girls turned to each other with flames in their eyes. They were eager to prove who the better tailor was. Leanne then turned to Roth.

"Also, whoever wins gets to hold and pet your kitty cat. Deal?"

"Uh... Deal?"

The flames in the girls' eyes went from little flames to blazing suns. Were they going to go all out to play with his kitten? Now that they had agreed, instead of breaking apart, they approached Roth, looking him up and down.

"Is the equipment for you, mister?" asked Leanne.

"Yes. And no need to call me mister. I'm only twenty-five. Just call me Pax."

"Why do you want it to be made of lambswool?" queried Rhapsody.

"My character has a unique restriction that doesn't allow me to use anything harvested from a mistreated animal. At the same time, I get a bonus for wearing only wool. Since I'm level 31, I figured that lambswool would be the way to go," he explained.

The girls nodded, agreeing with his choice of material. They didn't ask him what caused this restriction, earning a few more points with Roth. They seemed to be quite used to serving discreet clientele.

"Are you a medic?" Leanne asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'll take that as a no. I don't mean to pry. I just want to know if you need healing bonuses."

Roth wanted the equipment to turn out well, so he answered truthfully. "I have a hidden class. I don't need healing. What I need most are stats, mainly the ones I included in the order."

Satisfied with all the answers, the two girls walked a few steps away from each other and pulled out two stools from their inventories. Roth just sat on the ground somewhere in the middle. These two tailors were much more advanced than he was. Maybe there was something he could learn from them.

The girls started pulling machines and gizmos out of their inventory bags, instantly turning the tent space into a workspace. Rhapsody pulled out a leather fold. Unrolling it, Roth saw several needles. They came in varied sizes and colors, each glistening in the light.

“Pax? Do you have an affinity unlocked yet?” she asked, turning to him.

“Yes.”

She looked up at him, surprised. She had asked the question expecting a no. “Interesting. Which one?”

“Light, and on my way to unlocking nature.”

Both girls stopped what they were doing. “Excuse me, did you say light?” asked Leanne, her voice in a squeaky pitch.

“Yeah.”

Both girls exchanged looks, and he could see Leanne mouth a silent ‘wow’ toward the other girl. After hearing his answer, Rhapsody pulled out a green and white needle from her leather kit.

“Excuse me, Rhapsody? Do those needles have anything to do with affinities?” he asked curiously.

“Yes. I have a special tailor skill. [Element Imbuement]. It will be good for you. I promise.” He rubbed his hands at the thought of equipment that boosted his affinity.

The hum of machinery made him pull his eyes away from Rhapsody. Leanne had brought a sleek machine with a needle sticking out and some pedals. “Is that a sewing machine?!”

“Oh yes!” she answered proudly.

“I didn’t know those existed in the game.”

“Not many people do. It’s a unique synergy between the technomaniac and tailor professions.”

Roth noted that when he had asked them about these items, they hadn’t thrown jabs at each other. Even though they focused on different specializations within the tailoring profession, they respected each other. He could feel the tension in the air. These girls would give it their all and knew they were against serious competition.

As the girls set up, passersby in the tent approached with interest. Roth smiled. It looked like this would be quite a show. Thinking of what the girls said about competition helping craftsmen progress, he opened the Union’s forums and posted.

“Tailor Battle

Rhapsody vs. Leanne

At the Union’s tent in Hilsford. The winner takes a VIP spot in the roster.”

After the announcement, as the girls finished setting up, Drake and Sarg appeared out of thin air.

“We leave you alone for one minute, and you’ve already started something,” joked Sarg.

“You said it right. You *left me alone.*”

“Don’t be like that, boy!” said Sarg as he slapped him with such strength that Lin was almost sent flying. “Throwing someone into the lion’s den helps them build character.”

Hearing the word ‘lion,’ Roth shuddered. “Yeah, right.”

“But this is a good idea. We could organize battles between Union members,” commented Drake. “You know... to keep things exciting.”

“I’m also getting some good ideas off this,” complemented Sarg. “Maybe this is the way to keep refining the Union.”

After setting up their workstations, the girls pulled out copious amounts of ready-to-use wool and looked at Roth.

“Uh... Roth? I think they’re looking at you,” spoke Drake.

Roth stared back at the girls awkwardly. They were looking fixedly at him. It was kind of creepy. “Uh? What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Aren’t you going to say one, two, three, go?”

Chapter 18

By now, over ten people in the tent had gathered around Leanne and Rhapsody, who stared daggers at each other and had a look of resolution and total concentration. They also glanced at Roth, waiting for him to signal the start of the battle.

Roth scratched his head as he watched what he had inadvertently started. He sighed. The girls were right. This battle needed some flare before it could begin. It would also be good for the Union. However, Roth had something better in mind than just a ‘one, two, three, go.’ He smirked, stood up, and addressed the growing crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Union members of all ages! Welcome to the epic battle that will dictate who will earn one of our precious spots in the VIP roster, granting unmatched power and precious stats, a benefit unique to this Union. Welcome to the first-ever craft battle in the history of the Union Collective.”

Applause and cheers went around the tent. Roth spotted Maggie and Emily arriving and joining the circle. They waved at him and went to take their seats with SergeantSarg and Drake.

“To my left, we have a lone wolf in the world of tailoring, Rhapsody and her rainbow needles!”

The girls giggled at Roth’s introduction. Despite being such well-accomplished tailors in AstroTerra, they were still just kids and were enjoying Roth’s silly antics. The sergeant started throwing his fist into the air and chanting a few ‘uh’s, to which the other soldiers and the others quickly joined, making the atmosphere more epic.

“To my right, we have a tailor that has stitched together the world of machinery and tailoring. I give you the one and only Leanne and her legendary sewing machine!”

The girl stood up and bowed, eliciting a more festive round of cheers.

“The rules of the challenge are simple. Two hours! You are to use the same materials and make a complete set of wool for a level 30 medic. The set that offers better stats and options wins. Is that clear?”

The girls nodded.

“The battle will now begin!”

The second the battle began, Leanne turned one of her machines on, activating a mechanical wheel and making it spin rapidly. She picked up bundles of carded wool she had prepared previously and gently guided them into the machine.

As the machine caught the fibers, it spun them, and a thin wool thread came out on the other side. Seeing how deftly Leanne guided fleece after fleece into the machine, and a perfect thin thread came out, Roth felt embarrassed at how long it would have taken him to achieve the same results.

You observe a new spinning technique and feel enlightened.

+10 ecotailor XP.

The notification surprised Roth. He could gain XP from watching other craftsmen working! This only made this type of battle more enticing to craftsmen in attendance. Roth took a screenshot of this, blurred the ‘ecotailor’ text out, and posted it on the Union’s forum. The moment he did, Drake next to him hit him with the elbow in his flank.

“Ouch!”

“Must you be so impulsive, kid? No harm in asking for a second opinion.”

Roth then felt the sergeant’s big two-thumbed hand hit him in the back of the head.

“Hey?!”

“Remember the chain of command, son!”

Maggie and Emily, to the sides, giggled at seeing Roth being bullied by the two old men. Roth knew that they were joking, but they were right. Two heads were better than one. He should check in with them more often.

Although Leanne was already spinning the wool into thread, Rhapsody did something completely different. Various objects were

flying around the tailor girl. Different bottles of liquid were being poured into two separate vats, and one after another, the fleeces of wool flew into the vats as if guided by invisible hands. The scene reminded him of Magister Mildred. The girl was a telekineticist and she was using her class' skill to help her crafting!

Even while observing her, he could tell that compared with Magister Mildred, Rhapsody's telekinetic skills lacked fine control and finesse. Still, it was impressive that the girl managed to blend her esper class with her crafting profession. Most players did things the other way around, using bonuses from their professions to boost their classes.

You observe a new dyeing technique and feel enlightened.

+20 ecotailor XP.

Dyeing? Was that what Rhapsody was doing in those vats? Was she dyeing the wool? After a few minutes inside the special solution, the fleece emerged from the vats. Some were incredibly shiny and had a faint white glow, whereas others had a vibrant green color. They were still dripping with liquid.

Wind Gust!

You observe a new drying technique and feel enlightened.

+10 ecotailor XP.

The blast of air from Rhapsody made the tent's fabric flap wildly and the attendees' clothes flutter. The girl was holding the fleeces telekinetically while simultaneously using a skill originally meant to knock back enemies to dry them. Roth wondered if fire-related skills would also work.

In the meantime, while Rhapsody was still drying the fleeces, Leanne already had neat balls of thin yarn. That was fast! It would have taken Roth half an hour to go through all those fleeces, but Leanne was done in just five minutes. She powered down the spinning machine and carefully set the balls of yarn into another machine.

Funny enough, now the noisy side was Rhapsody's, who kept drying the wool with different wind skills.

Howling Gale!

Air Push!

After several uses of these skills, Rhapsody examined the wool and, judging it dry enough, lifted two rings with her mind that started spinning in the air. She guided the fleeces toward the telekinetic-powered contraption. Roth noted how she used her hands to perform this task. Perhaps some tasks were too delicate to do with telekinetic abilities and required her to use her hands instead of her mind.

In the meantime, Leanne started the other machine. She had tied the ends of all the balls of yarn she had produced, and now the machine brought all the separate threads together. The contraption rotated different bars in an intricate ballet that made them go through and under one another as multiple threads of yarn came together and turned into cloth. It was a loom!

You watch how a veteran tailor uses a mechanical loom and feel enlightened.

+30 ecotailor XP.

More and more people arrived. Roth wondered why the girls hadn't bothered to ask for the battle to be held behind closed doors. Weren't they afraid their secrets would be given away? Or were they so confident in their skills that they didn't mind others watching? Roth had a feeling that it was the latter, which only made him more impressed with the tailors. Such faith in their skills!

The announcement Roth had posted on the forums had made the Union abuzz with excitement. Leanne and Rhapsody were easily the most known tailors in the Union, and Roth's post kept receiving comments from players saying they were on their way. Most players in the Union Collective happened to be based in Hilsford and, as craftsmen, usually hung around the crafting district. The 10 minutes that had elapsed since the competition began were enough to allow several to arrive, and by now, the spacious tent was beginning to feel more crowded. There were over 50 people in attendance.

After Leanne's loom finished making a long piece of woolen cloth, the girl drew shapes on it with chalk. Roth was entranced by how the girl made every line perfectly straight and every curve gracious and elegant. Even if Roth had a ruler, a set square, and a pair of compasses, he didn't think he could draw those shapes so perfectly.

Rhapsody's telekinetic rings finally stopped spinning, and she had her yarn ready. The girl placed it around her and closed her eyes, concentrating. The needles she had chosen beforehand flew off the ground and hovered before her. There were three: one was made of wood, similar to the knitting needles Roth used; one was green, made of some precious stone—jade, if Roth had to guess; and the last was made of glass or crystal. Rhapsody seemed to be visualizing what she was going to do. She opened her eyes and started knitting.

Roth gasped as he realized she had been holding two other knitting needles in her hands. As she knitted, the three other flying needles complemented her moves. She was knitting with five needles at the same time!

You behold the rare five-needle knitting technique and feel enlightened.

+300 ecotailor XP.

You behold the rare elemental needles in action and feel enlightened.

+1000 ecotailor XP.

Seeing the fantastic boost to XP, Roth felt his throat go dry. These had to be very high-end tailoring techniques for them to grant so much bonus XP to onlookers. Something else that caught Roth's eye was that she was knitting with threads of two different colors, resulting in a beautiful mixed pattern of forest green and brilliant white. It looked like Rhapsody had started by making a pair of mittens.

On Leanne's side, she held a pair of golden scissors and was halfway through cutting the patterns in the fabric. Leanne seemed to have a very methodical approach to tailoring. She did everything in stages, streamlining her process. Once finished, she brought the stack of fabric to the sewing machine and sat down.

She confidently put piece after piece through the machine and engaged its pedals, making it run a line through the seams, joining the pieces together. Unlike Rhapsody, who had chosen to start with the smaller pieces, Leanne had started right off the bat by making the jacket, which was the largest and most complex piece of clothing as well as the one that traditionally granted more stat points.

By now, the crowd had reached three digits, and Roth was surprised to see a familiar face within the crowd waving at him from the other side of the circle. Roth stood up and went out to meet his mother.

“Oh baby,” she said, hugging him.

“Hey, Ma. Sorry I didn’t tell you about the plan.”

“It’s OK, son. I was pretty mad at you and the others when they whisked us out of the house, but you never told me you were sending us all to a resort!”

Roth’s jaw dropped. A resort? Did his mom think he had sent her on a vacation? The Ogres’ condo had to be amazing for her to think that. That, or her old house had been really dingy. At the thought of his real body being surrounded by spas and luxury he couldn’t enjoy, his mood soured a little, but considering how his mother and brothers were having a good time, he felt happy for them more than anything.

“I-I’m glad you like it.”

A round of applause went through the crowd. One of the girls must have done something exciting. He had to have lost some precious professional XP for being distracted here. He forced himself to look away from the competition and focus on his mother. She was the most important. What were some measly XP points compared to talking to his mom?

His mother caught his distraction, though.

“We can talk more later. Go be with your friends,” she said happily.

Roth smiled awkwardly at being treated like a child but obeyed. “Thanks, mom. I’ll call you later.”

Roth turned around and squeezed his way through the crowd to make it back to his viewing spot. After all, he was hosting the battle.

“That’s my son. He’s really handsome, isn’t he? You should see him in real life. He’s single, you know?” he heard his mom say.

Roth whirled backward and saw his mom talking to two other girls his age. She was pointing at him, and the two girls were giggling.

“He’s just out of prison. Don’t you girls love a bad boy? But don’t worry, he’s now a changed man, the kindest man you can find. Kindness is an important quality in a husband, you know?”

Roth’s face reddened. What was his mom doing?! Was she playing matchmaker?! He pulled up the hoodie of his [Black Toxicologist Set]

and stomped toward the sitting area. Maybe bringing his mother into the game wasn't such a good idea.

Chapter 19

In the short time Roth was gone talking to his mother, Rhapsody had finished working on her second piece, a woolen cap. Both it and the mittens had the same beautiful marbled pattern of mixed green and white. Roth had never thought wool could look so colorful and beautiful.

Leanne, on the other side, had caught up. She was now working on a pair of pants. Whereas the clothes that Rhapsody had knitted had a fluffy, cozy look, Leanne's jacket was elegant and thin, giving it a lighter, more streamlined feel. It lacked any pattern, however, and only had the dull-washed color of undyed wool.

Roth looked at the clock. Not an hour had passed, and these girls had already produced such good-looking items. He had a long way to go before calling himself a proper tailor. As Rhapsody worked on a pair of wool boots and Leanne finished making a cape, someone tapped the sergeant's shoulder.

"SergeantSarg. We need to talk."

"Master Godsfried. Good to see you. And hello, Master Nakia."

Hearing the respect in the sergeant's voice, Roth turned toward the newcomers. One was a dwarf, the first dwarf player he'd seen in the game. He wore beautiful silken robes, and every single finger on his hand had a beautiful ring with a gemstone of every color. He had to have very high charisma because when Roth's eyes landed on him, he had trouble pulling them away.

To his side was a woman with a long neck. She had long clay circles in her earlobes and one in her lip, significantly enlarging her facial features. She had no rings on her fingers but many on her neck. A series of metallic bands elongated her neck beyond anything that Roth

had ever seen and only made the dwarf seem shorter by comparison. She wore a colorful large tunic with yellow and blue patterns.

The dwarf leaned to the side to examine Leanne's and Rhapsody's crafting stations and nodded approvingly. "This battle thing. How does it work?"

"It's something brand new, Master. We'll add an addendum to the Union to regulate them and brief everyone about this. We plan to make these battles a way to settle disputes between Union members or to compete for orders or prizes," the sergeant explained.

Roth raised his eyebrow, knowing the sergeant was making up all this jibber-jabber on the spot without blinking.

"Godsfried and I were talking," spoke Nakia in a soft contralto, "and we have a proposition."

"Let's hear it."

As Leanne finished the cape, the crowd gave another round of applause and cheers. Roth, however, was interested in this exchange between the sergeant and these two high-level players and kept eavesdropping.

"Who was the senior member who issued the order that started all this?"

The sergeant answered cautiously. "This boy here."

Feeling the sergeant's unspoken request, Roth stood up and introduced himself. "Hey, there. I'm Pax. Nice to meet you."

"Pax, these are Master Godsfried from the Ogres and Master Nakia from the Basilisks. They are very respected jewelers."

The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit together. That's why they had come to talk to the sergeant, who was also a jeweler.

The dwarf player examined Roth from top to bottom, and his eyes landed on his [Blue Caterpillar] ring and earring for a split-second.

"Nice ring and earring you have there," spoke Master Nakia.

"Thank you."

"I'm guessing you reached level 30 and are changing equipment. Correct?" asked Godsfried.

"That's correct."

"Have you got new jewelry yet?" probed Master Nakia.

"Uh... The only ones that suit my level are the earring and ring you noticed."

The two jewelers exchanged a knowing look and nodded. “We propose you host a battle between us two. We’ll make level 30 jewelry for you, too. The winner takes a VIP spot. Deal?”

Roth squinted at the two clever players. It was impressive how they deduced what had started the battle and then thought of a way to take advantage of it. Roth exchanged looks with the sergeant.

“*It’s your call, Roth,*” he messaged him.

On the one hand, he wasn’t planning on hosting a battle like this every time he needed to change equipment, but on the other hand, he had to increase his strength in any way he could.

“Deal. Once this battle is over, the sergeant here will host another battle with you two.”

The sergeant gave him a stern look, and Roth shrugged. The two players smiled, satisfied. “Very well. Please give us some information to start planning what we’ll do for you. What class do you have?”

“It’s a unique class.” Roth spared a look at the competition between the girls; they weren’t showing any new techniques, so he decided to give the information the two artisans needed now. “The stats I need most are intelligence, charisma, and wisdom, but I use all others too. The more stats, the better. I also desperately need cooldown reduction. Oh, and I have light affinity.”

“Excuse me, did you say *light affinity*?” asked Nakia.

“Yes.”

“You are the one who sold the guides,” Nakia gasped.

“You cost my guild a pretty penny. What an interesting lad,” commented Godsfried. “Very well, I’ll make you the best jewelry you can imagine, boy.”

“The second best,” countered Nakia, “because I’ll take the VIP spot, Master Godsfried.”

“We shall see. By the way, can we see your ring and earring?”

Roth took the items off and handed them over to the dwarf. The dwarf picked up the ring but passed the earring to Nakia.

“I’ve never seen this item in the game,” he commented.

“Me neither.”

“Especially this bonus to illusions. It’s quite unique but probably worthless to you, no?”

Roth wasn’t sure if the dwarf was preparing to make an offer on this item or if he was collecting information for what kind of items

they would craft. "It's actually my favorite thing about the item. I need every bonus to illusions I can get."

"Really?"

"Can you make something better than this?" Roth tried.

"We can make something with slightly better stats, but we can't replicate this bonus to illusions," Nakia explained apologetically.

"No worries. Let's make the competition about a belt, a ring, an earring, and a necklace."

"Very well," said Nakia.

"Deal." Godsfried stretched out his hand, and Roth shook hands with them. The jewelers sat down next to the sergeant and kept chatting with him while Roth focused his attention back on the competition. Rhapsody was still knitting the jacket while Leanne had finished making the clothes. She examined each of the items of clothing and nodded approvingly.

She then took an empty vat from her inventory and poured two large bottles of blue liquid into it. Once they were full, she dropped all the clothes into the vat and stirred the solution and the clothes in it with a wooden stick, letting them soak the fabric.

Roth scratched his chin, pondering the timing each artisan had chosen to dye the fabric. What advantages were there to dyeing the material before or after crafting with it? He doubted that it was solely a matter of preference. He would have to ask the girls later. Hopefully, they wouldn't mind sharing some of their secrets.

Meanwhile, Rhapsody finished the jacket and started working on a pair of woolen pants. Roth didn't miss the beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Knitting with five needles at the same time had to be very taxing on the girl. Still, she soldiered on without slowing down.

Leanne removed the clothes from the vat and hung them up to dry. She also grabbed what looked like a hair dryer and ran it up and down the clothes individually. They were in the home stretch and looked like they would both finish in time.

Seeing how many people had gathered, Roth wondered if the whole Union Collective had come to watch the show.

"What? Another battle?" he heard someone say to his side.

"Godsfried and Nakia! Those two are top-tiered jewelers. Want to hang out here and check their techniques?"

“Of course, man. You were right. Joining this Union was the right call.”

Hearing the two craftsmen’s excitement, Roth smiled. This atmosphere would undoubtedly draw in more talented artisans who wanted to perfect their crafts. He had to give it to Drake. Getting the Union started was an excellent decision.

The competition progressed, and with news of another battle between two top-tiered artisans, the crowd kept growing. Leanne was finished before the two hours were over, but Rhapsody kept knitting almost until the end of the competition.

Finally, after two hours of excitement, Roth stood up.

“The two hours are now over! Drop your needles, ladies!”

The girls grabbed the clothes they had made, and both started putting them on a mannequin. Roth had seen these in stores in the city but never imagined that it was an item a tailor could carry around like this. Perhaps they were inflatable or something.

As the girls finished dressing the mannequins, the two incredible sets of equipment were fully displayed for the crowd, and everyone looked incredibly excited.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Did you enjoy the battle?” asked Roth.

A massive roar of excitement and applause shook the tent. Roth chuckled at the thought of a neighboring guild complaining to the citadel about having rowdy neighbors. It had been a while since he’d been in the spotlight like this. He hosted many guild events when he ran a guild, but that was a long time ago.

After hosting the auction with the guilds, maybe he was getting a little of his old mojo back. Well, at least the non-rageaholic parts of it, he hoped.

“As the one who commissioned the order, I’ll now judge who performed the best. Please wait for a moment.”

Roth decided to check Leanne’s clothes first. “Let’s see what you’ve got there, Leanne.”

Roth walked toward the mannequin. The first thing that came to mind as he studied the equipment was the word ‘elegant.’ With the help of precise machinery, Leanne had made wool into a thin thread, which, when processed into fabric, made the clothes feel lighter and fresher and have a beautiful criss-crossed pattern.

However beautiful it looked, what he needed was stats. He picked up the items and studied them one by one.

Blue Lambswool Cap (Rare)

Description: A cap from a lamb's first wool. It captures and reflects ambient light, providing an otherworldly appearance. It's been bathed in a dye made from Blue Orchid extract, giving you a more intellectual appearance.

Item effects:

+1.5% cooldown reduction;

+10 intelligence;

+6 charisma;

+2 wisdom;

+5 ep regeneration.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

Blue Lambswool Blazer (Rare)

Description: A blazer tailored from the finest lambswool. Its deep blue hue, derived from a meticulous bath in Blue Orchid extract, radiates intellectual charm.

Item effects:

+1.5% cooldown reduction;

+15 intelligence;

+100 hp;

+8% damage reduction;

+5% status resistance.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Blue Lambswool Gloves (Rare)

Description: Gloves fashioned using wool carefully harvested from a lamb's first shearing. Bathed in a calming blue dye extracted from Blue Orchids, these gloves keep you warm and give you an intellectual look. The fine craftsmanship and attention to detail make these gloves a symbol of refined taste.

Item effects:

+2% cooldown reduction;

+5 intelligence;

+20 ep;

+5 ep regeneration;

+3% damage reduction;

+3% status resistance.

Blue Lambswool Trousers (Rare)

Description: These trousers are crafted from the softest lambswool. The subtle pleats and precise cut enhance your overall charisma.

Item effects:

+6 charisma;

+9 intelligence;

+2 wisdom;

+30 hp;

+30 ep.

Restrictions: Lvl. 31.

Blue Lambswool Oxfords (Rare)

Description: Meticulously crafted lambswool oxfords. With a plush texture and dyed in Blue Orchid extract, these shoes provide comfort and elevate your intellectual aura.

Item effects:

+8% running speed;

+4 intelligence;

+3 wisdom.

Royal Navy Lambswool Cape (Rare)

Description: Regal cape crafted from the fleece of a lamb's first shearing. Bathed in a majestic blue dye extracted from Blue Orchids, the cape enhances your intellectual charm and charisma.

Item effects:

+15 charisma;

+10 intelligence.

Restrictions: Level 31.

Leanne had surely delivered on her promise. He didn't know how she did it, but the stats offered by the clothes were exactly the ones he needed, no more, no less. What kind of mastery was required to make clothes give more of a stat? And how did she make sure that the level requirements suited him? The mastery required to produce this result was mind-boggling.

“Impressive work, Leanne.”

“Thanks, Pax.” Leanne looked at Rhapsody, who waited patiently by her clothed dummy and smirked. “See that, Rhapsody?”

“I must admit, using [Blue Orchid] extract to dye the clothes at the end was a stroke of genius. Good job,” praised Rhapsody. “Are you coming to check the clothes I crafted for you or what? Mamma needs her place in the VIP roster!”

Roth grinned. It was time to check why Rhapsody looked so confident.

Chapter 20

Roth approached Rhapsody's dummy and studied the stats of each piece of equipment.

Forest Lambswool Cap (Rare)

Description: A cap knitted from a lamb's first wool. It smells like the forest and has a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+8 intelligence;

+2 wisdom;

+5 hp regeneration;

+5 ep regeneration.

Restrictions: Light affinity, nature affinity, lvl. 28.

Forest Lambswool Robes (Rare)

Description: Robes tailored from the finest lambswool. They smell like the forest and have a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+11 intelligence;

+100 hp;

+6% damage reduction;

+4% status resistance.

Restrictions: Light affinity, nature affinity, lvl. 30.

Forest Lambswool Mittens (Rare)

Description: Mittens fashioned using wool carefully harvested from a lamb's first shearing. They smell like the forest and have a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+4 intelligence;

+3 wisdom;

+4% status resistance.

Forest Lambswool Slacks (Rare)

Description: These trousers are crafted from the softest lambswool. They smell like the forest and have a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+10 intelligence;

+4 wisdom;

+1% damage reduction.

Restrictions: Light affinity, nature affinity, lvl. 30.

Forest Lambswool Runner Shoes (Rare)

Description: Shoes made from a lamb's first shearing. They smell like the forest and have a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+15% running speed;

+5 dexterity.

Restrictions: Light affinity, nature affinity, lvl. 30.

Forest Lambswool Cape (Rare)

Description: Regal cape crafted from the fleece of a lamb's first shearing. It smells like the forest and has a beautiful sheen. This is part of a set.

Item effects:

+1% cooldown reduction;

+10 intelligence;

+5 charisma;

+3% running speed.

Restrictions: Light affinity, nature affinity, level 31.

[Forest Lambswool Set] effects:

If three pieces of the set are equipped:

+3 to all stats;

+5% intelligence;

+1% cooldown reduction.

If six pieces of the set are equipped:

+5 to all stats;

+10% intelligence;

+3% cooldown reduction;

You smell like a forest;

You glow brighter.

Roth could hardly breathe, looking at the description. No wonder she had been so confident! She had made a set! How on earth had she done this? Did she have a recipe prepared beforehand? If so, it was a devious move to challenge Leanne while keeping this ace up her sleeve.

As he compared the pieces of equipment, he was torn between who the victor should be. On the one hand, individually, Leanne's pieces of equipment were all superior to Rhapsody's. But on the other hand, they weren't part of a set.

While Rhapsody's individual pieces of equipment were lackluster in comparison to Leanne's and impossible to sell later on, they had a powerful set effect. This type of universal increase to all stats was particularly powerful since Roth had ten different stats. Just from this set bonus alone, he won 50 stat points, or ten levels worth of stats.

The [Forest Lambswool Set] also offered a percentage increase in intelligence. He was no stranger to this kind of bonus, thanks to his [Well-Read] title, which granted 1% to intelligence; his [First of a Kind] title, which granted 5% to charisma; and, more recently, his [Stat Prodigy] title. Although, at first, these percentage bonuses didn't do much, as he kept amassing stats, they revealed their true potential. From the moment he activated his [Badger Form], the percentual bonus to intelligence could easily translate into 50 stats.

Last but not least, it was his first time seeing equipment that granted affinity bonuses. He had a sensitivity to the light element thanks to his [Martyr] title and one to nature thanks to his zoomorph race. What would happen once he equipped this set?

"You sneaky gal," Roth heard Leanne say as she studied the pieces of equipment on Rhapsody's dummy. "You had a set recipe!"

"I wasn't the only sneaky one. How much did you spend on that [Blue Orchid Dye]? 100 gold?"

"It's a small price to pay to get those stats. So your elemental needles give more stats in exchange for narrowing down who uses them?"

"That's right."

"Cool. However, that kills its selling potential. How many players do you know with a dual affinity at level 30?"

"There you go, thinking only about money! It's all about the craft, girl!"

"I have made my decision!" declared Roth, quieting the murmuring around the tent and the bickering girls. The two tailors stared at Roth, eager to hear the results.

"First of all, let me tell you that it was very difficult to decide between the two sets of equipment. You are both fantastic tailors, and you deserve a round of applause. Am I right?"

The crowd released a thundering round of applause and cheers. Roth meant what he said. The girls had put on quite a show. Their display of techniques had captured the crowd's attention, especially the tailors, who took the lead in applauding.

"Leanne, even though the equipment you made is fantastic, Rhapsody was able to make a set with an incredible effect. I'm sorry, she wins this round. Rhapsody, congratulations! You are now a VIP member of the Union Collective."

SergeantSarg started chanting Rhapsody's name, to which all the other Union members joined.

Leanne gracefully walked over to Rhapsody and shook her adversary's hand. "Good fight. I enjoyed seeing your crafting process. I have to give it a go with those marbled wool patterns."

"It's worth it. I've also been working mostly with knitting, but I must focus more on using the loom. Your technique with it is awesome."

Roth smiled, seeing the comradery and the maturity of both girls. That only assured him that what he was about to do was fair. He raised his arms, signaling the crowd that he wasn't done talking.

"However, that's not all. Something incredible happened today, which the Union Collective can't ignore. Let me ask you. Did you enjoy seeing this battle?"

A round of applause sounded.

"And would you like to see more of them in the future?"

"Yeah!" came the answer from the crowd.

"Leanne was the one who gave the idea of starting this crafting battle. She also showed great sportsmanship by accepting Rhapsody's challenge even when she didn't have to. In the statutes of the Union, we state that we'll reward members for an extraordinary contribution to the Union. Leanne's contribution today can't go unnoticed. Leanne, congratulations. You are now also a VIP member of the Union!"

Hearing this, the mature tailor reverted to a giddy teenage girl, and she hugged Roth. "Thank you!"

"No problem."

She then went to Rhapsody, and both jumped happily while hugging each other. Roth observed, smiling. Both girls were winners today, but that wouldn't always be the case. He glanced at the master jewelers who waited for their turn. He wondered who between the two would win the next battle.

"Now, please give your attention to the host of our next epic crafting battle! Give it up for SergeantSarg!"

The sergeant took the hint and went to the ring. Everyone in the Union knew him, and he received a warm welcome from the crowd just by standing up. As soon as they quieted down, the tall veteran

announced the challenge's rules. Roth used the opportunity to leave the circle's center, followed by Leanne and Rhapsody.

As the crowd roared and applauded, Roth used the chance to say goodbye to both girls.

"Ladies, your skills are incredible. I learned a lot."

"Wait. Are you a tailor, too?" asked Rhapsody curiously.

"Yes, I am."

"What level?" asked Leanne.

"Level 10."

They looked at each other, and even though they respectfully remained silent, Roth could see the implicit 'what a noob' look. "Do you mind if I call you whenever I need guidance?"

"Sure. And, by the way, thank you, Pax," said Leanne. You were the one who gave the idea for the battles, not me."

"What I told the crowd wasn't a complete lie. You had thought of it, too. Besides, I honestly believe you both deserve to be VIPs. I'll add you to the roster as soon as possible. OK?" Roth turned to leave.

"Wait. Aren't you staying for the jewelry battle?"

"I'd love to, but I must take care of some things. I'll be back before the challenge ends, though."

"You're forgetting something, Pax," complained Rhapsody with a pout.

Roth looked blankly at Rhapsody and then remembered what she was talking about. "Oh, right. Sure. You can hold him." Roth pulled Lin from the folds of his Black Toxicologist Jacket and handed him over to Rhapsody.

"Aaw... Aren't you the cutest little kitten?"

Rhapsody, catching Leanne's begging look, approached her. "See how soft he is."

"Oh my goodness, I can't believe how cute he is!"

Roth let them play with Lin for a few minutes and then, looking at the time, decided it was time to go. "I'm going to leave now. But I'll be back in a while," he said while picking Lin up again.

"Alright. See you around, Pax."

The girls went to see the battle while Roth headed in the opposite direction, toward the auction house. He had enjoyed meeting the two tailors. They had utterly opposite styles but were both incredible at

what they did. The possibility of giving them a call whenever he was stuck was priceless.

Roth activated [Camouflage] and ran out of the tent camp. As he ran through one of the avenues of Hilsford, he equipped his new set.

EQUIPMENT

Right Hand: [Plumber's Torch] | +5 intelligence

Left Hand: [Flag of the Rat Cave] | +10 wisdom; +6 dexterity; +10% speed; [Ratan Stride]; [Ratan Dash]

Shoes: [Forest Lambswool Runner Shoes] | +15% running speed; +5 dexterity

Bottom: [Forest Lambswool Slacks] | +10 intelligence; +4 wisdom; +1% damage reduction

Top: [Forest Lambswool Robes] | +1% cooldown reduction; +11 intelligence; +100 hp; +6% damage reduction; +4% status resistance

Gloves: [Forest Lambswool Mittens] | +1% cooldown reduction; +4 intelligence; +3 wisdom; +4% status resistance

Head: [Forest Lambswool Hood] | +1% cooldown reduction; +8 intelligence; +2 wisdom; +5 hp regeneration; +5 ep regeneration

Cape: [Wool Poncho] | +10 intelligence; +5 charisma; +3% running speed; +1% cooldown reduction

As he put on all the different pieces, they all shone in a brilliant white with a faint green tone, and then the glow disappeared.

The Leafies enjoy the scent of the forest on you.

+1 nature affinity;

+10 affection.

[Leafies] have leveled up.

Lin thinks you smell nice.

+1 nature affinity;

+10 affection.

[Lin] has leveled up.

Roth stopped running to read through the notifications. What? He had gained nature affinity just by equipping this set of equipment. And his pets had leveled up just like that? How was that possible? Roth scratched his chin, lost in thought.

His zoomorph race had a relationship with nature affinity, and since he had unlocked it, he had been steadily gaining points on that front. Could it be that the equipment's effect stacked with his race and made gaining affinity easier? If so, this set of equipment was even more valuable than Roth had given it credit for.

Not only that, but with this switch, his stats grew immensely.

STATS

Strength: 74

Dexterity: 97

Intelligence: 143 (+11%)

Wisdom: 171

Endurance: 244 (+10%)

Charisma: 124 (+5%)

Resilience: 24

Insight: 29

Subterfuge: 58

Perception: 18

Although [Plumber Boots] and [Plumber Gloves] had offered some neat special effects, they didn't give any stats. He had just gained a massive spike in power by replacing them with better alternatives.

Compared with the 1% cooldown reduction offered by the [Black Toxicologist] set, he now had a 7% cooldown reduction from this set alone. His [Wool's Will] effect had also kicked in, granting him an extra six intelligence and three dexterity. Wearing the beautiful regal ensemble of green and white marbled wool, Roth looked like the ruler of a kingdom in some frozen mountain realm.

The best part was that he was just getting started. Even as he ran, some of the top jewelers in the game were giving their all, creating accessories that fit his playstyle—and all of that for free! That last part was significant because it left him with a larger budget to secure what he needed from the auction house without worrying about money.

Back at the auction house, Roth rushed up the stairs, past the columns, and returned to precisely the same bench where he'd been sitting when Drake summoned him. Roth's experience so far was that something terrible happened whenever he wanted to spend time shopping. Therefore, he would hurry to purchase what he wanted as fast as he could.

He first looked for consumables that granted stats. Like before, the cheapest one was [Golden Acom], priced at ten gold a piece.

Golden Acorn (Consumable)

Item description: Occasionally, the majestic oak trees of the Jade Forest will give an exceptional acorn such as this.

Item effects:

Increases a random stat by 1.

It can only be eaten 3 times.

He had his eyes on these for a long time, but he had been postponing purchasing them for a lack of funds. He bought three right away and stuffed them all in his mouth. They tasted surprisingly like caramelized popcorn.

The vitality of the forest strengthens you.

+1 charisma;

+1 nature affinity.

The vitality of the forest strengthens you.

+1 insight;

+1 nature affinity.

The vitality of the forest strengthens you.

+1 dexterity;

+1 nature affinity.

What a nice surprise! He hadn't expected the [Golden Acorns] to also increase his nature affinity. Was that also a reflection of his zoomorph race and the [Forest Lambswool] set effect stacking up? Looking at the golden acorn, he thought about the Leafies ant colony. They also lived in acorns. Why not get them an upgrade?

Chapter 21

Roth drummed his fingers on the bench and grabbed the acorn that was the home of the Leafies. The colony was still in its very beginning, and the acorn was pretty much intact, but there might be benefits to upgrading their house. Ten gold was a considerable sum, but he wasn't currently lacking funds, and it looked like a good investment. He purchased an extra [Golden Acorn]. After grabbing the golden acorn from the inventory, he brought both acorns together.

"Here. This house is better," he offered Lea, the queen of his colony.

There was a moment of awkward silence, and Roth repeated the telepathic message. Then, finally, there was a hint of movement. The copper-green treeant queen emerged from the little hole she had burrowed herself into, and Roth tried to assist her by bringing the gold acorn as close to her as possible. She searched for the better acorn with her antennae and retreated into the regular acorn, contrary to what Roth was expecting.

"Hard" was the only thing Roth managed to get from the queen. Roth tapped the gold acorn with his finger and tried scratching it with his nail. She was right. This fruit was hard. The treeants didn't have the resources to drill into this improved acorn. It had been worth a shot. He would save it for whenever they were ready.

These acorns made him think of his plans to become an herbalist and a card master. He kept being thrown from one situation to the next and couldn't catch his breath. Hopefully, after he opened the portal for the Ogres, he would have more time to dedicate to his profession.

For now, the priority was to increase his strength as much as possible. Roth browsed the auction house for more consumables, which permanently increased stats. The second cheapest was one he had seen before but didn't want to buy.

Wolf Fillet (Consumable)

Item description: An incredible cut of meat harvested from a wolf elite. Just the smell of it makes your mouth drool.

Item effects:

Improves your worst stat by 2;

It can only be eaten once.

He knew this was just a game, but ever since he raised his little chick in prison, he just couldn't get any meat in his mouth without gagging, virtual or otherwise. He would stick to his guns and keep looking for vegetarian options.

As he reviewed the list of items available for sale, Roth realized that avoiding non-vegetarian options would come at a price. All items under a thousand gold that boosted stats, except for the [Gold Acorns] that he already bought, were cuts of meat! Priced at 300 gold, there was a drumstick.

Owl Seer Drumstick (Consumable)

Item description: The lower portion of the thigh of the leader of the owls. It makes for a fantastic meal.

Item effects:

Permanently improves wisdom by 1;

It can only be eaten twice.

And then, priced at 350 gold, another steak.

Beaver Tail Steak (Consumable)

Item description: A steak made from an elite beaver's muscled tail. Some of the beavers' know-how is passed on to you by eating it.

Item effects:

Improves dexterity by 1;

It can only be eaten twice.

These and other similar items seemed to be gained from hunting elites and bosses around Hilsford. Players would probably eat the first ones they found, and then, when they found more, would sell them in the auction house.

Although the items weren't exceedingly expensive, Roth ignored them and kept looking for options that suited him. Unfortunately, the following options that he felt comfortable eating cost more than 1500 gold.

100-Year-Old Ginger Root (Consumable)

Item description: An aged root that brims with vitality and is good for detoxing your body.

Item effects:

Permanently increases hp by 100;

Boosts your weakest stat by 1;

It can only be consumed once.

The other cost 1850 gold.

Camel Queen's Milk (Consumable)

Item description: The nourishing milk from a powerful camel queen which will make your skin soft and supple.

Item effects:

+2 charisma;

It can only be consumed once.

He couldn't blame the market for the ginger-root's high prices. No class or player on AstroTerra wouldn't want the extra hp. As for the [Camel Queen's Milk], it not only permanently increased charisma but also unlocked the stat for players who didn't have it yet.

The next more expensive vegetarian item he found for sale was the [Snake Fruit], which he had already consumed. It cost 5000 gold.

He wasn't sure if he was ready to fork out 3500 gold for just three stats. At the same time, he was trying to make it to the top, and apparently, every respectable player went around hunting for these prized cuts of meat and improving their stats. If Roth didn't invest in these consumables, how was he supposed ever to reach the top?

He saved the two items as favorites. He would see how much money he would have left after buying everything else he needed.

Roth inspected his current skills.

Passive: [Boar's Might]; [Farsight]; [Flag Bearer]; [Ratan Stride]; [Snake Slither]

Active: [Camouflage]; [Inspiration]; [Miniaturize]; [Peace Decree]; [Peace Treaty]; [Ratan Dash]; [Screeching Terror]; [Search]; [30 Steps]

Several of his skills were irreplaceable, such as [Miniaturize] and his class-specific skills. Others had room for improvement. For example, he didn't need [Boar's Might] anymore. All he used [Boar Form] for was to improve his weight-carrying capacity, and he had found more efficient ways of doing that.

For one, there was Bucky. Then, there was [Ant Form], which directly boosted his weight-carry capacity. Finally, there was his [Cart-Pulling] skill and the ride he was about to buy. He doubted he would be using [Boar Form] anytime soon.

His flag also offered him the [Ratan Stride] and [Ratan Dash] skills for free, making his previous purchase of [Ratan Stride] and [30 Steps] moot. He had potentially three skill slots to fill, four if he could find a better alternative to [Snake Slither].

Roth operated the different filters in the auction house and started looking for all the skills he could use. He focused on skills that could resonate with his zoomorph forms and affinities. Soon, Roth came down to three possibilities. The first was one skill that every respectable esper had, which could be learned from level 30.

Blink (Uncommon)

Description: With much training, you can tap into the quantum realm and jump across space.

Skill effects:

Active. You can teleport a short distance.

Radius scales with wisdom.

Cooldown: 1h.

Restrictions: Esper, lvl. 30.

It was a skill meant to improve survivability and to put some distance between espers and attackers. There was a similar equivalent in most games, and it was a pain in the neck to deal with. He didn't mind adding this skill to his arsenal to improve his survivability and utility. To top it off, the skill could be learned from trainers, and therefore, whenever players got their skill card, they sold it on the market cheaply for 50 silver. He deleted [30 Steps] and learned [Blink].

[Blink] resonates with [Inner Light].

[Blink] has upgraded to [Blink Blink].

Roth smirked at the notification. He had suspected that [Blink] would be of the light attribute and would resonate with his affinity. It seems he was correct. He looked at the upgraded version of the skill.

Blink Blink (Rare)

Description: With much training, you can tap into the quantum realm and jump across space.

Skill effects:

Active. You can teleport a short distance and then teleport again.

Radius scales with wisdom.

Cooldown: 27m.

Restrictions: Espers, lvl. 30.

What a difference. Not only had the cooldown been halved, but he could blink twice. Roth looked at the fountain that was ten meters away.

Blink Blink!

His figure instantly appeared near the fountain. He then looked at the place he had teleported from and used the skill again.

Blink Blink!

And he was back. So that's what it looked like to be on the other side of this annoying skill. This would help him get out of tricky situations, he hoped. A double blink, boosted by the high wisdom of his [Corvid Form], would help him traverse a long distance in one single bout.

The next skill that Roth learned was a replacement for [Taunting Roar], which he had deleted back in the Green Woods to experiment with some of his skill cards. It was a new upgraded version that warriors pursuing the tank class advancement could learn. Since his class' unique attributes ignored those requirements, he could learn it.

Taunting Bellow (Uncommon)

Skill description: The surrounding creatures react to your threatening grunts and sounds and feel enraged. They will chase after you.

Skill effect:

Active. Draw all enemies in a 10m radius;

Radius is affected by charisma;

Skill effectiveness is affected by strength.

Restrictions: Tank, lvl. 30.

Compared with [Taunting Roar], the skill didn't lose effectiveness depending on the target's HP. This was a priceless upgrade for tanks, who often took the initiative to engage bosses and secure aggro before the team would follow. Despite being a skill that could be learned from trainers, this skill card was more expensive. It probably translated into a popular card in the Terramon mini-game. He took out five gold to purchase it, deleted [Boar's Might], and learned it.

Roth looked for an upgraded version of [Screeching Terror] but couldn't find one. Perhaps it was only unlocked at later levels. The medic fear-provoking skill had proven its worth many times. Now that he had unequipped the [Black Toxicologist] set and lost its bonuses to poisons, and to hallucinogen grenades, he had to find an alternative way to power the skill.

He eventually found one that suited the bill. It was crazy expensive, but its effect seemed to be worth it.

Eerie Glow (Rare)

Description: Your skin casts a ghostly light that makes your surroundings feel ominous and unsettles enemies.

Skill effects:

Passive. Slightly powers your fear debuffs;

Active. Doubles your fear debuffs for one minute. Cooldown: 1h.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

It was priced at a whopping 300 gold, enough money to buy several good pieces of equipment for level 30. It had to be a difficult skill to get, and since it could be learned by all classes, that only jacked up the price.

Roth purchased it without any hesitation. He deleted the [Ratan Stride] skill, which, although useful, was also provided by his flag, and learned it.

[Eerie Glow] resonates with [Inner Light].

[Eerie Glow] has upgraded to [Horrific Glow].

Horrific Glow (Epic)

Description: Your skin casts a terrible light that makes your surroundings feel ominous and terrifies enemies.

Skill effects:

Passive. Powers your fear debuffs;

Active. Triples your fear debuffs for one minute. There's a chance that whoever looks at you suffers a fear debuff for 1 second while this skill is activated.

Cooldown: 27min.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

The moment Roth learned this skill, his newly equipped [Forest Lambswool] set gained an eerie, sickly green glow. He almost felt as if he had suddenly become radioactive. This skill would significantly boost [Screeching Terror]'s effectiveness.

Roth stared at his new skillset and nodded approvingly. This time, what had shone through was his [Light] affinity. Skills named after low-level monsters such as ratans, boars, and snakes were typically more for players level 25 and below. Now that he had broken through to level 30, skills that were worth buying and resonated with his zoomorph forms had become fewer.

Additionally, regardless of his form, he always had his light affinity burning in the background. It was better to always have a skill in its

upgraded version rather than one that was only upgraded if he changed forms.

Checking the clock, he still had two hours before the jewelry battle ended. He had expected to spend all his money on equipment and skills, but he had only spent 305 gold and 50 silver on skills and 40 gold on [Golden Acorns] so far. The artisans competing for a VIP seat were giving him costly equipment for free, and he had purchased two of the skills for a very low price. That left him with thousands of gold in his pocket.

Thanking BlueFire for his generosity and for the 5k gold he had mooched off the Ogres earlier, Roth opened the auction house window and went to his favorites. He purchased the [100-Year Old Ginger Root] and [Camel Queen's Milk] he'd seen earlier for 3250 gold. As soon as the items materialized in his inventory, he grabbed them and ate them.

His eyes watered as he munched on the ginger root, and his tongue burned. The vegetable had a spicy sweetness. Even though it was hot, it tasted pleasant and savory.

The vitality of nature strengthens you.

+100 hp;

+1 perception;

+5 nature affinity.

Since this item was of higher quality than the acorns, he had gained five nature affinity points! He went on to drink the bottle of milk he had purchased. The milk was silky and thick, instantly cooling the prickling sensation that the ginger root had left in Roth's mouth.

The love and warmth of the camel mother nurture you.

+2 charisma;

+5 nature affinity.

You've unlocked a new title: [Vegetarian Gourmand].

“Uh? A new title?” Roth opened the description of the title.

Vegetarian Gourmand (Rare)

Description: Your palate has become refined after experiencing the delicacies of the natural world.

Title effects:

You can consume one more of each vegetarian stat-boosting item;

You can't eat meat inside the game.

Conditions to unlock [Vegetarian Gourmand]:

To have eaten five different types of stat-boosting vegetarian ingredients;

To have never eaten stat-boosting meat.

Chapter 22

Roth hadn't expected a title related to eating and a rare one of all things. Among his many titles, most were common and uncommon. Titles that were rare and above were difficult to unlock, and guilds kept information about them under lock and key.

Brian, for example, was a long-time member of Pegasus and was privy to valuable information on the guild's activities. He had access to intel on different races, quests, maps, dungeons, professions, and titles. Even so, Brian had only been given access to information on titles that were uncommon and below. This went to show how valuable rare titles were.

Roth remembered all his adventures with the [Power Truffle] and how he found a [Snake Fruit] down in the sewers. Those had been the first two stat-boosting vegetarian ingredients he'd consumed. But how many players had been lucky enough to do the same? How many players had had the luxury of eating these prized ingredients early on in their journey in AstroTerra?

Roth stared at the description of his new title. He wondered if there were vegetarians like him who refused to eat meat inside the game. Most likely, players who arrived from the Green Woods never got their hands on a [Power Truffle] and went hunting the elites around cities, eating [Wolf Fillet] or similar cuts of meat that permanently boosted stats, thus barring them from ever getting [Vegetarian Gourmand].

Perhaps there was even an equivalent for players who only ate meat, a [Meatatarian Gourmand] title, or something similar.

However, due to Roth's unique journey, he'd been lucky enough to eat a [Power Truffle] and a [Snake Fruit]. Finally, with the [Golden

Acorns], the [100-Year-Old Ginger Root], and the [Camel Queen's Milk] he bought and ate in the market today, he was able to reach the five-ingredient threshold necessary to get [Vegetarian Gourmand].

He picked up the extra golden acorn he had purchased earlier for the Leafies and put it in his mouth.

The vitality of the forest strengthens you.

+1 wisdom;

+1 nature affinity.

As he chewed on the sweet, crunchy acorn, his mind was already working at full-throttle, thinking of ways to get his hands on another [Power Truffle] and [Snake Fruit]. He knew that the [Power Truffle] was on sale in the reputation store, and he imagined the same would be valid for the [Snake Fruit] if he could figure out where their reputation store was. Perhaps spending reputation coins to buy these consumables would be a solid investment later.

Opening the auction house's window, he purchased yet another [Golden Acorn] for whenever the Leafies wanted to move into it. It felt wrong to keep all the good stuff just for himself.

After this shopping spree, he had a little over a thousand gold left in his inventory. He grimaced as he realized that this amount was the same as the bounty that Pegasus had offered to entice all players in Hilsford to serve Roth's head on a silver platter to Loki. It was a lot of money, but it felt so little. He still wanted to purchase several things, but hopefully, this much money would be enough.

*

Blue Creek Town was one of the largest fishing villages in Green Country. Players who wanted to pursue fishing often started in the Water Caves. However, if someone wanted to start their fishing career in Green Country, this was one of a handful of fishing towns players could go to. It had a population of over 500 NPCs.

Zin looked at the fishing village on the horizon. He had to give it to the Ogres for pioneering the concept of keeping a pet village. They let hivies contaminate all the NPCs, which didn't take long, swept through the village collecting event points, and then waited for the village to reset with new NPCs. They would then leak that this village wasn't infected yet, and players on the alien side would come running

to start the whole process again. Although most guild farming teams only stuck to smaller settlements, as was characteristic of Ogre, he had gone for something more ambitious.

"Wait here," he messaged his squad. He had brought his assassin team, comprised of 100 rogues with a skill set focused on damage-dealing and stealth. Even though they all had good gaming sense, Zin trusted no one more than himself to do recon. After all, their target was the guild leader of the Ogres.

Zin turned on his [Camouflage], faded into a puff of smoke, and reappeared on the roofs of the fishing village. Some NPCs walked around, going about their business, but the village looked quite empty. This probably meant that the Ogres had recently finished a harvesting cycle and were waiting for the village to be repopulated again so that hivies could come and create more prey for them.

Jumping from roof to roof, Zin spotted a small forested hill that afforded a good view of the village and, judging it as the location where he himself would have set camp, moved toward it. Zin wasn't sure if he was the strongest player in the game, but he was confident he was the fastest. In seconds, he arrived at the hill and found the Ogres' campaign tent. It was made of camo-patterned cloth, which helped disguise the structure against the green and brown background.

He didn't dare go into the tent alone. Ogre had that annoying pet who would spot him immediately if he came too close. But that didn't mean he couldn't glean any information. He started doing a headcount of how many Ogre players were here. Previous intel said there would be fifty players.

With his squad of 100 rogues, he could divide them into three teams and have them stealthily approach thirty-three selected targets. Once he gave the order, they could just perma-stun and instakill most of this squad of Ogre players. Then, they could crush the rest using the sheer strength of numbers, thus enacting Loki's revenge.

However, Zin had already counted sixty players and kept finding more. He frowned once he spotted heavyweights from other major guilds here, too. He spotted Manny from Cerberus, someone he respected and dared not look down on. He was one of the few players in AstroTerra who had come close to killing him. He then found Kraken and ColdHand coming out of the tree line and approaching

the campaign tent. These two were very troublesome opponents, too. At least three of the top ten guilds had gathered in this back-of-the-woods place. What was going on here?

*

Trampler watched as the guild's envoy unloaded the cargo in the clearing. The old man was a retired businessman and one of the guild's best merchants. He had a refined set of clothing, but Trampler had never once seen the man without a straw in his mouth. He wondered if there was some in-game benefit to doing that or if it was just an inexplicable quirk that the man had. Despite granting him a grandfatherly, country look, the rest of his clothes were made of the finest silk, and even the carriage he used to transport the goods was made of beautifully carved wood, a true treasure. Once the merchant dumped the cart's contents, he left at the slow, steady pace of a retired carefree man. Trampler nodded approvingly at the pile of golden cereal left behind.

"Now what, captain?" asked Ray, one of his team members.

"Now, we wait. The shield is impenetrable. This is supposed to grant us access," he said, pointing at the pile of cereal.

"Tsk. What a waste," Kevin, another of his troopers, said.

Trampler couldn't blame him. This was [Windy Wheat], a delicacy that could only be farmed by farmers level 30 and above. Moreover, it was an ingredient unique to the Sky Islands. There was at least ten gold worth of cereal in this pile. Whatever. It was the guild's money, and the guild had deep pockets.

He squatted and waited. After several minutes, he finally caught some movement. A tiny little ant came across the shield, appearing as if by magic, and landed on the cereal. After a few moments, it disappeared. Then, two ants appeared, and then a third. They worked together to cut loose the grain from one of the wheat stalks and carried it through the shield.

After a few moments, another team of four ants appeared, then five, then ten. As time passed, more and more ants crossed the shield and disappeared into the pile of cereal.

The Lord of the Woods accepts your offering.

+1 reputation with the treeants.

“Only one? After we gave it a whole pile?” protested Ray. “What if it had just been common wheat? These ants have a fancy taste!”

“What’re you gonna do?” Trampler said as he pushed his hand against the barrier. As he reached out towards it, the previously impenetrable invisible wall disappeared, and so did his hand. Grinning, he stepped through the shield and discovered the giant tree, just like the guide promised. Trampler instinctively raised his shield and positioned it between him and the high-end boar that swung its axe a few meters away. He tried to inspect the NPC to no avail.

Trampler stood fear-struck for a few seconds, not daring to move a muscle, but the boar ignored him. There was nothing in the guide about this monster. The humanoid boar kept swinging its heavy axe without glancing in his direction. Fine. He would ignore the NPC back. He didn’t want any trouble. He was here to explore the new map like BlueFire had ordered him.

The other three Ogelords crossed the shield, showing similar reactions at the sight of the boar.

“Is it safe, captain?”

“I think so. It’s just ignoring us.”

“Wow! What a tall tree! I haven’t seen anything like it in the game!” spoke Lara, one of the most powerful hydrokinetics in the guild.

“Who would have known that such a secret was hiding in plain sight on a beginner map.”

“What’s up with the sheep over there? I’ve never seen any sheep in the Green Woods before.”

While his squad looked at what had been hidden behind the shield, Trampler walked toward the tree and located the small hole the ants were disappearing into. “OK, people. Gather round. Get the potions from the guild. It’s time to enter Antioch. Do not attack the ants under any circumstances. Got it?”

Hearing his troops’ agreement, Trampler gulped down the [Miniaturizing Potion] and then the item BlueFire had provided them. Just as the guide had promised, they shrank to a 100th of their usual size.

Trampler checked the timer in the upper-right corner of his vision. The stacked effects of [Miniaturize] would last them one hour. If need be, each had ten more [Miniaturizing Honeydews] in their inventory, which should last them for half a day. They had that long to find a

way to get more of it. The supply of expensive consumables wasn't infinite, and the number one priority in their mission parameters was guaranteeing a steady supply of [Miniaturizing Honeydew].

"I can't believe the developers hid this feature from players for so long."

"Come! Let's enter the city. There's no time to waste."

The entrance to Antioch was a hole hidden under the tree's tangled roots, with many ants entering and leaving. "Whoever found this place is a top-notch adventurer," commended Lara.

Trampler kept a blank face, but inwardly, he agreed. Finding this shielded tree and then the gateway to a new world region while being bold enough to spend a [Miniaturizing Potion] to make it down there showed incredible insight and bravery. "No time to waste, team. Let's go."

The four players followed in after the many ants carrying food and pieces of leaf. Before they could progress far into the tunnel, it closed ahead of them.

When Trampler inspected the wall, he saw that two turtle ant elites were clogging the tunnel. "Now what?" he heard Ray say.

Trampler had read the guide many times and couldn't remember seeing any references to this. According to the guide, all they had to do was enter the tunnels, not stir up trouble, and find work to do. But how were they supposed to do so if they couldn't even enter the city?

"What should we do?" asked Kevin as his chain-mailed, gloved hand fastened around his spear.

Trampler pondered for a few moments, "According to the guide, to gain access to the stores of Antioch, we have to find work to do. The player who discovered this probably got a reputation bonus with the ants as a reward and could enter the city right away. We'll have to do it the hard way."

"But what kind of work should we do?" asked Lara.

"I don't know. Just split up and do as the other ants do."

The team skedaddled. Kevin and Ray followed some ants up in the trees, and Lara went after others disappearing into the grass. Trampler was already running toward the pile of cereal at the shield entrance. He would help the ants carry the cereal in and, hopefully, be allowed entrance into the city.

Chapter 23

Roth entered the crafting district as he studied the new post on the Union Collective's page. It looked like in the short time that he'd been away shopping, the rest of the team had already added an addendum to the Union contract explaining the rules for crafting battles.

Addendum: Crafting Battles and Union Challenges

Crafting Battles:

In the spirit of camaraderie and fair competition, the Union Collective hereby introduces the concept of Crafting Battles. Crafting Battles are friendly competitions among Unionized Craftsmen designed to settle disputes, compete for orders, and elevate the overall skill level within the Union.

Occasions for Crafting Battles:

A Crafting Battle may occur under the following circumstances:

To settle a private dispute;

To compete for the right to an order;

As a challenge to enter the Union.

Crafting Battles to Settle Disputes:

Unionized Craftsmen seeking to settle disputes may propose a Crafting Battle by submitting a formal request to the Union Collective. The request must detail the nature of the competition, the stakes involved, and the mutual agreement of both parties.

Crafting Battle for Order Placement:

Crafting Battles will automatically ensue when two or more Unionized Craftsmen express interest in fulfilling the same order. After an order is placed, a sign-up period begins. If more than one person vies for the order during this period, a Crafting Battle is automatically initiated.

Union Challenges:

In order to foster a dynamic and skilled Union Collective, a rule is hereby established to allow outsiders to challenge current Unionized Craftsmen. If the outside challenger wins, he shall earn a place within the Union Collective.

Initiating a Union Challenge:

Outsiders seeking membership in the Union Collective may issue a formal challenge to any current Unionized Craftsmen. The challenge must be submitted in writing to the Union Management, accompanied by a processing fee of 50 silver, specifying the terms and conditions of the challenge.

Acceptance of Challenges:

Unionized Craftsmen are obligated to accept at least one challenge per month to demonstrate their commitment to the growth and competitiveness of the Union. Failure to accept challenges without valid reasons may result in consequences, as determined by Union Management.

Consequences of Union Challenge:

The Union Collective will supervise and facilitate Union Challenges to ensure fairness and adherence to the rules. The challenger will be able to join the ranks of the Unionized Craftsmen.

Public and Private Crafting Battles:

Valid Crafting Battles must be public to foster transparency and fair competition. Craftsmen wishing to conduct a Crafting Battle away from public view must remit a fee to the Union Collective for approval.

Crafting Battle Resolution:

Crafting Battles will be overseen by appointed referees or a committee designated by Union Management. Although the involved parties can suggest one Unionized Craftsman as the referee, Union Management reserves the right to choose the referee. The outcome shall be determined based on predetermined criteria relevant to the nature of the competition.

Debts and Dispute Settlement:

Failure to fulfill debts or to follow through on disputes settled with Crafting Battles will result in expulsion and banishment from the Union Collective. Union Management will enforce the consequences in such cases.

This revised addendum is hereby incorporated into the Union Collective Agreement and is effective as of [Insert Effective Date].

He had to ask H if he was a lawyer, a paralegal, or something else. He could create contracts with a snap of the fingers. As Roth looked over the details, he nodded approvingly. These battles would make the Union Collective more attractive to hardcore artisans who wanted to prove their worth and sharpen their skills.

In the future, if two craftsmen wanted to compete for the right to accept an order as it had been in the case of Rhapsody and Leanne, they could just settle matters through a Crafting Battle. Roth hadn't thought of charging a fee for hosting battles, but he agreed with the measure. Serving as a referee in this type of event could take a couple of hours, and there should be something in it for whoever was hosting.

The extra fee for craftsmen wanting to keep their secrets hidden from the public was also a great way of assuring some funds for the Union. Although Rhapsody and Leanne had seemed completely confident in displaying their skills to onlookers, there probably were artisans who didn't enjoy revealing their secrets.

He also liked how they had made it so that these battles could be used to enter the Union. They ran the risk of the organization growing stale if they didn't do something like this. Eventually, newcomers would run out of new insights into crafting that they could share with the Union. This way, they were given an additional way to join the ranks.

He sent a thumbs up in the chat to commend the initiative and dropped the idea of hosting a monthly tournament for each profession. Having a ranking for each profession could further fan the flames of competition and make people excited about joining the Union.

Roth checked his map to make sure he was on the right track. He was on one of the city's main avenues, heading toward the citadel. As he walked, a few notifications from the auction house trickled in.

Someone has purchased [Black Toxicologist Hood] for one gold in Hilsford's Auction House.

It was a good feeling to have some money reentering his wallet. After buying everything he wanted from the auction house, he was left with only five hundred gold. He still wanted to pass by the Crafting Hem to purchase new recipes, tools, and supplies, so having that extra cash could go a long way.

Roth was surprised with how much stuff he had to sell in the auction house. For starters, there were random skill cards, pieces of equipment, and consumables that he received as spontaneous gifts from friendly factions, some of which were quite valuable.

There were also several items that he got to keep for himself after bartering between factions. For example, Mario asked for five [Swamp Corn] for one [Alligator Scale]. Roth had convinced Soros to throw one extra [Swamp Corn] into the deal. Whenever they traded goods, Roth came out of it with one [Swamp Corn] to himself. Having no use for it or other similar items, he just sold it, making a profit. Finally, there was his older equipment and some more stuff he picked up as he adventured.

The hottest thing he had dropped in the market was the silk of the Blue Caterpillar, and there were already a few bids on it. One and all, all the junk he had left for sale in the auction house would conservatively go for no less than 30 gold, which was all money he could use and reinvest in useful things, which brought Roth to his current trip to the Crafting District.

When Roth searched for rides in the auction house, he found nothing. After checking the forums, he realized that pets and rides couldn't be sold in the auction house. For that, one had to travel to Stable Street and meet a tamer or breeder, hence his coming here.

It had to be atypical for him to have two pets already and to be out shopping for a third one. However, since both his treeant colony and Lin had inherent skills that exempted them from being counted as pets, Roth had to make the most of it.

Lea, the queen of the Leafies, was still nurturing the first larvae in the colony. Once they metamorphosed and became workers, they would share the load and care for the next generation of treeants. However, for now, they weren't doing anything for him. As for Lin, besides looking cute, eating, and burping, he did absolutely nothing.

The trip to slay the Hive King was just around the corner, and he was looking for things that helped him *now*. He would find a ride that would help him travel faster or, more likely, run away faster.

As Roth left Crafting Avenue and entered Stable Street, his first impression was that it was a mix of the slums and the citadel. The memory of the slums came to him in the form of the smell of wet fur and manure. Even though it wasn't comparable to the stench of the sewers, Roth considered whether he should change into his [Plumber Set] to cancel the stench.

Stable Street also reminded him of the citadel because of the many soldiers. They sat on their powerful steeds in shiny armor, proudly

sporting the insignia of the city. Horses made up the vast majority of the animals being ridden. They were kept spotless, except for the city's mark atop two hills branded on their side. The horses trotted along with military precision.

Other than the horses, however, there were other animals. He saw a group of four soldiers riding the biggest wolves he had ever seen and also one soldier riding a rhinoceros. It was no accident that the citadel was located so close to this street. The garrison of soldiers seemed to be the best customers out here. Supplying the garrison with mounts was probably the most significant business on this street.

As Roth looked at all the animals, he bit his lip. Coming here reminded him of that poor camel who had drawn a message on the ground on that first day he'd arrived in Hilsford. How many of these animals were slaves? Were any of them contracted? Why would an animal even willingly want to become a soldier's mount, he wondered.

Roth had come here to find a mount. Even though there were a few mounts players could use from level 10, those were incredibly expensive and difficult to find. As a level 30 player, however, there was much more to choose from, and with choice came more reasonable pricing. Lin's head poked out of the folds of his woolen robe, and looked around curiously.

"Is the smell making you curious?" Roth asked as he petted the little kitten. "Come, let's find you another friend."

All Roth knew about mounts and rides was what he had read in Pegasus's library. All the suggested rides in their guide could be procured on this street. Instead of following the guide blindly, Roth wanted to explore. He still had some time, and only getting the D and E rank mounts that Pegasus promoted seemed too little for him.

Not wanting to overthink it, he just entered the very first establishment he landed his eyes on. It was a wide one-story building with dark-gray letters reading 'The City Riders.' It had a simple, sleek architecture, which reminded him of the citadel. Maybe that had been a conscious move on the part of the management to appeal to their military clientele.

As Roth approached the building, he discovered that the letters had been made of dozens of horseshoes nailed to a giant board. Several soldiers entered the building on foot but left riding steeds. Roth decided to check it out.

Going through the main door, his first impression was how clean the place was. Compared to the stench of wet fur and manure from the street, it smelled of oil and leather here. Saddles, spurred boots, whips, knight lances, and other military gear hung from walls in such abundance that it took Roth a few moments to find that the wallpaper behind the items was dark green.

Despite the banter of the many soldiers chatting and the distant sound of neighing horses, the room didn't feel echoey or noisy. The light in the room came from two roaring fireplaces placed on two opposite walls and from the many windows that gave a view of a vast paddock filled with white sand.

Thanks to his enhanced vision, even from here, he could see several soldiers leaning over the fence while admiring the trainers riding the steeds. At the same time, on the other side of the paddock, a talented knight made a horse trot and canter and performed several elegant acrobatics.

It was only thanks to his [Farsight] skill and all the bonuses he had gotten to perception that Roth could see that, beyond the paddock, there was a separate building from which different stable boys left and entered with horses in tow.

At the four corners of the main lobby were counters where different staff attended to the soldiers' queries. Seeing a few players at those counters, Roth followed their lead and approached. After a few seconds, one of the establishment's NPCs noticed him. She was a tall lady, wearing a neat rider's hat. "Hello, adventurer. Looking for a ride, are we?" The lady spoke so loudly that it made Roth wonder if she was hard of hearing.

"That's correct. I was wondering if you could show me around?"

Chapter 24

With a radiant business smile, the lady seemed more than happy to accommodate Roth, “Very well, then. What’s your poison? Speed or power?” she asked as she came from behind the counter and started walking toward the paddock.

“Uh... I guess you’re asking me if I want a mount more suited for battle or for just traveling, right?”

She nodded in agreement.

“Well, in that case, I have to say I’m looking for speed more than anything. Although, I do want a ride that can handle some weight. I’m a merchant, you see?”

“Very well. Follow me, then.”

The lady was very kind, making Roth wonder if his high charisma and bonuses had anything to do with it. As they left the lobby, Roth inspected the sales rep.

Greta, the Horse Trainer

Lvl. 43

Hp: 10,000/10,000

Ep: 1000/1000

Skills: [Ride]; [Domesticate]; [Oneness of Mind]; [Tailwind].

Now that there wasn’t a counter between them, Roth could see how shiny and polished the woman’s tall boots were. As she walked, the spurs in her boots jingled, and Roth didn’t miss the whip she wore as a belt coiled around her waist.

At the sight of the pointy spurs and the scary whip, Roth recoiled. Memories of how he'd stumbled into the Beanies' illegal operations in Tailor Street came to him, and he grimaced, imagining a similar progression of events. He took a deep breath and reined himself in.

"Mrs. Greta, there's something I must know before you show me around."

"Yes?" she said, pausing her march.

"Where does your stable procure the horses? Are you slavers or contractors?"

The lady bobbed her head to the side and regarded Roth curiously. He guessed that not many people asked this question. She resumed her march toward the paddock, "We are merely an intermediary between suppliers and customers. Most horses in the market are captured in the wild and brought here by slavers. However, we do have some contracted horses as well. They are the minority, though."

"I want to see only contracted horses."

"You realize that contracted horses are more costly? And that you have to sign contracts with them, pay them insurance and all the works?"

"Yes, I do."

"Very well. A man of principle. I respect that."

The fact that she had kept walking reassured Roth that he might find some good options here. As they left the lobby, the earthy scent of animals returned in full force. It was early morning, and the sky was painted in beautiful purples and pinks.

Greta beckoned Roth to join her by the paddock fence, and then she called out to one of the stable boys: "Hoy! Gigi! Bring out the animals in stables H3, B2, and J9. Stat!"

The shout pierced right through the neighing of horses, the clacking of horse hooves hitting the ground, the laughter of soldiers, and similar calls from other sales reps. Roth was starting to get a sense of why this woman seemed so comfortable with screaming. The stable boy on the other side of the paddock disappeared into the stables.

"So, how does it work with contracted horses? They just come here and ask for a job?" Roth found the whole idea of a horse knocking on houses to find a job surreal.

“The Transport Guild represents contracted mounts,” she replied idly.

Hearing this, Roth smirked. Dogs were the ones mediating things, uh?

“Many animals out there figure that if they don’t come of their free will, slavers will just capture them anyway, so they might as well take the initiative and get paid for carrying humans around, you see?”

“I don’t know. It can’t be fun for them.”

“Nonsense. Humans can provide things to these beasts they would never find in the wild.”

“Like what?” asked Roth, reluctant.

“A roof. Medicine. Treats. To name a few. You know that domestic animals have a much longer longevity, right? Besides, many animals enjoy a human’s company and have fun going on adventures with them. They get attached.”

As Roth tried wrapping his head around the concept, he saw Gigi emerge from the stables. It took the stable boy less than a minute to bring out the horses Greta had asked for. He entered the paddock, and brought the three animals in tow toward them. One was a gray mare. Even though Roth was no expert in horses, he could see all her ribs, and her hair looked dull. She looked starved, old, and tired but meekly followed after the boy.

Then, there was a donkey who was being towed along reluctantly. It looked everywhere, startled by every sound and every movement. Its stocky figure and short legs made Roth wonder if the donkey could even gallop.

Finally, there was a hunched horse with hair over his eyes. It had so many flies flying around it that Roth guessed its rider would gain access to some sort of skill that unleashed a cloud of flies on the opponents. The animal didn’t even bother swatting the flies away as if it had come to terms with its annoying insect tenants.

“Here are three horses that I think will suit someone of your level,” she spoke without looking at Roth. Her complete focus was on the horses. “The gray mare there is a bit old but can gallop at a respectable speed. The donkey is a new arrival. It is a bit skittish but has some power in its legs, and you can put a lot of weight on it. As for the last one, he’s not a bad choice if you can get used to the flies. What do you think? Not too bad, huh?”

Roth had the utmost respect for this sales rep's ability to maintain such enthusiasm while presenting such terrible options. Had it been him, he would have urged the customer to run away.

She continued her high-spirited pitch, "All of them are volunteers looking for a human employer in exchange for food and some coin. Which one caught your fancy?"

Roth shook his head. This was not the place where he would get a ride. "You know what? I think I've seen enough. I'm going to take a walk around the street, seeing what else is out there."

"Fine by me, but I guarantee you you won't find better beginner steeds."

Just as Roth was turning to leave, he heard what sounded like a clap of thunder. As he looked for the source of the sound, he spotted a soldier in silver armor and a red floating cape heading toward the paddock. He was sitting on a horse that almost seemed drunk, given how it zig-zagged. The horse veered to the side, signaling its reluctance to return to the paddock, which made the soldier hit its side with a baton whip, causing another clap. Roth grimaced as he realized the source of the sound he'd heard. That had to hurt. Seeing the violence with which the soldier hit the horse made Roth shudder.

The horse was obviously unhappy to be commanded toward the paddock, but every time it swerved, the soldier dug his spurs in the horse and hit it, making it neigh violently. Reaching one of the stable boys near the paddock, the soldier unmounted the horse and gave him the reins. The horse tried to signal its protest and break free from the stable boy, almost sending him flying. Quickly, more staff joined the struggling boy and helped him regain control of the horse. The beast, foaming and breathing heavily, weakened by the violent treatment the captain had inflicted on it, eventually resigned and calmed down. Roth could see the marks the rider had left all across its body.

"Excuse me, mister. Since we're done here, let me see how I can help the captain," said Greta as she excused herself.

"By all means."

She walked toward the soldier and greeted him amicably. "Captain Harris, what's the matter?"

Seeing someone from the staff addressing him, the soldier turned a heavy scowl at her and responded aggressively, “The matter is that you sold me a faulty horse!”

Hearing the volume at which the two communicated only shed further light on why Greta screamed every word. It looked like in Hilsford’s Garrison, the adage of whoever speaks the loudest is right was taken seriously.

“A *faulty horse*? That’s a fine moonlight mare you have there, captain. It’s a fantastic steed. How can it be faulty?”

The soldier snorted derisively and tightened his grip on his whip baton. As Roth looked at the man’s eyes filled with violence, he wondered whether the soldier was considering using it to hit Greta. “This *fine mare* refuses to obey orders, miss. To get her to do anything, I have to hit her so hard that I doubt I’ll have any strength left to fight enemies on the battlefield. I want a total refund.”

“A refund?” the lady answered apprehensively. “You want to return the mare after you’ve done all that to her? Look at her! She can hardly stand!”

“Not. My. Problem.”

“If we take her, who will want to buy her? If I saw a horse like this for sale, I wouldn’t pay more than ten gold for her, and you want me to give you back two hundred?”

“Put her down and make glue out of her, for all I care. I have no use for a disobedient horse.”

“If I well recall, captain, you were the one who said that you wanted the wildest horse we had for sale and that you’d break it yourself!”

The captain spat to the side as if he could actually spit away the memory, “I don’t recall ever saying that.”

“You...”

“Don’t tell me this is an establishment that doesn’t care about the city’s garrison. I’d hate for you to lose all my soldiers as customers,” the captain had been speaking loudly, but he projected his voice even more, drawing the attention of a nearby group of soldiers who followed their discussion curiously.

Ms. Greta swallowed the defense she was about to make and sighed heavily. “Fine. Leave the mare.”

“That’s what I thought.” The captain turned his back and walked away.

Ms. Greta walked toward the mare. At the sight of Greta’s whip, the mare seemed to regain some of the fight in her eyes and stood on its hind legs, sending one of the two stable boys flying. It kicked the other one, and Greta took the whip out to get the horse under control. Roth had already jumped between the horse and the horse trainer.

“Careful! That mare is dangerous. She’s going to...”

Roth approached the mare with a stretched-out hand and let her pick his scent. “Easy, now. I’m your friend. I’m your friend. Hush, hush.” Smelling Roth, the mare stopped struggling and returned to her labored breaths and panting.

“You poor girl,” he whispered, “You must be so scared, right?”

Lua, the Moonlight Mare is touched by your sympathy.

+7 reputation with the moonlight herd.

“How much for her?”

“I-I beg your pardon? You want to buy this mare?”

“I do. How much?”

“Not even the captain was able to control her properly, and you think you can? Besides, look at her. She’s all wounded. You know that we won’t take responsibility if she has a limp or anything of the sort.”

“I understand.”

Ms. Greta looked at the horse and sighed. “A hundred gold.”

Roth pondered whether he should haggle. Hadn’t she just told the captain that she wouldn’t have given more than ten gold for the animal? However, it felt wrong to haggle for this living creature. It would be too much like when the guilds had been bidding for him. Roth refused to stoop so low. “Sold.”

Chapter 25

As the money left Roth's inventory, a window opened before him.

Congratulations! You have a new pet!

You've received [Lua's Ownership Deed].

You've unlocked a new title: [Beast Master].

Had he just gained a title?

Beast Master (Rare)

Description: You have so many animals that you should consider opening a zoo!

Effects:

It's easier to gain affection with your pets;

Maximum pet affection is now 110.

Conditions to unlock [Beast Master]:

To have three or more pets. {complete}

Roth still didn't know how important it was to gain affection with pets, but he welcomed this new rare title. And what was this ownership deed? He had received nothing of the sort for Lin or the Leafies. Roth first checked the mare's stats.

Lua (Pet)

Pet rating: E-

Lvl. 10

Affection: 7/100

Endurance: 50

Strength: 33

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Skills: [Ride]; [Moonlight Mount]; [Summon]

Ride (Pet Skill)

Description: This animal has been taught how to serve as transport and can help you get places.

Effects:

Passive. You can ride this pet, increasing your movement speed by 100% and weight-carrying capacity by 50kg.

Moonlight Gallop (Pet Skill)

Description: The moonlight herd exhibits its true strength and speed at night.

Effects:

Passive. If it's dark, your pet can move 50% faster.

Summon (Pet Skill)

Description: Whenever you're in a pinch, feel free to call for help; it will come to you.

Effects:

Active. Call your pet, and it will appear.

At first glance, Lua looked like a mount with an E-grade, which wasn't too bad. She had the two basic skills every rider possesses, [Ride] and [Summon], and even came with a bonus one, [Moonlight Gallop].

Lua is hungry. [Ride] has been disabled.

Lua is sick. [Moonlight Mount] has been disabled.

Lua is hurt. [Summon] has been disabled.

Lua's hooves need tending to. Pet grade decreased.

Lua needs deworming. Pet grade decreased.

Roth's eyes widened, seeing all the flashing red messages saying how unhealthy the horse was. All her skills were locked, and even her grade had dropped! That left Roth to wonder what the mare's true grade was. But that didn't even matter because he couldn't even ride this mare right now in her current condition. Before he could mount her, she had to be nursed back to health.

Roth considered whether to keep the horse, but seeing her tired, sad look, he couldn't bear to leave her. Thinking of the golden acoma he'd bought for the Leafies, the amount of milk Lin required, and now the expenses required to heal Lua, he sighed. He could see that poverty would be a constant in his life in the game.

Roth petted the mare. "It's OK, girl. We'll take good care of you." Turning to the sales rep, he asked, "How much to get her cleaned up?"

"50 silver," she answered easily.

Roth threw her two gold coins. "I want her treated like a princess. Give her the best food, medicine, and care you can. Under no circumstances do I want anyone to hit her. If she doesn't want something, don't do it. Got it?"

"Alright."

Your concern touches Lua.

+7 reputation with the moonlight herd.

+5 affection with Lua.

Roth studied the notifications. It looked like horses were a bit similar to wolf packs. Reputation was unlocked with only specific groups, not the entire race. From this, Roth learned that horses weren't all united in one faction.

"Also, is she contracted?" probed Roth.

"She's a slave," answered Greta, matter of factly. Hearing the word 'slave,' the mare showed signs of distress and threatened to act up again. Roth's following words immediately made her quiet down, though. "How can I free her?"

"Free her? But you just bought her!"

"I don't want to keep a slave."

"Well, since you bought her, you can do whatever you want with her. If you want to keep her, keep her. If you want to free her, free her. Just tear up your ownership deed, and she'll be free to go." She looked left and right and then added in a soft voice. "If you are dead set on freeing her, though, I suggest you don't do it here; otherwise, slavers will just get her before she even leaves the city and just come over to sell it again. Just do it somewhere outside the city. Got it?"

Roth was pleasantly surprised that Greta knew how to speak at a volume other than screaming and nodded in agreement. Again, he wondered if these little hints resulted from his high charisma since the NPC was speaking against her own business.

Lua grunted questioningly toward Roth. Roth approached her and whispered, "It looks like setting you free can be dangerous. There are slavers around here."

"Neigh, nicker, grunt, groan," she responded unhappily while kicking the ground with one of her hooves.

Roth scratched his head. He didn't feel good about keeping this mare a slave for even a minute. "If I let her go but then contract her, would slavers make trouble for us?"

"Oh, no. Slavers know better than to go after contracted beasts. The city wouldn't let them trade otherwise."

She almost makes it sound like slavers have principles. As if there was much of a difference. Slaves are slaves, thought Roth. "What do you say, Lua? Can we be partners until I take you somewhere safe?"

The mare bobbed her head and drew it very close to Roth. He hadn't realized how big her head was compared to him. She still seemed to be suspicious of Roth. Sighing, he took the document he had received when he bought the mare. Seeing the paper, Lua became agitated and aggressive.

Right before her eyes, Roth slowly picked it up and tore it into two.

You've let Lua go. Lua is no longer your pet.

You have no pleasure in seeing one held against their will.

+10 righteousness.

You saved a horse from captivity and granted back its freedom.

+5 nature affinity.

+100 reputation with the moonlight herd.

You're now friends with the moonlight herd.

Seeing the paper torn into two, the horse shook her head contentedly and drew Roth closer into an equestrian hug.

"OK! OK! It's fine. Just be cool."

As the horse licked him happily, Roth turned to Greta, “Can you help us draft a contract so that I can keep her away from the slavers until I’ve taken her somewhere safe?”

“But, sir, aren’t you an accomplished merchant? Surely, you can do that yourself, no?”

Of course! How could he have forgotten about it? After becoming a novice broker, he gained a skill that allowed him to contract with novice-grade NPCs. That’s how he had issued a contract to Mario and the... Roth froze! The ratans! He had told them to spy on his behalf but had completely forgotten about it! Worse, he had promised them gold and XP! How long had it been since he had issued that quest to them? After wrapping up here, he had to go down to the sewers and check what kind of juicy information the ratans had dug up. He also couldn’t leave the quest active forever. What if he came back one day to meet the sewer rats only to find he owed them a fortune in XP and gold? Hopefully, he still had enough money to pay them. After all, after purchasing Lua, much of his remaining funds had disappeared.

Roth located the [Novice Hire] skill in his dashboard and activated it.

Novice NPC detected:

Lua, Princess of the Moonlight Herd

Lvl. 20

Hp: 5000/5000

NPCs Professions: [Mount]; [Monarch].

Conditions to hire Lua: friendly status with the moonlight herd.

Would you like to issue a quest to Lua?

Level 20? But when he had first inspected her, it said she was only level 10. Could it be that because of how mistreated she was, she had dropped levels, too? And what was this thing about her being a princess and the [Monarch] skill? He fumbled with the controls, wrote what he thought would be the reasonable parameters for the quest, and let the system process it. Soon, there was a new window for his approval.

Serve the Pacifist (Uncommon)

By coincidence, you have run into the righteous pacifist Pax, a zoomorph and friend of animals. He tears your contract and promises to take you somewhere safe. However, he asks that you sign a contract with him to keep slavers away until he helps you find the herd.

Quest objectives:

Serve under Pax for a month.

Would you like to issue this quest to Lua? [Y/N]

Roth clicked yes.

Lua refuses to accept the quest.

“Hey? Why did you refuse?”

The mare looked up and then to the side, letting him know how offended she felt by Roth’s suggestion. What had he done wrong?

You’ve received a new quest: [Take Lua Home].

Serve Lua, the Most Gorgeous, Beautiful, Unparalleled, and Prettiest of Mares (Uncommon)

You’ve seen a mare of the famous moonlight herd being mistreated and decided to step in and free her from slavery. She is a princess of the herd, and she wants your help to take her back home.

Quest objectives:

Take care of Lua until you find the moonlight herd;

While you’re helping her, Lua won’t be your mount. You will be her bodyguard instead. Pay attention, human! The difference in wording matters!

Would you like to accept? [Y/N]

Roth looked at the mare, confused. Wasn’t this the same quest he had issued her? Why had she declined it when he did it then? He looked at the mare, who held her head high despite tiredness and hunger. He chuckled, thinking of her status and the funny wording in the quest.

“You’re a proud girl, aren’t you? You won’t have it if I hire you. You want to hire me instead.”

The horse neighed and nodded at Roth. “Very well. I accept to take care of you, princess.”

Congratulations! You have a new pet!

“I’ll leave you here to be taken care of, and I’ll come get you later, OK?”

The mare neighed, and before one of the stable boys could come and get her, she headed to the stables on her own. “Wait!” the stable boy shouted as he ran after her, but the mare kept going, refusing to accept the boy’s command.

Roth was starting to understand why the captain could not break this mare. She had the pride of a monarch and wouldn’t do what she didn’t want to. Roth was unsure about how he felt about this turn of events. He had a crippled, proud steed, who he wasn’t even sure he could ride anytime soon.

Looking at the clock, he saw that there was little time until the crafting battle that would grant him his level 30 accessories ended; therefore, it was time to visit the sewers and see what the ratans had discovered for him.

*

Zin counted one hundred and fifty players on this hill from at least six different guilds. They weren’t a bunch of wannabes, either. Several guild leaders and their best players were gathered here. He would need 1000 more assassins to defeat such strong opponents and come out unscathed. He would only have attacked Ogre if he had absolute superiority. If he couldn’t get him out of the battle in the first few minutes of the attack, he would become very difficult to deal with. But dealing with the cream of the crop of six of the top ten? That was simply suicide.

It wasn’t that he didn’t have his ways, but what did he have to gain from this? To enact Loki’s petty revenge? He couldn’t care about that lunatic’s erratic commands. He made a report, listing all the players gathered here and explaining why he was calling off the attack.

Loki was sure to throw a tantrum when he heard it, but his paranoia would get the better of him. Zin made sure to feed Loki’s paranoia every chance he got. A paranoid boss was easier to control.

After writing a neat report and telling Loki he had already left the hill, he kept his eyes on this gathering of giants. He wanted to know what the guilds were planning and how he could get something out of it. Information was power.

Zin grabbed a black spherical pill from his inventory. He looked at the treasure he'd found in a hidden ruin in the Dark Abyss. No one knew he had this item, not even Loki. Especially Loki. Sadly, the number of uses was limited. How he wished this had been a skill. Looking at the distant gathering of players, he judged the information he would get using it worth the investment.

Batman Pill (Consumable)

Description: A funky medicine that some crazy scientist cooked up in the lab.

Item effects:

Transform into a bat for thirty minutes;

While in bat form, you can fly, and your hearing is three times better.

He had only found three such pills in the ruins of the lab and had already used up two. He brought it to his mouth and transformed into a tiny bat. Zin flew toward the trees near the tent to find out what the guilds were planning.

Chapter 26

Roth stood at the bottom of the well, which led into the sewers. He pouted as he put on the [Plumber Set] and went from looking like the king of the mountain to an ordinary plumber. Roth hadn't expected it to be so hard for him to unequip the [Lambswool Forest Set]. The decrease in his overall level of coolness was hard to bear.

As Roth entered the dark hole leading into the sewers, the familiar darkness and grime that had kept him company for so long came into view. Even though he kept his [Plumber Flashlight] on his belt, he didn't bother turning it on. Compared to the pitch-black darkness of Antioch, walking in the sewers was like walking in daylight. He found himself relying less on the flashlight these days. He only kept it because it was a part of the plumber set.

Lin emerged from the fold in his clothes, sniffing at the air curiously. He had expected the little kitten to react poorly to the potent smell, but instead, only seemed more curious than ever. Moreover, it seemed that not even the stench of the sewers could ruin Lin's appetite.

“Food. Now.” Lin is hungry.

Roth took out one of the many milk bottles in his inventory and gave it to the little kitten as he headed toward Toxy's nest. He looked at the little furball lovingly. With each tiny gulp, his ears twitched in unison, making the kitty look incredibly cute. It was amazing how much of an appetite he had.

Roth looked over the calendar and could hardly believe it when he realized it had only been 12 days since he'd been here. So much had happened that it felt longer. Between escorting the sheep to safety,

being stuck in Mario's lab, exploring Antioch, and then getting the Ogres to take him in, a little under two weeks had elapsed.

In that short period of time, not only had he gained nine levels, discovered a new world region, entered the Hall of Fame, gained multiple titles and three pets, and was on his way to completing a full equipment makeover, but he had also unlocked his first-class advancement and became a peacekeeper.

Feeling smug about his progress, Roth went past the different intersections and finally saw the tunnel where Toxy's nest was. The sword mark Athos had left on the stone was still there, but the locations blackened by the gunpowder of Athos' musket were already fading, overwhelmed by the moss and grime of the sewers. To the side, the pile of rags where the ratan pups lived was lively, with the squeaky sounds of young ones playing and having fun.

Catching sight of Roth, the leader of this crew of sewer rats ran to him. "Martyr! You're back. How we've missed you!" greeted Toxy. The other ratans in the nest were already coming to join Toxy in greeting Roth. "And you're carrying our flag. What an honor! Uh? What is this smell?"

Toxy sniffed at something in the air and finally noticed little Lin in Roth's arms. "C-c-at! There's a cat! Run! Run for your lives!"

Before Roth could say anything, the nest was thrown into chaos. Several ratans dove into the filthy water, while others ran in the opposite direction or disappeared into pipes and side tunnels. Roth had never known that rats could run so fast. All the while, they screamed.

"A cat! A cat!"

As the rats ran for their dear lives in a way they hadn't back when the oozing monsters were plaguing the sewers, Toxy and two courageous ratan volunteers were left behind, taking the pups from the nest.

"Martyr, hold the beast off while we save our young," shouted Toxy as he picked up the sixth ratan pup.

"Wait, Toxy!"

"I can't stay, martyr. I have a family to take care of. But you're single and childless. Oh... you're so selfless. Thank you for your friendship."

"Toxy!"

“Your sacrifice will not be in vain!” Toxy screamed as he ran away.

“Toxy, this cat is my friend. He won’t hurt you.”

The rat didn’t stop running, but once he was a safe distance from Roth, he turned back and shouted, “Friend? You’re friends with a cat?”

The whole thing made Roth think of Greta screaming while he was in the City Riders. It seemed that today was a day reserved for shouting. “Yes. I’m its guardian. I’m supposed to take care of it.”

“People don’t own cats. Cats own people, human!”

This was the least friendly that he’d seen any ratan behave. He hadn’t considered how taking in a pet kitten would affect his relationship with the ratans. “I promise you he won’t do anything. Look. He’s just a baby,” Roth said, bringing his arms down so that Toxy could see little Lin burp adorably as he went through yet another bottle of milk.

“No need to show me the beast. I can see he’s a bloodthirsty monster from here, thank you very much.”

“Come on, Toxy. Don’t be like that. I promise you. He’s harmless.”

“Are you telling me you haven’t blended rat meat into that milk?”

“Yuck. No. Of course not. It’s just normal milk.”

Toxy twitched his nose while rubbing his paws, a sign that a ratan was thinking. After a few moments, he sighed. “Everyone, come back. It should be safe. The martyr vouches for the ugly furball.”

The ratans approached cautiously one by one, but Roth didn’t miss how everyone stood behind their leader. It was a big difference to how they usually crowded around him, joking playfully. This was something that Roth could do very little about. The enmity between cats and ratans went way back. He wondered if he would have to find a catsitter when visiting the Rat Cave. Were there even petsitters in the game? Maybe he could issue a petsitting quest to Mario. How much would the alligator charge an hour?

“Not meaning to be rude, but what brings you here?”

Roth grinned, seeing how Toxy wanted to get this encounter over with. “Right, right. Last time I was here, you told me you would collect information on the Gazpachos. What do you have for me?”

Hearing Roth’s wishes to report their mission, Toxy assumed a more professional look and stopped staring at Lin drinking milk.

“Very well, then. As you requested, we’ve been keeping track of the Gazpachos’ movements. After the Peace Corps raided them, they lost a lot of business, and many of their supporters went over to the competition. However, they seem to have found some new business.”

“What’s that?”

“Have you heard of the renovation project?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“The city’s been planning to renovate some of its infrastructure. The recent war with the aliens has made the city accelerate its plans. The shield generator needs replacing, some of the walls need repairs, and the city wants to update a lot of outdated equipment in the garrison.”

The sudden change in topic threw off Roth, but he imagined Toxy would explain. “So?”

“Anyway, from the conversations we’ve been eavesdropping on, the Gazpachos are planning something big related to the renewal project.”

“Really? What does a bunch of racketeers want with a construction project?”

Toxy shrugged. Although scared by Lin’s presence, the rats behind him seemed less aggressive and more relaxed now, seeing that the little kitten kept drinking bottle after bottle of milk while completely disregarding the rat meat around him.

“There’s something else,” continued Toxy, “One of our spies, Scruffy, discovered a clue about where the Gazpacho’s brass meets.”

“Really? Where is the underboss now?”

“No. Not the underboss. The boss,” Toxy spoke ominously. Roth could hear the fear in the ratan’s voice and somehow knew that this portion of terror wasn’t due to Lin’s presence.” Scruffy heard two captains say something about ‘the workshop.’”

“Great! Where is that?”

“Somewhere in the crafting district. Scruffy tried to find out more, but we didn’t hear more from him. We suspect they found him.”

Roth nodded gravely. When he broke into the vault at Baldwins and was found out, he had drawn too much attention. Perhaps the Gazpacho’s underboss had connected the dots, associated the mouse he saw in his office with the raid they suffered from the Peace Corps, and had taken precautions to ensure no more rats could spy on them.

Clicking his tongue, Roth imagined this poor Scruffy caught in a rat trap somewhere. “Well, thank you for a job well done. I’ll take it from here.”

Toxy and his crew have finished [What Happened to the Gazpachos?]

You’ve given Toxy and his crew 200,000XP and 4 gold.

As Roth saw his XP bar decrease and his four gold going away, he sighed. They had been spying on the Gazpachos for nearly two weeks, so he had to pay them double what he had initially promised. He had to be careful about this in the future and make sure he specified in the quest if he wanted hired NPCs to repeat the quest or if they should do it once and leave it alone.

After receiving the report, the quest Roth issued was transformed into a new one.

[What Happened to the Gazpachos] has been changed to [Gazpachos’ Plans].

Gazpacho’s Plans (Uncommon)

Word on the street is that the Gazpachos are planning something big related to the city’s renewal project. It seems like the management meets at ‘The Workshop,’ somewhere in the crafting district.

Objectives:

Follow up on these leads, and stop the Gazpachos.

Looking at this quest, Roth had bittersweet feelings. Did he want to get caught up with the mafia in Hilsford again? He would have to leave town in a few hours and go on an excursion to the Dark Abyss. How did he have the time to follow through on this? “Well, thank you all for everything.”

“Whatever. Take that monster away from here.”

Toxy practically kicked him out of the nest, and Roth pursed his lips in thought. Throughout this whole encounter, he hadn’t unlocked one single reputation point with the ratans. It looked like Lin wasn’t good for his rep.

Roth grabbed a fresh bottle of milk and fed the baby.

“Milk. Yummy.”

+2 affection with Lin.

[Lin Level Up]

+1 subterfuge;

+1 dexterity.

Lin has learned a new skill: [Naughty Antics].

After feeding it several milk bottles, Lin finally reached level 5 and learned a new skill. Roth checked what it did.

Naughty Antics (Pet Skill)

Skill description: How boring would life be if we didn't walk on the edge and pushed the boundaries? Life is a big adventure!

Skill effects:

Passive. Your pet has gained some independence and will act on his own sometimes.

Your pet can help you trigger unlikely scenarios—scales with subterfuge.

Roth looked at the little kitten, who seemed ready to play and explore after having a full belly. He tried now to climb out of Roth's clothes. Roth picked him up and put him on the ground. The kitten began walking around with incredible confidence, smelling and licking everything. Was that a natural result of growth or the new skill kicking in?

He wasn't sure of what to make of this skill. Did this mean that Lin was going to misbehave from now on? He did have Oli's DNA, and from the little he knew about the cat thief, he was a handful. It wouldn't be surprising if his clone followed in his cat-burgling footsteps. He shrugged. He doubted a little kitten like this could do any severe damage. Besides, the way the skill was phrased made it sound like it would be a good thing.

Knowing everyone in the sewers and confident that Lin would be safe, Roth let Lin explore as much as he wanted. As he sat down and watched Lin walking around, he scratched his chin in thought. He had come to a decision on how to tackle the Gazpacho's problem without wasting a lot of time. He would outsource the quest to an expert in all mafia-related matters.

He looked at his friend's list and made a call to Drake.

Chapter 27

Roth was used to Drake taking his calls within seconds, but this time, it took Drake almost half a minute to pick up. “Hey, Roth.”

“Hi, Drake.

Behind Drake, a big crowd of players cheered as the Crafting Battle between Godsfried and Nakia reached its climax. Roth deduced that Drake had taken this long to pick up because he had to worm out of the crowd before taking his call.

“Things are getting heated up here. Your accessories are almost finished,” he said, half-screaming.

“Really? What are they like?”

“I’m not going to ruin the surprise, but this is proving to be quite a show. Sarg already won a profession level just from watching them.”

Roth’s appetite for his new accessories only grew stronger. “I’ll head over there soon. By the way, I checked the addendum.”

“I know. I saw your message. I was discussing your idea for a monthly competition with the sergeant. It’s brilliant,” complimented Drake.

Roth blushed. He hadn’t expected Drake’s commendation to mean so much to him. He shook it off, however, and got back on topic, “Anyway, Drake, how are things with your mafia family?”

“The Raviolis? I’ve been steadily progressing in their hierarchy. When they found out I was a cyborg, they gave me control over a maintenance crew that does different work around the city. Whenever one of our customers refuses to pay protection, their machines *break*,” he explained matter-of-factly.

Roth gulped. He never imagined that people could hold machines as hostages. “Have you been keeping tabs on the Gazpachos?”

“Ever since you got several of their members arrested, they’ve been laying low. I don’t know what they’re up to.”

“Well, I might have a clue,” declared Roth cheekily.

“Really? What’s that?” asked Drake.

“Have you heard of the renovation the city’s planning?”

“Are you kidding? The Raviolis talk about little else.” A round of cheers in the back made Drake stop for a moment, “The city is going to invest hundreds of thousands of gold in the project. The Raviolis would like nothing better than getting a piece of it, but the city hasn’t hired anyone yet.”

Roth frowned. “I just don’t understand why the mafia gets excited about construction projects.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s one of the best money-making opportunities for crime families.”

“How come?”

“Well, if you have some sway over who gets public contracts, you can sell rights to participate in a project to businesses. You can also accept to do the work with quality materials but use cheap ones instead and skim some money. Another scheme involves using deadlines against contractors. They often have to pay heavy fines if they don’t finish the work in time, so unless they pay you for protection, you sabotage their work and make them miss the deadlines.”

Roth stared at his mentor wide-eyed for a few seconds. Drake had spat out three different money-making schemes just like that. His friend’s dark past shouldn’t be underestimated. It looked like Toxy had stumbled on some good information. “I’ve heard that the Gazpachos are planning something big regarding the renovation project.”

Drake was silent for a few moments, “This is big news. The Gazpachos mostly ran racketeering and protection schemes targeting merchants. How are they going to get their paws on public money?”

“Beats me. But that isn’t all. I’ve discovered where their management meets. It’s a place called ‘The Workshop’, somewhere in the crafting district.”

“Thank you for telling me this, Roth. I’ll look into it. Maybe there’s an opportunity for us here.” There was another round of cheers on

Drake's side. "Well, you might want to get over here and check the stuff they made because it looks awesome."

"I will. On my way."

*

Trampler unloaded all the grain he had managed to stuff into his inventory at the door of the colony.

The treeants appreciate your work for the city.

+10,000 XP;

+1 reputation with the treeants.

The XP awarded wasn't terrible, but in the time it took him to run this errand for the ants, he could have already hunted several mobs and gained much more XP. This was his second trip, and he only had 10 minutes left on the clock before the [Miniaturize] buff ended. The most frustrating thing was that had he been at his normal size, he could have crossed the distance between the pile of cereal outside the shield and the entrance to the city in a few steps. But due to his tiny-tiny legs, a hundredth of his regular size, he took 10 minutes each way.

He considered whether they should cancel the buff and carry the grain in their normal size, but what if the treeants considered it cheating? What if they required them to work in this minuscule size so they could gain access to the city?

As he finished unloading the 50th stack of grain, the turtle ants finally gave way, signaling he could go in.

At once, he sent a message to his teammates, "*Everyone. They let you in at the 50th stack of grain.*"

"*Oof, finally, some light at the end of the tunnel. I'm on my way to unlock my second batch of leaves,*" answered Ray. "*But I will have to go back up for the third.*"

"*Same.*"

"*Same.*"

His colleagues had discovered work different from his. Ray was helping the red ants climb the tree, cut pieces of leaves, and bring them down to the colony's entrance. Since he had the herbalist profession, this task suited him well. Kevin and Laura were foraging with the ants in the nearby grass, bringing seeds and fruit that fell off the tree.

Trampler was level 52, the highest in the group, and had a pure strength build. He could carry, by far, the most weight in the group and, therefore, had been the first one to win the necessary reputation to enter the city. He considered whether to wait, but every minute wasted on this buff was precious. "I'm going in, guys. Keep working so that the ants let you in."

As Trampler walked down the tunnels of Antioch, he sent an update to BlueFire, who responded approving of his decisions so far and stressing the importance of locating the [Miniaturizing Honeydew].

Although called a city, Antioch was more of an underground tunnel complex. Everywhere he looked, there were skittering ants; the only thing that changed was the cargo they carried.

He didn't miss the group of about twenty ants that followed after him wherever he went. They were larger than the workers, wore armor, and had blades on their mandibles. As he inspected them, he bit his lips until they turned white. Trying to fight their way into the city was suicide. There were millions of ants living here, all of them powerful creatures level 45 and above. There were several elites, and he suspected he had barely scratched the surface.

Trampler was looking for whatever store sold the [Miniaturizing Honeydew]. But how in the world should he know where that was? The guide didn't come with a map! It just gave a few pointers and described some items that could be bought. He sent a message issuing the complaints to BlueFire. Whoever had written this guide had done a terrible job at it.

Trampler took a torch from his inventory and looked for anything that might look like a shop. He wrestled with asking one of the ants for directions, but that was stupid. There was no way they could understand him. Even so, against his better judgment, he gave it a go.

"Excuse me, where can I find this," he said, pulling out one of the shiny blobs of honeydew.

The ants just ignored him and kept walking. "Good job, stupid. Talk to the ant," he berated himself. Looking at the clock, he frowned. He had to hurry and find whatever store sold these.

*

As Roth entered the Crafting Hem, the little bell rang, letting Juliette know he had arrived. Today, she wore a different dress from the last time he'd seen her. Instead of the one-piece wool dress with long sleeves, she wore a fashionable, sleek, dark purple suit. The change in attire made such a difference to her demeanor that Roth was confused about whether this was the same Juliette he knew or her older sister.

"Nature's weaver! It's good to see you again."

Hearing the familiar voice, Roth relaxed. "Hi, Juliette."

"Uuh... nice outfit!" she said as she walked a complete circle around him, feeling the wool with her hands and admiring the craftsmanship. "Elemental needles? That's not something that you see every day. The garments suit you."

"Thanks!" Roth answered humbly. "I'm sure that if you were the one making something like this, it would be even better."

Juliette didn't confirm nor deny Roth's flattery. "Let me see your hands," she commanded.

Roth stretched them out, and she nodded approvingly. "Good. Some calluses. They are a tailor's badge of honor. I can tell you've applied yourself and have reached the novice grade. Congratulations are in order, Nature's Weaver."

"Thanks." The day was going well for him today. He was getting compliments left and right. "Now that I've advanced in my profession, I was wondering what else you can teach me."

She nodded enthusiastically. "Look at you. Eager to learn. Wanting to get one more stitch in. Very well, my friend. What do you want to learn next?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. I only know the basic knitting techniques you taught me last time."

"Well, now that you have some experience, I can teach you another knitting technique. I can also teach you how to use a loom or work with linen. You let me know what you want."

"Can I learn all three?"

"Of course. But I recommend you choose only one for the moment. It's better not to focus on too many things at once. Don't bite off more than you can chew."

Roth looked at the clock, and seeing how much time he had left and guessing how long it would take to learn each technique, he decided. “Why don’t you teach me that new knitting technique?”

The reason for Roth’s choice was simple: based on his experience, being stuck in places for long periods while Loki was out to get him was to be expected. By learning one more knitting technique, he could keep building on top of what he had already learned without carrying a big loom or another heavy load of material around. It also sounded like the quickest one to learn.

“A fine choice!” she said as she pulled two stools from behind the counter for them to sit on. “Last time, I taught you the plain stitch, also called the knit stitch. Now, it’s time to learn its little brother, the purl stitch. It’s a wonderful counterpart to the plain stitch, adding texture and versatility to your fabric. Let’s start by understanding the key difference between the two.”

Juliette’s hands disappeared into a blur as she knitted two pieces of cloth. It took her ten seconds to do each, leaving Roth stupefied. Was it even possible to knit this fast?

“Here. Look at the two pieces of cloth. Can you tell the difference?”

Roth studied the two pieces. Their patterns looked different. One had columns of little Vs, whereas the other had rows of little bumps. “The stitches look different,” Roth answered.

“Good. The one with the V’s is the knit stitch I taught you before. I made the one with the little bumps using the purl stitch. Now, turn them over.”

Roth did and frowned. The back of the cloth with V’s was made of little bump stitches, and the back of the one with the wavy bumps had V’s. “They’re mirrors.”

“That’s right. Every plain stitch has a purl stitch on the other side. Same the other way around. A purl stitch is what’s on the other side of the knit stitch.”

“Then, what’s the point in learning to do purl stitches?” Roth asked befuddled. If a purl stitch was on the other side of a knit stitch, then all he had to do was turn the cloth over and do a knit stitch.

“Because you can create beautiful knitting patterns by alternating between the two. Look.” Her hands blurred again, and a new cloth appeared in her hands. The cloth’s field was made of little bumps, but

over them, there were thick rows of wool shaped like Vs, making a beautiful barred pattern.

“Can you see how I made those bars using knit stitches?”

“Yeah. Cool.”

“That’s not all. There’s also a practical reason for it. When you knit using both stitches, you can stuff more wool in one cloth, making it more elastic, durable, etc.... These two stitches are the bread and butter of knitters, forming the basis for all more advanced techniques. Master these two, and the knitting world will be at your feet.”

Roth nodded appreciatively. It was elegantly simple, like zeros and ones in binary code. Combining knit and purl stitches, he could create several patterns. This was even before he dyed the wool. He spared a glance at his [Forest Lambswool] set and could now identify how Rhapsody had used purls and knit stitches to make his beautiful clothes.

“Ready to learn this new stitch?” asked Juliette with a smile.

Chapter 28

“Now, grab your needles. Let me teach you how it’s done.” Juliette picked up a piece of fabric and demonstrated, “In the plain stitch, you insert the needle from the front to the back of the fabric. Now, with the purl stitch, we reverse the process. Instead of going from front to back, we go from back to front.”

She watched Roth pick up his knitting needle and yarn, “Hold the needle with the yarn in your left hand. Insert the needle from the back to the front of the fabric, just like this.” Juliette demonstrated the motion, her hands moving gracefully. “You’ll notice the yarn now sits before the needle.”

After spending so many hours doing knit stitches, it felt unnatural to invert the order of steps. It was as if he had been knitting with his right hand and had just been asked to use his left. Nevertheless, he soldiered on, closely watching and copying Juliette’s motions.

“Now, wrap the yarn counterclockwise around the needle,” she continued, guiding Roth through the motion. “After that, slide the needle back through the loop, again from back to front, pulling the yarn with it. Congratulations! You’ve just created your first purl stitch!”

Roth mimicked the steps, feeling the yarn weave through the fabric differently. Juliette nodded approvingly, “Excellent! The purl stitch creates a bumpy texture on the side facing you. Practice this motion until you feel comfortable with the technique.”

As Roth practiced, Juliette patiently watched as she added some additional tips: “Remember to maintain a steady tension on the yarn and don’t rush the process. Consistency is key in tailoring.”

“Thanks, I think I’ve got it.”

You've learned [Purl Stitch].

“Good, now that you know [Purl Stitch], I want you to make a cloth. Use the [Knit Stitch] in one row, and on the next one, use the [Purl Stitch]. Alternate between the two and see how it goes.”

Roth grabbed the needles, cast on the yarn, and then made one row of knit stitches as he had many times before. The motion was smooth and quick. Once he finished the row quickly, he clumsily switched gears and made the row using purl stitches. He kept alternating stitches between rows, going swiftly through one and slowly through the other. He almost felt like he was an old typewriter. The only thing missing was the *ding* every time he did a row using knit stitches.

As he finished crafting the cloth, he got a notification.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Woolen Cloth].

+10 ecotailor XP.

Congratulations! You've learned a new profession skill: [Stockinette Stitch].

Stockinette Stitch (Profession)

Description: By alternating between knit stitches and purl stitches, you make your fabric stronger and more durable.

Effects:

Pieces of equipment crafted with this technique gain one bonus stat. Consumables gain half a grade.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Roth studied the new profession skill and nodded approvingly. Just by slightly changing his working method, his work was instantly elevated.

“Awesome! So by alternating between knit and purl stitches, I can make different patterns.”

“That's right.”

“Can you teach me more stitches?”

“I'm sorry. That's the only one I can teach someone at your level. Maybe some other day, I can teach you more.”

Roth didn't know if Juliette was holding back on him because of his level or if it was because profession trainers only taught the basics,

and it was up to the players to find out more techniques through quests or experimentation. He couldn't wait to keep exploring more types of stitches and techniques to improve his equipment. He wondered how many of these skills Rhapsody and Leanne had. He should message them and ask what other types of stitches he could learn.

"Thanks. This is an incredible technique." Looking at the clock, Roth added, "I'll come back soon so you can teach me how to work with linen and a loom."

"No problem. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Yeah. I need to do get some supplies."

"I'll leave you to it, then," Juliette said, turning away and going to the counter, where she opened a book and studied it with a concentrated look. Roth activated the shop window and studied everything available for sale. Other than clothes, there was a new type of wool available.

Alpaca Wool (Crafting Material)

Description: Wool sheared from alpacas.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

He had seen several items crafted utilizing this material, and it was nice that he could use it, too. It was a bit pricey compared to sheep's wool, at one silver and forty coppers, but after all the discounts he could get as a VIP customer, and as a broker, he could get one stack for one silver.

There was also flax for sale, but since he didn't know how to work with it, he just left it alone for now. After stocking up on raw materials, he moved on to recipes.

[Wool Sweater Recipe]

Item description: This tailor recipe teaches you how to make a simple fashionable sweater.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10; [Knitting]; [Purl Stitch].

[Wool Trousers Recipe]

Item description: This tailor recipe teaches you how to fashion a simple pair of trousers, which will keep you warm and comfy.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10; [Knitting]; [Purl Stitch].

[Wool Socks Recipe]

Item description: This tailor recipe teaches you how to fashion a cute pair of socks, which will keep your feet warm.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10; [Knitting]; [Purl Stitch].

[Wool Cape Recipe]

Item description: This tailor recipe teaches you how to fashion a simple wool cape.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10; [Knitting]; [Purl Stitch].

He bought the recipe for knitting jackets, pants, socks, and capes for one gold each. After reaching level 10, there was also some better knitting gear that offered interesting options.

Copper Bucket (Common)

Description: These buckets can hold heat for a little longer, thus speeding up the washing process.

Item effects: It's 10% faster to dry fibers.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Copper Shearing Scissors (Common)

Description: Scissors with a somewhat sharp edge that help you shear animals more effectively.

Item effect: When shearing, there's a 10% chance of getting double the amount of wool.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Novice Carding Pads (Common)

Description: These carding pads are made of sturdier wood and can help you comb fibers a little quicker.

Item effects: Carding is 10% faster.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

He bought all three without blinking. After all his discounts, they only cost one silver each, and he would take any help he could get to craft better and faster. He also found a new tailor tool to speed the spinning process.

Pedal Spinner (Common)

Item description: A wheel that you can power with your feet to spin fibers faster.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

When he saw Leanna using her electrical spinner and how fast it went, he felt like a noob. With this small upgrade, he would definitely gain a little more traction when crafting and getting the job done faster.

Finally, he purchased a lanolin extractor.

Lanolin Extractor (Common)

Item description: a machine that allows you to extract lanolin from washed wool and repurpose it.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 7.

Compared to the big one he had seen in the back of this shop, this was much easier to transport. This was yet another way of making money when working wool. He just had to dump the buckets of water into the machine to get the precious oil he could resell to chemists.

With this, he was finally done shopping. The only thing left to complete his equipment makeover was to go see the results of the Crafting Battle that, according to Drake, was nearly done. With a spring in his step, Roth walked north toward the gate and headed back to the guild camp.

Now that he had come here once before, for some reason, the trip felt faster this time. He saw the Union's tent, even more crowded than he had left it. More than a hundred people were here, but they weren't huddled together, watching the battle. It seemed that during the time it took Roth to learn a new tailoring technique and come here, the jewelers had finished the competition.

Drake was already walking toward him, "Hey, there. You're back."

"What's going on over there?" asked Roth pointing at two new groups that were beginning to form. One inside the tent and another just outside of it.

"Well, while Godsfried and Nakia's battle was being fought, a couple more requests for crafting battles came in. You're looking at the two new Crafting Battles that will start at any moment, now."

"Really? Already?"

“Oh, yes. The requests keep coming in. That group over there,” he said while nudging toward the group gathering in the tent, “will be a carpentry battle. Two carpenter friends want to settle a dispute.”

“What kind of dispute?” asked Roth curiously.

“It seems they did a quest together and obtained one rare piece of timber. Whoever crafts the best quarterstaff gets it. Now, the others over there is just a group of friends fooling around. The participants are tinkers and their friends are placing bets on who does a better job.”

“Are you going to be the referee?”

“I want to investigate the intel you gave me. Maggie will arbitrate the carpenters, while Charlie will do the other one. But, come. I’m sure you’re curious to see what Godsfried and Nakia made. Right?”

Roth nodded happily and followed after Drake, making his way through the crowd. He first found the veteran who, just by his presence, seemed to make whatever group of people was gathered around him become soldier-like. Sergeant Sarg stood stoically in the middle of the crowd like an island in an ocean.

Roth nodded a hello, to which the sergeant responded in kind. Next to the sergeant, Godsfried and Nakia had both set up shop with two tables, two portable furnaces, toolboxes, magnifying lenses, and several gadgets that made Roth think of Red’s workshop back in the Green Woods. At the sight of their work, Roth couldn’t help but drool a little.

“So, who won?” he asked the sergeant, even though he could tell the answer from Nakia’s radiant smile.

“It was Nakia, barely. But check for yourself what they crafted during the battle.”

Roth first approached Godsfried’s crafting table. Even though he was the loser, he couldn’t help but be drawn by the glistening earring, ring, belt, and necklace shining beautifully. All pieces of jewelry had a combination of silvery blue metal with green gemstones. Together, they made a elegant ensemble that Roth could tell was valuable.

Glancing toward Nakia’s side, all he saw were simple, black items. Godsfried’s items won by a long margin in terms of glamor and coolness.

“Hello, master Godsfried.”

“Hi, Pax.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“By all means.”

Roth picked the items one by one and inspected them carefully.

River Silver Earring (Rare)

Item description: An earring crafted from river silver collected from Forest Creek encrusted with faceted green jade. The craftsman outdid himself.

Item effects:

+5 intelligence;

+1% cooldown reduction;

+20 energy.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

River Silver Necklace (Rare)

Item description: A necklace crafted from river silver collected from Forest Creek sporting beautiful faceted green jade. The craftsman outdid himself.

Item effects:

+7 intelligence;

+3 charisma;

+10 energy;

+10 hp.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

River Silver Ring (Rare)

Item description: A ring crafted from river silver collected from Forest Creek encrusted with faceted green jade. The craftsman outdid himself.

Item effects:

+6 intelligence;

+1% cooldown reduction;

+20 energy.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

Jade Encrusted Belt

Item description: A beautifully crafted belt encrusted with jade that offers some protection and dignifies the wearer

Item effects:

+6 intelligence;

+5 charisma;

+2% damage reduction;

+1% cooldown reduction.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

All the items were beautiful and delivered on what Roth had asked. Altogether, they granted over twenty intelligence and a three percent cooldown reduction. He wondered if Godsfried would sell these items, and how much they would go for. These had to be worth at least a thousand gold. He was having trouble imagining how Nakia could have done better than this.

Godsfried stood by his work, regarding Roth curiously. “Master Godsfried, your work is amazing!”

“I’m glad you like it, but as much as I hate to admit it, Nakia outdid herself. She pulled out a rare crafting material that decided the battle before it even started.”

For a master jeweler to say that meant that this material had to be exceedingly precious. Roth couldn’t wait to inspect Nakia’s work.

“Well, anyway, thank you so much for participating. It’s an honor to have someone like you in the Union.”

“Oh well, I know I’ll get one of the Union VIP seats eventually, so save me a spot, will you?”

“Count on it,” said Roth, giving the dwarf jeweler a hearty handshake. Roth walked over to Nakia’s working table to inspect her work.

Chapter 29

Nakia's work was lackluster compared to Godsfried's fancy gemstones and silvery metal. Her creations looked simple and basic. Roth grabbed the earring to inspect the craftsmanship. Roth was surprised by how light it was when he picked it up. He could hardly feel its weight. As he ran his fingers on the material, it felt warm and grainy instead of cool and polished. "Is this wood?" he asked the jeweler.

"That is correct."

He had assumed it was some sort of iron because of how black it was, but stood corrected. Roth spared a glance at Nakia's table and found several shavings, perhaps the result of Nakia using a knife to sculpt these pieces of jewelry.

Both the necklace and the belt also had wooden spheres. He brought one of the items up into the light and saw that Nakia had carved animal figures on the surface of the spheres. He squinted to try to make out what the figures were.

"Elephants?"

"Yes."

"Why elephants?" Roth asked.

"They are animals known for their intelligence," she answered plainly.

Roth had come to associate intelligence with badgers on account of [Badger Form]. But he supposed there were other creatures out there known for being intelligent. Curious, Roth inspected the winning items.

Iron Wood Earring (Rare)

Item description: A hollow earring crafted from the wood of an extremely hard iron tree. It has been filled with time sand and is carved with symbols of knowledge and intellect.

Item effects:

+8 intelligence;

+2% cooldown reduction.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Time Berlock Necklace (Rare)

Item description: A necklace made with polished wooden hollow spheres filled with time sand, ran through with lotus silk.

Item effects:

+1 to all stats;

+5% cooldown reduction;

+5% status resistance;

+50 hp.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Time Berlock Belt (Rare)

Item description: A belt crafted from elastic tree wood. The fibers have been entwined with iron tree roots to provide extra safety to the wearer. Its berlocks are filled with time sand and carved with figures of elephants.

Item effects:

+4 intelligence;

+4 wisdom;

+4% damage reduction;

+2% cooldown reduction.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Iron Wood Globe Ring (Rare)

Item description: A hollow ring crafted from the wood of an extremely hard iron tree. It has been filled with time sand and is carved exquisitely.

Item effects:

+8 intelligence;

+2% cooldown reduction.

Restrictions: Lvl. 28.

“What do you think, mister,” asked Nakia cheekily.

“I never imagined making such awesome jewelry out of wood would be possible. And I guess that the prized crafting material Godsfried was talking about is this time sand?”

“That is correct.”

“Is that what gives it so much cooldown reduction?”

Nakia just smirked. This material couldn't be cheap, but that didn't take any merit from her. After all, money and resources were part of an artisan's strength. Nakia's commitment to make sure she won this competition also showed that she really wanted to be part of the Union, and was a token of her sincerity.

“May I ask how much this time sand is?”

“I must have used 2k worth of it,” she answered matter of factly.

“Two thousand gold?!” he let out, stupefied.

Roth held his new jewelry with trembling hands. This jewelry set was potentially worth as much as he had spent in the auction house, yet he was receiving it for free. The decision to start the Union had been the right one.

“On the sand alone,” Roth heard Godsfried add. He had approached them while Roth inspected the items and chose to comment on his opponent's work. “Not to speak of the rest of the equipment she made. Iron wood isn't cheap, either. But [Time Sand] is indeed the rarest. Even if you have the money, it doesn't necessarily mean you can buy it. There is no way I could compete since your main requirement was cooldown reduction.”

“By the way, are the carvings how you decide what attribute a piece of jewelry gets.”

Nakia winked. “Maybe.”

Roth didn't pry more. Everyone had their secrets. Roth wondered if embroidering elephants on clothing, would increase how much intelligence they granted. What if he added foxes? Would that grant the piece of equipment charisma? Could it be that simple? He would have to try it later.

“Nakia, I will add you to the VIP roster as soon as possible, OK?” Roth said as he stuffed his new jewelry in his bag, afraid that Nakia would change her mind and decide to keep the items to herself instead. She stood unperturbed, though, letting him pick the items and put them in his inventory. She had to be very wealthy, to not even blink when parting with thousands of gold like this.

“Well, congratulations on your work, and thank you. You two are very talented.”

“It was a lot of fun. I learned a lot from watching Godsfried work.”

“I’ll be coming back for revenge!” he teased.

They chatted a little more but soon parted ways. Roth watched as the smaller crowd gathered around the next competition that was going to be held by the two carpenters. Some of the artisans, seeing that the carpenters competing weren’t so famous, decided to leave.

Removing himself from the crowd, Roth equipped the new jewelry. The wood accessories went well with the green tones of his [Forest Lambswool] set, making him look like not only the king of a mountain but of a forest, too. He checked his stats.

CHARACTER INFORMATION

Name: Pax

Class: Pacifist

Race: Zoomorph (Human Form)

Profession(s): Broker, Lvl. 21 | Ecotailor, lvl. 10

Level: 31

Affinity: Light (169/300); Nature (97/100)

Alignment: Meek (394/1000)

Positive relationships:

Badgers (1723/2000); Boars (1712/2000); Corvids (1803/2000); Cyborg Union (1118/2000); Dogs (207/300); Dwarf Exiles (214/300); Flock (242/300); Foxes (1788/2000); Snakes (3169/8000); Golden Mountain Inc. (1248/2000); Greenleaf Inc. (617/1000); Hilsford Garrison Soldiers (103/300); Moonlight Herd (114/300); Oli, the Cat Burglar (101/300); Peace Corps (100/300); Ratans (3695/8000); Silkworms (10/100); The Table (10/100); Treeants (1260/2000)

Negative Relationships:

Bears (-10/-100); Blue Caterpillars (-100/-300); Gazpachos (-1400/-3000); Grassland Wolves (-45/-100); Thadeus (-10/-100); Timberwolves (-90/-100);
Titles: [Adored]; [Alpinist]; [Art Enthusiast]; [All-Nighter]; [Beast Master]; [Creature of the Night]; [Darksbane]; [Discoverer of Species]; [Entitled]; [Grand Explorer]; [Hero of Ages]; [First of a Kind]; [Jumper]; [Marathonist]; [Martyr]; [Microman]; [Mindfulness]; [Novice]; [Overachiever]; [Pioneer]; [Polyglot]; [Richling]; [Single Minded Craftsman]; [Stat Prodigy]; [Sweatshop Worker]; [Swimmer]; [Triathlete]

STATS (5 Free Stat Points)

Hp: 395
Energy: 475
Damage Reduction: 49.9%
Status Resistance: 16.6%
Cooldown Reduction: 16%
Running Speed: 153.4%
Weight: [Light] - (146.7/196.5 Kg)
Strength: 75
Dexterity: 99
Intelligence: 158 (+11%)
Wisdom: 179
Endurance: 245 (+10%)
Charisma: 136 (+5%)
Resilience: 25
Insight: 31
Subterfuge: 59
Perception: 20

EQUIPMENT

Right Hand: [Plumber's Torch] | +5 intelligence
Left Hand: [Flag of the Rat Cave] | +10 wisdom; +6 dexterity; +10% speed; [Ratan Stride]; [Ratan Dash]
Shoes: [Forest Lambswool Runner Shoes] | +15% running speed; +5 dexterity
Bottom: [Forest Lambswool Slacks] | +10 intelligence; +4 wisdom; +1% damage reduction
Top: [Forest Lambswool Robes] | +1% cooldown reduction; +11 intelligence; +100 hp; +6% damage reduction; +4% status resistance

Gloves: [Forest Lambswool Mittens] | +1% cooldown reduction; +4 intelligence; +3 wisdom; +4% status resistance

Head: [Forest Lambswool Cap] | +1% cooldown reduction; +8 intelligence; +2 wisdom; +5 hp regeneration; +5 ep regeneration

Cape: [Forest Lambswool Cape] | +1% cooldown reduction; +10 intelligence; +5 charisma; +3% running speed

ACCESSORIES

[Iron Wood Earring] | +8 intelligence; +2% cooldown reduction

[Blue Caterpillar Earring] | +5 subterfuge; +10 wisdom

[Witness Protection Mask]

[Time Berlock Necklace] | +1 to all stats; +5% cooldown reduction; +5% status resistance; +50 hp

[Iron Wood Belt] | +4 intelligence; +4 wisdom; +4% damage reduction; +2% cooldown reduction

[Blue Caterpillar Ring] | +8 subterfuge; 5 intelligence

[Iron Wood Globe Ring] | +8 intelligence; +2% cooldown reduction

SKILLS:

Stat Bonuses: [Charm]; [Copper Skin]; [Fast Hands]; [Good Character]; [Healthy Bones]; [Horse's Gallop]; [Inner Awareness]; [Inner Light]; [Quick Hands]; [Sharp Mind]; [Slower Heart Rate]; [Strategic Thinking]; [Timely]

Profession Related: [Cart Pulling]; [Increased Discount]; [Exasperate]; [Novice Hiring]; [Plenty of Fiber]; [Supplier's Loyalty]; [Tailors Bag]; [Wool's Will]

Passive: [Farsight]; [Flag Bearer]; [Forest Lambswool Set II]; [Horrific Glow]; [Ratan Stride]; [Snake Slither]; [Taunting Bellow]

Active: [Blink Blink]; [Camouflage]; [Inspiration]; [Miniaturize]; [Peace Decree]; [Peace Treaty]; [Ratan Dash]; [Screeching Terror]; [Search]

Roth was pleased with how much he had progressed. His stats had sure come a long way. Stat bonuses he only used to get when in one of his zoomorph forms were now always active, such as the stat bonuses for subterfuge and intelligence.

His new equipment had helped him grow much, much stronger. His equipment alone granted him a 15% cooldown reduction. Instead of waiting 24 hours to change forms, he could now do it every 20 hours.

His light affinity was still a long way from moving on to the next tier, but he was really close to unlocking the first bonus for nature affinity. He wondered what that would do for his character. Would it also be an overall increase to his stats like [Inner Light]? Or would it be more specific?

As he studied his character window, Drake appeared and slapped him in the back hard enough to almost make him lose balance.

“Hey?!” protested Roth.

“Look at you, you look like a new man. All clad in fancy new clothes you didn’t have to pay a cent for,” taunted Drake.

“I’m not mooching off anyone! I paid them in stats.”

“True, true, it’s a fair deal. There’s something I needed to talk to you about.”

“What is it? Another *surprise*?”

“No. Not really. Here.”

Would you like to join the Union Collective Guild? [Y/N]

“Is this the dummy guild we created to give stats to guildless members?”

“That’s correct.”

Roth looked at the invitation to join the guild in front of him. He couldn’t help but think of the last guild he’d been a part of: IronIre. Memories of him and his former friends rampaging through battlefields left a bittersweet taste in his mouth, the bitterness overwhelming his taste.

“What is it? Why aren’t you accepting the invitation?” asked Drake, confused.

“It’s just that, the last time I entered a guild was when me and my friends created IronIre.”

“I see.”

“I can’t help but think that if it weren’t for the merc guild I created, I wouldn’t be stuck here,” explained Roth.

“Being a rageaholic, you would’ve ruined your life anyway, Roth. It’s got nothing to do with being in a team. Your problem started much earlier on.”

Roth nodded. “I know. It’s just hard not to blend everything in my mind.” Roth thought of the 14th and the rest of the team. They already had something much stronger than a guild, they had a friendship. “This time, it will be different.”

“This time will be different,” echoed Drake, smiling.

You are now a member of the Union Collective Guild.

You’ve been promoted to management in the Union Collective Guild.

As soon as Roth accepted, he also received some new buffs.

The strength of the [Boar’s Great Tusk] runs in you.

+2 strength;

+5 hp.

The strength of the [White Wolf Fang] runs in you.

+2 dexterity;

+1% running speed.

The strength of [Owl Duke’s Lens] runs in you.

+2 wisdom;

+5 ep.

The strength of the [Alpaca Talisman] runs in you.

+2 intelligence;

+1% damage reduction.

Roth looked happily at all the buffs he had received. The increase of two in dexterity even helped him unlock a new dexterity stat bonus.

“Wow! How do you have buffs already?”

“Come, let me show you.”

Roth followed Drake through a curtain of cloth separating the main space of the tent from an enclosed, more reserved location. A few gas lamps cast a brilliant golden light on glass cases with items in them. It strangely reminded Roth of Oli’s hideout and his collection. He now wondered if that was the secret to Oli’s ridiculous strength.

Did all those items grant him stat bonuses, too? There were five cases in total, and only one was empty.

“Is this...”

“That’s right, this is the Guild Museum. Right now, we only have four items that we purchased. But we’re going to make it so that there’s more.”

“How does it work?”

“Very simple. You just put the artifacts inside the case, and everyone in the guild receives the bonus. Level one guilds start with three cases, and once you spend 100 gold, you can upgrade your guild to level two, and you add two cases to the museum.”

Roth studied each of the items. He recognized the thick, ivory, cracked tusk. It was the wild boar king’s tusk, an item that could be secured from the Green Woods. The other one he’d seen in person when badgers clipped Brawny’s claws wasn’t here. “And I guess you didn’t put the badger one because we don’t really care about damage in the guild.”

“That is correct. We’re only going to focus on items that provide bonuses to crafting.”

Roth remembered BlueFire’s invitation to join the guild and wondered about how many stats Ogre players got. What kind of items did they have in their museum? Up to how many cases could guilds have?

Drake’s comment interrupted Roth’s thoughts.

“Did you know that some guilds do this, too? They have one main guild to bolster the stats of damage-dealing classes and then create a secondary branch guild to provide bonuses to their craftsmen. Some guilds even have a different museum section dedicated to each main class. For example, the Gorgons have several branch guilds designed to bolster specifically the stats and skill effects of each of the main classes.”

“And they can afford it?”

“Well, they can afford to have multiple guilds with multiple museums, but what they can’t afford usually is to have good flags in each of the tents. Flags are really expensive.”

“Can we already hoist a flag in our guild’s tent?”

“We can. If you give me one, I’ll be happy to fly it. Do you want to spare the rat flag?”

“Come on. You know I need this one. But as I unlock more flags, maybe I can leave my older ones here.”

“Now you’re talking. Just so you know, multiple people have been offering artifacts to the museum and saying that they’ll exchange them for a seat at the table.”

“Bring them on! I can still add a few more people, even after factoring in Nakia, Rhapsody, and Leanne. I think if the items are valuable enough, we should accept them,” Roth said, thinking about how good it would be to have a few more bonuses. He didn’t really care about filling the seats in the Union. All he cared about was improving his strength to get to the top 10 in the game sooner and escape the prison Loki put him in.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t rush it. Let’s take it easy, shall we? We still don’t know who else is going to come along and what kind of benefits they can promise. But I’ll watch for any offers on flags and artifacts. Deal?”

“Deal.” Maybe this could be another way for him to get better flags, too. He studied each of the cases and admired the items in them. Even though they were ordinary, being encased inside the glass made them feel mysterious and valuable. “Well, I’m going to get ready. It’s time to go.”

“So, are you off to take the guilds to hunt the Hive King?”

“Yeah,” Roth said, “It looks like it.”

“Are you just going to escort the guilds, or will you participate in the hunt?”

Roth stared at Drake, befuddled, “I haven’t considered that.”

“I suggest you do that now; otherwise, you’ll just get there and freeze or worse, go in one of your crazed rampages and get in everyone’s way. You have to figure this out before you go,” chastised Drake.

Roth paused. Drake was right. How hadn’t he thought of that? “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Please, do. Remember how much you hurt after throwing that grenade?”

Roth recoiled at the memory, and a twinge of guilt surfaced.

“Make peace with whatever you do out there *before* you go. Otherwise, you’re just going to end up regretting it.”

Chapter 30

Roth left the tent, somewhat shaken. Drake's words had struck a chord with him. It was true; he still hadn't figured out what he would do once they reached the Hive King. What would happen once he saw the other 99 players hunting and fighting furiously against the monster? Would he jump into the fray? Would his traumas take over and make him get in everyone's way, or would he decide to help the good guys from the get-go?

Roth's grip on the flagpole tightened. Even though he wanted to make a decision now, to be honest, he didn't know what he would do once the fighting broke out. All he knew was that he had to come through in his agreement with the Ogres and transport the guilds to the lair of the Hive King. Perhaps he could just be the taxi driver, so to speak, only dropping the players off and bringing them back. But wasn't that naive? He couldn't just wing it, could he?

Thoughts confused, Roth entered Hilsford through the north gate and headed to Stable Street, hoping Lua was ready to be mounted. The alternative would be to activate [Ratan Form] and run to the rendezvous point.

As soon as he entered the City Riders establishment, Greta spotted him from behind one of the counters and was already running out the door, screaming orders to the stable boys to get Lua.

Roth followed her to the patio in the back. "Hello, Greta."

"Hello, sir. Fancy seeing you here again," she greeted amicably.

"Is Lua ready?"

"She is. Please wait for a moment. I've already sent for her."

Knowing his mount was ready, Roth rubbed his hands in anticipation. Had this been the real world, the horse would need

weeks or months to heal, but being a game, the recovery was much faster.

It didn't take long for the stable boy to bring the mare, or better said, for the mare to bring the stable boy. The difference was important because, like before, the mare was the one obviously calling the shots, and the stable boy just tried his best to keep up with Lua's fast canter.

As Lua appeared, Roth performed a curt bow, showing respect for the monarch, to which she groaned a greeting.

You start making sense of the strange sounds.

Progress in learning Horsian: 2%.

Nice! Yet another language! And the best part was that he would spend lots of time with Lua, enabling him to learn the language quickly. Roth looked at the wounds on her side, which were healing nicely. The horse, who could hardly stand a few hours ago, now moved with certainty in her step, boding well for her recovery.

"We've taken good care of her, cleaned her up, patched her wounds, and fed her some medicine," Greta explained. "She'll still need more care, though."

"Can she be mounted?" Roth asked.

"Yes, she can, but try not to push her too hard."

Roth inspected Lua's stats.

Lua (Pet)

Pet rating: E+

Lvl. 15

Affection: 13/100

Endurance: 52

Strength: 35

Dexterity: 12

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

Skills: [Ride]; [Moonlight Mount]; [Summon]

From an E minus, Lua's grade had climbed to an E plus. Dexterity had previously been locked but now had been activated again. The good news was that both [Ride] and [Summon] had already been unlocked. Her level was still lower than it could be, and her special skill was also locked away from Roth. But for now, it would do.

Roth turned to the mare, patting her on her snout consolingly. “I’m about to mount you if you give me permission, but we won’t push you too hard. Do you prefer I walk?”

The mare shook her head.

“Are you sure?” The horse kicked the ground a couple of times, affirming her readiness.

“Very well, let’s go.”

As he was about to ride her, Roth realized something. “Wait, where’s the saddle?”

“You don’t have your own?” Greta asked.

“No, I didn’t think I’d need one. Don’t you sell it together with the horse?”

Greta gave him a wolfish grin. “I’m sorry, mister. They are sold separately. I’ll be happy to sell you a saddle and any riding equipment you want, though,” she offered.

Roth clenched his teeth. There went the rest of his savings. “Show me what you’ve got for sale,” he said, resigned.

The shop window appeared in front of him, featuring three saddles. One for level 10 players, another for level 20, and another for level 30 players. Surprisingly, the level 30 saddle only cost one gold, much less than Roth had expected.

Beginner’s Saddle (Common)

Description: A saddle with a simple design that isn’t too comfortable but is better than riding a horse without one.

Item effects:

+10% running speed to mounts;

-10% energy consumed when mounted.

The bonuses weren’t spectacular, but they were a good boost. As he equipped the saddle in the inventory, it appeared neatly installed on Lua’s back. It was a cookie-cutter design with no ornaments.

Roth activated the [Ride] skill, and the system took over his body, allowing him to neatly jump on top of the saddle as if he had done it multiple times before. It was an otherworldly feeling to experience the system pulling your strings as if you were a puppet, but it was nothing he hadn’t experienced before when utilizing other skills.

Now, atop the mare, he felt her powerful lungs and great strength. How he had missed this feeling. Although he had never ridden an animal in real life, he had done so many times in online games. In New Earth, among Roth's most prized possessions was a ride of a legendary grade, an armored dinosaur. He and Rexie had wreaked havoc in the game, braving battlefields together.

Even though he didn't miss the thrill of battle, he had forgotten how tall one felt when atop a mount. There was no comparison between mounting and riding a vehicle. When riding an animal, there was a feeling of freedom and potential that no car or vehicle could offer. The sense of harmony between man and beast working in tandem was incredible.

"What do you say, Lua? Shall we go?" Roth asked as the horse breathed in and neighed in readiness. "Let's go, Lua," Roth declared, directing her gently toward the North Gate. The mare took off at an easy step toward the north of the city.

Little Lin poked his head out of the folds in his robes, trying to determine why the ride was so bumpy compared to Roth's usual, smoother steps. Lin was getting bolder by the hour and venturing farther and farther away from Roth. With incredible inherent agility, despite the bumpy ride, the kitten climbed up to Lua's head and then looked back at Roth expectantly.

"What?" asked Roth.

The kitten just kept looking at him, waiting for something. Roth frowned but, after a while, understood what the kitten wanted.

"Well done, Lin! Way to go!" he said encouragingly.

The kitten raised his head triumphantly, vindicated by the well-deserved commendation, and judging the seat on Lua's head a bit chillier than his usual accommodations, he retreated into the warmth of Roth's woolen clothes.

Leaving the gate, seeing the greenery, Lua instantly reacted, neighing happily and speeding up her canter, eager to leave the human city behind and head into the boundless wild. Roth pulled the reins on her, afraid that she would reopen her wounds. She let him bring her down to a more reasonable pace.

Roth took one last look at Hilsford. Not a week ago, he thought he wouldn't see the city for a very long time, yet he returned after only a few days. He still wasn't sure what to do after finishing this new

adventure with the guilds. Would he come back here or move toward Sapphira as he had originally planned? Whatever happened, he preferred to keep this parting memory of Hilsforn rather than the previous one, running under the darkness of night. Roth burned in his mind the image of the white city by the river under the sun and briskly shook the reins, signaling Lua to take off.

Coming back or not would be a decision for another day. He still had no idea of the repercussions of ending the event. He wasn't even sure that he would succeed in ending it! What about Loki? If he had chased him relentlessly before, how much more so he would do it once he brought the guilds to his doorstep? Even if Roth's real body was outside his grasp, Loki could still get to him in the game, and Roth didn't feel like being imprisoned again.

As Roth thought about his next steps and worried about Loki, Lua rode along the river, upstream, toward his destination.

He had the coordinates Bluefire had sent him half a day earlier, and based on his traveling speed, he estimated that it would only take him one hour to get there. The city of Hilsford quickly became a white spot in the distance, lost to a sea of waving green. Lua was excited to revisit the wild, conveyed through her occasional neighs and reinvigorated canter.

Besides these signs, the system also confirmed how much Lua enjoyed riding outside.

You've let the princess of the moonlight herd ride under the sky again.

+3 affection with Lua;

+8 reputation with the Moonlight Herd.

For once, Roth was happy not to be the one running around and to let Lua do the traveling for him. Roth went through the descriptions of the many consumables he purchased in preparation for the trip and also reviewed each of his titles and skills, ensuring he knew every tool in his arsenal for the quest ahead.

After a few minutes of riding, he also received a pleasant notification.

The first 15 nanites of your treeant colony have finished metamorphosis.

+150 xp

[Level Up!]

+3 intelligence;

+2 dexterity.

The Leafies have learned a new skill: [Forage].

Forage (Pet Skill)

By exploring the surrounding area the colony can gather the needed resources to help the colony thrive.

Skill effects:

Active. You can assign an area to your colony, and they will gather resources from the surrounding area. You will get a part of the spoils.

That was a nice surprise! The first workers had become active, and his colony had learned a new skill! It was nice that they could collect resources for him, but it was a little inconvenient that he had to plant them somewhere and pick them up later. Right now, he was on the move, but maybe he could find a safe place to leave the treeants working for him and collecting goodies. He wondered what kind of resources he could get this way.

The directions were simple; all Roth had to do was follow the river. Halfway through the trip, flashes and explosions caught his attention, and he stopped Lua in her tracks.

A group of players clad in beautiful matching armor surrounded a village. Thanks to the enhanced eyesight from [Farsight] and his perception stat, he could see what was happening while keeping a safe distance from the conflict.

Barricaded inside the village, he saw farmers and villagers in torn clothes surrounded by a black miasma. There was also a group of players in sleek armor standing behind them. The village had been taken by hivies.

Roth directed Lua to take a long detour around the settlement to avoid the conflict. As Lua went around, a group of players on the human side stormed the village while espers provided cover fire with long-range skills. The hivies threw the infected NPCs at the invaders while retaliating with their ranged skills from the rear.

His doubts about what he would do resurfaced because of the battle. It wasn't only the people fighting but the sight of peaceful villagers forced to fight that turned his stomach. Killing the alien king would put an end to all this conflict. Maybe he should really put his conscience aside for this trip. Or should he really? Wasn't blowing that grenade up in the sewers enough violence? Roth just pressed Lua to continue and ride away. He went back and forth between what stand he would take, but no matter how far Lua rode, he couldn't outrun his doubts and confusion.

Chapter 31

The meeting point for the expedition was a very small town with wooden sheds built along the river. There was a rudimentary harbor with boats tied along the piers, if they could be called that. To Roth, they looked like wooden planks barely kept together with ropes. Strangely, he saw no fishermen or NPCs out in the water. Perhaps it was a fisherman thing; Roth recalled it was better to fish at night.

The town itself was a much poorer version of Hilsford, having only one stone building: the town hall. The hall's design reminded him of the auction houses of Greensburg and Hilsford. It was as if they had been designed by the same architect. All the other buildings were built from wood. The town was between a beginner village and a mid-tiered city, though leaning much more heavily toward the first. It was much bigger than beginner villages and had some visible improvements; for example, instead of dirt roads, there was cobblestone and pavement. Contrary to the unprotected beginner villages, a wooden palisade around town offered some protection.

He followed the empty main street, wondering where everyone was, and followed BlueFire's instructions, heading toward the hill overseeing the fishing town. When he reached the foot of the hill, three rogues appeared out of thin air.

Roth had assumed that his perception was high enough not to be caught off-guard, but he had no clue they were there. Lua, too, was caught by surprise and stood on her hind legs, ready to fight or run. Roth tried to calm her down while studying the ambushers. They had very high-end equipment, and looking at them, Roth felt the hair on the back of his neck prick. These weren't pushovers. They were powerful rogues and had to have very high subterfuge to hide so well.

“Who goes there?” asked one of the rogues that had appeared in his rear.

“Hi, I’m Pax. BlueFire is expecting me,” Roth replied.

“So, you’re the troublesome one?” the frontman said good-humoredly. “Follow after me,” he added. Roth hopped off Lua.

It looked like Pax’s playstyle and movements had been noticed by other players in the Ogre’s guild. Roth pulled Lua gently by the reins toward the hill, wondering what gossip the Ogres had on him.

“Nice mount you got there,” remarked one of the thieves walking alongside him. “What grade is it?” he asked.

“She’s an E plus.”

“Okay, cool,” he said halfheartedly. He seemed slightly disappointed with the grade. It looked like he had been expecting something juicier than a measly E plus. Roth didn’t bother to explain that she was hurt and that he didn’t know her true grade yet. As Drake constantly reminded him, divulging one’s secrets to the first person who asked was bad policy.

Only when they were almost in the tent did Roth finally see the structure. The Ogres had set up a military-style tent with cameo patterns that helped break its shape against the background of the forested hill. Even with his enhanced vision, he couldn’t spot it until it was right under his nose. He could see several players behind the tent and hidden behind the trees, but after his previous experience with the three invisible rogues, he was sure that there were many more lurking about, hidden by [Camouflage].

Summon!

Roth experimented with the basic skill that Lua had come with and watched her disappear into a puff of smoke. It wasn’t among the most realistic things in this game. The game lore didn’t explain where the mounts went and where they returned from. They just disappeared and appeared for the sake of a player’s convenience. He wasn’t complaining. The game was complex enough, and he thanked the developers for making players’ lives easier in this regard.

In AstroTerra, the trickier things to manage were energy depletion caused by running and the weight-carrying limit imposed by the system. In New Earth one had to satiate hunger, and maintain and

repair equipment, but as far as Roth could tell, these factors were simplified in this game.

Roth followed the rogue toward the tent's entrance, and he gasped as he realized that the other two rogues had vanished without him even noticing. The remaining rogue smirked, seeing Roth's startled expression, and gestured for him to enter the tent.

"Here's your stop, chief."

"Thank you," said Roth.

Roth was surprised by the tent's size. It looked like it could only accommodate ten people from the outside, but there were at least 50 inside. The difference between his guess and the construction's actual size made him wonder if there was some kind of spatial distortion technology at play here or if it was the result of the optical illusion created by the cameo pattern on the tent that made it look much smaller than it was.

Roth studied the crowd, chatting and laughing inside the tent. The scene reminded him of the bidders at the auction for his life who had mingled and chatted amongst themselves after finishing negotiating Roth's life. The memory made his face twitch, but his admiration pushed the annoyance out of his mind. This was the most impressive array of high-end equipment he'd seen in the game.

Mighty warriors wore sets of golden, intricately carved suits of armor, while espers sported floating, regal, shiny robes. Every axe, spear, and quarterstaff in the room looked like the stuff of legends. Roth, who had felt extremely cool after this last makeover of his equipment, flushed embarrassedly. He was the shabbiest person in the tent by a mile.

Roth spotted the yellow feathers of Goldie, Mel's hawk. Even though he couldn't see Mel, the hawk enjoyed being perched on her shoulder, and its head was slightly higher than the group of players that mingled and talked. He felt his mouth go dry. The last time he'd seen the girl, he had scolded her so hard that, despite the messages of apology they'd exchanged, running into her would be awkward. As he pondered whether he should go and say hello, someone touched Roth's shoulder.

"Look who it is," greeted Manny, wearing the same equipment that he'd seen him wearing at the auction.

"Hello, Manny."

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” he said, disappearing into the crowd and returning with a kid. The boy looked around 14 or 15, but despite his young age, Roth could tell he was a seasoned player. The reason was simple: he wore one of the most beautiful suits of armor Roth had ever seen. The red armor had a wolf carved into the chest piece with two shiny eyes. Under closer inspection, he could see that the shiny eyes were, in reality, two shiny chips. He also had a bow on his back, marking him as a ranger or an archer. It was the first time Roth saw a bow in the game.

“So, this is the Pax fella I told you about. Pax, I want you to meet our guild leader; this is Cerberus,” Manny introduced.

Roth greeted Cerberus respectfully, “Nice to meet you, sir.” In gaming, age didn’t matter. Level and stats spoke louder, and he dared not be disrespectful toward this young man. If anything, his age only made Roth respect him more. For someone to lead such a powerful guild at such a tender age spoke for their ability.

“You’re the one who made BlueFire dance on the palm of your hand and the one who knows the Tree Hunter?” Cerberus asked.

Roth replied, “I guess so.”

“I suppose you don’t have any more clues about how I can find the black panther,” the young man tried.

“Not at the moment. But if I run into Shadow again, I’ll give you a call,” Roth promised.

The boy’s eyebrows shot up, questioning, “Shadow?”

“The panther. Shadow. That’s his name.”

“Really? That’s interesting.”

“You didn’t know?”

“No,” Cerberus replied. “Doing this quest, I’ve run into myths describing the Tree Hunter, and they do refer to it as the shadow that hunts in the night, but I never assumed that was his name.”

The conversation was interrupted when a man as big as Roth approaches and possessively put his arm around Roth’s shoulder. “So, this is the little fella that has cost me a bucket load of money,” the man greeted.

“Ogre,” greeted Manny respectfully.

“Hello, sir,” said Cerberus.

“Manny. Cerberus. Welcome. You couldn’t be headhunting one of my new acquisitions under my own roof, could you?” he said with a predatory grin.

“Not at all. Just making small talk,” answered Cerberus respectfully. “Anyway, nice to meet you, Pax.” The pair walked away, leaving Roth alone with the leader of the Ogre guild.

Roth estimated the man’s age to be around 35 to 40. He had spiky hair and exuded joviality and energy. He wore a massive sword on his back and a sleeveless chest piece, leaving his arms uncovered with only metal bands on his wrists. He looked like a drawn blade: sharp, dangerous, and ready to go.

“Hello, Roth,” he greeted in a pleasant baritone.

“Sir. Nice to meet you. Thank you for taking my family in.”

“It’s not like I had much of a choice,” he complained. “You’ve made quite the impression with BlueFire and Cyclops. I can see why. You seem to be a trouble magnet,” he said, turning in the direction where Cerberus had left. “What did Cerberus want?”

“Just some help with a quest he has,” answered Roth truthfully.

“I beg your pardon? Cerberus, the boy genius, wants your help with a quest?”

Seeing Ogre’s baffled look, Roth decided to surf the wave. “Yeah... I just threw him a bone, but can’t really be bothered with it. So busy these days. But if you ever need help with one of your quests, please come to me, too, sir. I’ll free some time from my busy schedule,” he said, winking.

Ogre was completely thrown away by Roth’s proposition and confidence, eyeing him suspiciously, trying to figure out whether he was speaking the truth. “Thanks,” he replied awkwardly. He looked around and dismissed the conversation. “It’s time to get the meeting started. I’ll see you around, Roth.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

The man walked away, leaving Roth alone to ponder over his encounter with BlueFire’s boss. As a former merc leader, he’d met several guild leaders, and they could easily be placed in two categories. Tacticians and generals. Tactician types managed the guild from behind the scenes but left the frontline to their subordinates, as Loki did. Then, there were talented, charismatic fighters who led the

charge. Ogre was definitely the latter. How heavily he seemed to depend on BlueFire only added to his judgment.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is about to begin,” he heard a familiar feminine voice say. He followed the turning heads of the crowd and identified the person who spoke as Cyclops, one of the generals of the Ogres. She didn’t have the same easy-going disposition he’d seen in the auction. She looked like a drill sergeant putting the barracks in line.

The table at the tent’s center wasn’t big enough to accommodate everyone. Only about ten people sat down, and seeing Ogre and BlueFire and Cerberus and Manny among those sitting down, he guessed that those at the table were guild leaders and their trusted aides. As the crowd shuffled and everyone found a place, Roth felt something heavy land on his shoulder.

“Goldie! Come back here!” He heard Mel say in a judgmental whisper as she pushed through the crowd. Once she saw Roth, she froze. The bird just ignored her and rubbed his head against Roth.

“Sqwak, squawk, chirp,” greeted Roth amicably.

“Chirp, chirp,” answered the hawk.

A few murmurs around Roth made him realize that other people were commenting and pointing at him. He flushed and, clearing his throat, turned to Mel. Seeing how the hawk’s owner seemed to have become made of stone, Roth sighed and tried to be nice. “Hey, Mel.”

“Hi.”

Roth offered his arm to Goldie, who climbed down from his shoulder onto his arm, and he then stretched it toward Mel. “Lost something?” he joked.

She smiled. “Thanks.”

Cyclops clapped her hands a few times, interrupting their awkward exchange. “The strategy meeting for the hunt of the Hive King is about to begin.”

Chapter 32

The meeting began. Cyclops took a seat and let BlueFire conduct the proceedings.

Ogre's relaxed posture as his subordinates took the lead confirmed Roth's earlier assessment that Ogre was the general type. He seemed happy to let others manage as long as he could lead the charge on the battlefield.

"Ladies and gentlemen," started BlueFire, "as you know, we have a ticket that will take us straight to the Hive King. I don't have to say how valuable this opportunity is. We have reasons to suspect that Pegasus was the one beginning the event, and their concentration on the Dark Abyss is probably connected to triggering it. Therefore, our best guess is that we'll be transported to that region as soon as we use this ticket." BlueFire spared an ironic look at Roth. He didn't feel too happy about being seen as *a ticket*.

As BlueFire spoke, Roth studied the people around the table. One was a pretty young woman with black hair and blue eyes. She wore white robes and massive crescent-shaped earrings. They were so big and sharp that Roth suspected a rogue could have used them as daggers. Her attire made her look like something between a judge and a dentist. She sat next to a lizardman with blue scales and yellow eyes. His reptilian tongue occasionally came out and licked his eyeball. Roth wasn't sure if this was a racial quirk that the player couldn't control or if he was the kind of hardcore gamer who really lived his character's backstory. He had a tower shield on his back and a mace hanging from his belt.

Then, there was someone in a black cloak whose features were hidden from Roth. He couldn't tell the player's gender. From their

equipment, his best guess was that they were an esper. They sat next to a thin man in baggy clothes. His garments were blue, not sky blue, but ice blue, that shade of blue that easily passes as white. Whenever he breathed, a puff of hot steam came out of his mouth as if they were inside a refrigerator, even though it was a pleasant spring morning. He was the only one who did that with his breath in the tent. It was as if he had his own private weather. Sitting on his lap was a white fur ball whose species Roth couldn't identify.

Finally, there was a man who stuck out like a sore thumb. First, he had fully gray hair, making him the oldest man at the table. He also wore the simplest attire of the whole group: a simple black tunic and no weapons. He was also the only person sitting alone at the table. Roth had spoken to him once on the phone after he'd discovered Antioch. This was the leader of the most powerful guild in AstroTerra: Jaw-Long, leader of the Dragons.

"Will we be transported to a dungeon?" asked the girl in white robes. The way she phrased the question and the lizardman next to her did not flinch and kept looking up, told Roth that she was a guild leader and the lizardman her aide.

"We do not know. In fact, we're not even sure that the Hive King is an NPC," stated Blue Fire. It was as if BlueFire had thrown a stone in a quiet lake, and now ripples disturbed the surface. A wave of murmurs went through the room. BlueFire's conjecture also caught Roth by surprise.

"What makes you think the Hive King is a player?" asked Cerberus.

"Nothing in the event specifies that the Alien King is an NPC," explained BlueFire. "That added to the fact that it was probably Pegasus who started the event, and we can assume that it's not necessarily an NPC. However, that doesn't matter. All that matters is that we have prey to hunt. We have a target to take down, which is within our reach; otherwise, the developers wouldn't have allowed this event to start. Stumbling upon a ticket to reach the Hive King only reinforces this. This event was designed to be ended, and we, ladies and gentlemen, are the ones who are going to finish it and scoop up all the rewards."

Greedy, excited looks were exchanged throughout the tent.

“Now, I will explain some rules that will dictate your participation in this hunt. Rule number one,” explained BlueFire while counting the rules on his fingers, “The rewards of the hunt shall be split in half. Half goes to the Ogres, the other half to all of you. Your half will be split equally between you all.” Ogre and Cyclops remained unfazed, but Roth didn’t miss the sour expressions on some of the other players. The Ogres would get the lion’s share of the rewards here.

“Secondly, everyone without fail will obey whatever leader is assigned to lead this expedition. Failure to obey will result in a hefty fine on the offender’s guild. So, guild leaders, keep a tight leash on your people. Otherwise, you will have to pay reparations to us.” Roth caught more than one guild leader staring down their subordinates in the audience, letting them know they would comply with this rule.

Roth guessed that the players who were smiling proudly and had a relaxed posture were probably with the Ogres.

“That goes for all members of the Ogres, too,” roared the guild leader. “Whoever leads has to be obeyed,” he said, quieting the chuckles and easy-going looks on the members of his guild. Roth could appreciate the fairness in this rule. It was a good way to increase cohesion among the hunting party.

“Finally, the last rule: Regardless of whether we fail or succeed in this hunt, there are no refunds.”

Roth imagined how much the Ogres had sold the front seats to the hunt for. But for BlueFire to have such a satisfied grin told him that it hadn’t been cheap.

“Are the rules clear?” asked BlueFire.

The girl in white robes, the player covered by a black cloak, and the old man in a black tunic all nodded. With this, Roth had finally finished identifying all the guild leaders in attendance.

“Very well, that leads us to the first point, the next big decision. We need to assign the party leader.” As BlueFire said this, several eyes turned toward the player with a white fur ball on his lap. Others kept looking at BlueFire. “Before we vote, I would like to submit the Ogres recommendation. We recommend ColdHand to be the leader of the party.”

“I thought you were the one who was going to lead,” spoke Cerberus. “You’re a capable tactician. Why delegate this to ColdHand?”

“Take this as a show of goodwill on our part,” spoke BlueFire. “We want this hunt to succeed, and if one of you leads us, we believe it will be good for overall morale. Additionally, I lose my cool where Pegasus is concerned.”

BlueFire was a proud, calculating man Roth could hardly call a friend. He knew that the general of the Ogres didn’t look out for his best interests. However, after hearing him so quickly relinquishing authority and admitting his weaknesses, he had a new level of respect for him. Any general who knew their limitations and was willing to swallow their pride was a fearsome opponent. Had Roth been this wise, IronIre would never have fallen, and Loki would never have been able to use and abuse him.

“I agree,” spoke Cerberus.

The woman in the white robe exchanged looks with the lizardman, who nodded. “We are willing to let ColdHand lead us. He’s a capable tactician.”

“Jaw-Long? Do you agree?” asked BlueFire.

The tent went dead quiet, and Roth could feel the tension in the air. Something told him that if this old man disagreed, his vote would be enough to cancel everyone else’s opinion. The man remained silent and just gave the shortest of nods.

“ColdHand, do you accept the position of party leader for this expedition?”

“What do you say, boss?” ColdHand asked the person in black robes.

“Go for it,” came the answer in a confident tenor.

“I accept.”

“Very well. The floor is yours. I’ll give you the honors.”

ColdHand stood up, mumbling as he walked to where BlueFire was. He disturbed the slumber of the animal dozing on his lap, causing it to unfurl from its furry ball, revealing its thick and sturdy paws. Its fur, as white as snow, concealed a sense of strength and confidence beneath its adorable appearance. It was a polar bear cub! It was the first time Roth saw a polar bear in the game. How had this guy gotten it?

“Well. Let’s see... Hmmm... Ten. Seventeen. Six. Five. Fourteen,” the man mumbled uncomprehendingly. ColdHand seemed to be the kind of person who always had a million things

running through his mind and only spared a small part of his attention to the situation around him.

“Very well. MountainTop, you’re the lead tank,” he said, gesturing toward the lizardman at the table, “and Griffin, you’ll lead the medics.” ColdHand had a soft, flat voice with no inflections. He sounded almost robotic.

“Roger that.” The woman in white robes responded. So that’s who she was—the leader of the Griffins. The main tank and the leader of the medics were two crucial positions in a hunting party. As long as these two elements stayed alive, the hunt had a chance of success. Even though they didn’t deal much damage, they were the buffer that allowed the rest of the team to stay alive. For ColdHand to entrust this to them meant they had to be formidable in boss hunting. For both of them to be in the same guild, they had to be in a guild famous for completing challenging dungeons and hunting powerful bosses.

“Second tank will be Ogre, and third tank will be... hmmm... let’s see. Is TurtleShell here?”

A dwarf raised his axe in response.

“Good. TurtleShell from the Cerberus will be 3rd tank. “BlueFire, you will command the DPS squad.”

BlueFire nodded courteously. Managing DPS was a crucial position in a hunt. Depending on how skills were rotated and the timing for important cooldowns, the difference in overall damage could be night and day. At the same time, if the DPS team got too excited and drew too much aggro, the boss would stop focusing on the tanks and wreak havoc among the party ranks. Traditionally, the party leader assumed this role, but ColdHand had gallantly given BlueFire some face and assigned him this vital responsibility.

“Cerberus, I want you and your squad to be ready to detach from the rest of the party and form a small containment team. Your goal is to keep Pegasus players from hindering us. Pay special attention to Zin and Anak. I don’t want those two anywhere near the hunt. Jaw-Long, I have two missions for you. Mission one is Zin. Can you handle him?”

The old man nodded. Roth had heard the name before. It was the highest-leveled player in the ranks and one of Pegasus’ trump cards. For ColdHand to delegate this responsibility to Jaw-Long meant that the old man could hold his own against him. He wondered why Jaw-

Long wasn't in the ranks. Had the old man chosen not to add his name to the ranks?

"Mission two... Where is the ticket boy?"

"The ticket boy?" Roth heard people around him ask. "What ticket boy? What is ColdHand talking about?"

"Roth. Come out," called BlueFire.

Roth took a step forward, eliciting curious looks from most of the people in the tent.

"Do what you want, but keep him alive. OK?" ColdHand said while pointing at Roth.

Roth had spoken to Jaw-Long on the phone, but this was the kind of person whose full presence could only be felt face-to-face. The old man checked him out from top to bottom. His look was so intense that Roth felt as if he could peer into his soul and see his every secret. Somehow, the old man's scrutiny felt heavier than everyone else's gaze in the tent combined.

"Ticket boy!" the old man called. His voice had a zing that made Roth think of a stern grandfather. Speaking after ColdHand's soft, droning voice only made it stand out more.

Roth grimaced at the stupid title that these people had given him. Why had he suddenly become 'ticket boy'? He was pretty sure he and ColdHand were roughly the same age. Why was he being called 'boy'? He could hear Mel behind him giggle. "Yes, sir."

"Come and sit here," the old man commanded imperiously. "From now on, you're not going to leave my side. Anyone who comes closer than three feet near us is dead," he declared matter-of-factly. Everyone in the tent stepped back, even though no one was anywhere near enough.

Roth obeyed and meekly came to sit at the table next to the old man. Suddenly, he felt as if he was being punished by his grandfather.

"Why do we need ticket boy?" asked Griffin, curious.

"He's the one who can get us all out of there. Also, he has a quest related to this. If he dies, it can affect the hunt."

"Hello, sir," Roth greeted. He hadn't expected to be assigned the game's number-one player as his bodyguard.

"We meet again, boy. A pacifist and a zoomorph, hey? Never heard of either. You're an interesting young man." Roth gulped,

hearing how easily Jaw-Long had discovered his class and race. “You’ll have to tell me more about those later.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Roth awkwardly.

“Very well. Let’s decide on our attack plan,” interrupted ColdHand. “Scenario number one. The Hive King is an NPC boss.”

Chapter 33

The briefing took an hour. ColdHand went through different possible scenarios and ensured the hunting party was ready for the decisive hunt ahead. Roth was no stranger to such briefings. They were a regular part of a professional gamer's life. He had had his fair share of briefings back in his merc days.

What would follow now was drills and exercises to build some muscle memory into the party, but given the pedigree of the hunting party members, that wouldn't take long. Everyone had just left the tent and was headed toward the chosen location to run the drills before teleporting away.

"I'm curious, how much did you pay for your place in the expedition?" asked Roth to his bodyguard. Even though Jaw-Long had defined 3 feet as a kill zone, no one came near the 30-foot mark.

"1k gold."

Roth gulped. That wasn't a small amount. "Was there an auction, or?"

"1k per seat. That was the deal."

"And how many people did you bring?" Roth asked, looking around. He hadn't yet pieced together who else from the reputed guild was here.

"Enough." The old man habitually answered questions with as few words as possible. He seemed to Roth as the kind of man who believed that the fewer words one used, the more power one wielded.

"And how many are those?"

The man smirked, "One."

The sentence was spoken without pretension or arrogance, just pure confidence. Just how powerful was this man? What kind of skills

did he have? Before Roth could ask more questions, BlueFire headed their way.

“Permission to enter the 3-foot radius, Jaw-Long,” asked BlueFire politely.

The old man nodded, and BlueFire approached Roth. “Hello, ticket boy,” he said playfully.

Roth wondered why the remark had a softer edge than BlueFire’s usual snarky tone. “Hey, BlueFire. What’s up?”

“I’ve been getting some interesting messages from the party of Ogelords I sent to explore Antioch.”

Hearing this, Roth understood why he was acting so meekly. “Oh, right. How is it going? It’s a cool place, isn’t it?” asked Roth happily. Jaw-Long, to the side, seemed to be looking elsewhere, but Roth was sure that he was listening into the conversation. After all, he’d been one of the players interested enough to call Roth and ask about this new world region.

“They’re having trouble making sense of the place. You don’t happen to have a map you could share with us? It would go a long way toward helping with exploration,” asked BlueFire politely.

“Of course. 5k gold.”

BlueFire choked, hearing this as if the words had fishbones that had gotten stuck in his throat, and even Jaw-Long couldn’t stop himself from quitting his little ‘I’m not looking at you’ act and throwing Roth a surprised look.

“5k? You’ve already milked us dry, Roth. I already paid 5k just for those,” he hesitated, sparing a look at Jaw-Long a few steps away, “*consumables* to enter the city.”

“Nonsense. Good old Jaw-Long here just told me you charged 1k for every seat in the hunt. On top of that, you’ll get half of the Hive King’s loot. As I see it, you guys are swimming in money right now.”

BlueFire clenched his teeth. “1k. Final offer.”

“Sorry. No.”

He walked away from BlueFire, signaling he wouldn’t budge. Roth didn’t have anything to lose and everything to gain. On the other hand, he doubted that the team of explorers BlueFire had sent in could do much in Antioch without his help. How many people there knew telepathy and were on friendly terms with treeants?

If BlueFire didn't take this opportunity, he would probably have to return to Roth and beg him to sell him more of the [Miniaturizing Honeydew] to let them enter the city again and have more time to explore. BlueFire was probably running all these calculations while considering Roth's confidence.

"Fine. 3k and not a penny more."

"You know what. Even though 5k would be a fair price, I don't want to be greedy, BlueFire. You've got yourself a deal. I can be a reasonable man."

BlueFire's scowl told him he disagreed with Roth's humble brag. Roth sent him the map he had previously prepared. He had taken some of the more valuable information out, such as the location of the queen's chamber, the teleportation gate, and the vault. Still, it marked clearly where the Ogelords could buy [Miniaturizing Honeydew].

"There you go," Roth said, sending him a message with the map information.

"Thank you."

BlueFire has transferred you 3000 gold.

"Pleasure to do business with you," spoke Roth amicably.

BlueFire let out a resigned sigh and left.

"Hahaha. You tamed the old fox," Jaw-Long laughed. "Guarding you is more fun than I thought."

The usually quiet man made the longest sentence Roth had heard him say all day. Roth noted how the old man had called BlueFire an old fox. It was ironic because Jaw-Long fit the bill better than BlueFire, but he was inclined to agree with him. BlueFire was indeed an old fox. He was a shrewd tactician. The overall respect he'd seen from other guild leaders toward him and his maturity in letting ColdHand lead the hunt only attested to this. He should be careful not to antagonize BlueFire too much, or it would come back to bite him.

Roth and his entourage kept walking until they reached a clearing that reminded him of the Palatial Clearing in the Green Woods, but this one was slightly smaller. This hill and forest were so far from important landmarks that Roth couldn't imagine anyone coming here and causing trouble. Even if they did, the Ogres had the whole area

on lockdown, and it would take an army to come here and disturb them.

Roth studied the group of ninety-nine players standing in front of him. There were trees all around them. Beyond the treeline was Ogre's campaign tent, and even beyond that was the fishing town and the shimmering river under the afternoon sun.

Each leader addressed their team. They could maximize their firepower only when they knew the team's strengths and weaknesses. Taking stock of players' skills and assigning roles beforehand could go a long way to ensuring a successful hunt. Given that this was a joint effort involving players from different guilds, ColdHand had asked each team leader to spend some time ensuring they got to know the soldiers under their command.

Despite Roth's dilemma and doubts coming here, ColdHand had made it easy for him during the briefing. He had one simple job. "Stay away, and stay alive." As a level thirty player, Roth was considered only a liability.

"Can you give me just a couple of minutes? I'll be right back," he asked Jaw-Long.

"Where are you going?" Jaw-Long asked.

"I need to use the bathroom."

The old man's eyebrow shot up. There was no need to use the bathroom in AstroTerra. Thank goodness, too. The game was already complicated enough without worrying about using the toilet in the middle of a dungeon run.

Jaw-Long lagged behind as Roth disappeared into the trees. He looked for the most remarkable landmark and settled with an old elm tree. It was lush and ancient. He might as well leave the Leafies foraging here while he was off hunting the Alien King. The Dark Abyss would be very dangerous. At least here, the Ogres would protect the area, and the Leafies could expand and grow faster.

Forage!

Looking left and right and ensuring no one had followed him, he activated the new pet skill that had been unlocked on the way here, dug a small hole in the ground with his hands, and buried the acorn. This should provide some safety for the treeants until they felt

confident enough to explore their surroundings. He marked the coordinates on the map to collect his pet colony later.

In the few minutes that Roth had been gone, the ninety-nine players had entered battle formation and looked like a well-trained army.

MountainTop stood at the front of the formation as the party's main tank. He would be one of the first to enter the gateway. Whatever was on the other side, everyone unanimously agreed that it wouldn't be able to one-shot MountainTop. Roth didn't know what kind of skills the lizardman tank had, but for everyone to respect him this much meant he had to be one of the best tanks in the game.

Ogre and TurtleShell stood behind him, ready to share the load of tanking the monster. A squad of rogues captained by Kerberos followed. The rogues would be among the first to enter. Their mission was to form a perimeter and scout the surroundings. In turn, that team was followed by the other warriors and various melee classes.

At the rear of the group were Griffin and her squad of medics, and last but not least, BlueFire and the DPS team. ColdHand conferenced with each team leader, ironing out the last details and plans for the hunt.

"I'm back," Roth said to the old man. He was standing in the same place and in the same position as he had left him, as if he were a statue.

The old man turned to him and asked, "Why did you bury that acorn?"

Had the old man followed him? Or did he have some sort of skill to keep tabs on him? "Isn't it obvious? To plant a tree," answered Roth sarcastically.

The old man kept studying him. His gaze unsettled him. He seemed to discern all of Roth's secrets with a glance. All the while, Roth knew nothing about the man. He didn't know his class or how powerful he was. When he'd tried to inspect him, he only got question marks. The impression he got from the man was the same as looking at the sky. He was boundless. He didn't know how else to put it. He seemed to be unhindered by the limitations that other players had. Was this the type of player he had to surpass to get out of the pod? If so, he would be stuck here for a long time.

"Right. I understand. You have your secrets."

Jaw-Long stood by Roth's side, and Roth knew that no matter where he went, he'd be watching him like a hawk. At first, he had assumed that ColdHand just wanted to keep him safe. But he was beginning to realize that wasn't the case.

ColdHand's assignment to Jaw-Long told Roth that, even between these guilds, trust was little and fragile. ColdHand obviously feared spies or being double-crossed by someone inside the team. Another way of looking at it was that ColdHand mistrusted Roth. Had Roth been a double agent working for Loki, he could easily transport them to a kill box to be ambushed by Pegasus players.

To prevent Roth from doing anything against the party, he had left him under the watch of someone he was sure couldn't be bought, Jaw-Long. ColdHand's contingencies were for the best. Roth had double-crossed many allies at Loki's beckoning in the past. ColdHand was acting prudently with all these measures and countermeasures.

"Ticket boy," called ColdHand. "Whenever you're ready."

Everyone was ready to go. Roth looked at the skill that Zion had granted him temporarily.

Lion's Breath (Legendary)

Description: You can realign the atoms in the air and create a wormhole. King Zion has loaned this skill to you temporarily.

Effects:

Active. Opens a portal that leads to the Hive King;

One-time use;

Up to 100 players can use the portal;

???

???

He took a deep breath. It was time to get the show started. "OK. Here we go."

Lion's Breath!

You don't have enough energy to use this skill.

Roth went pale white at the sight of this notification. He hurriedly checked his energy bar and found he had 480 energy points. Wasn't

that enough to use this skill? Just how much energy was required to open this portal?! Roth opened the skill's description again.

Lion's Breath (Legendary)

Description: You can realign the atoms in the air and create a wormhole. King Zion has loaned this skill to you temporarily.

Effects:

Active. Opens a portal that leads to the Hive King;

One-time use;

Up to 100 players can use the portal;

Energy cost: 10,000

Cooldown: 1 month.

As soon as he tried using the skill, the previously hidden details were revealed. His heart almost stopped when he saw the amount of energy needed.

"10,000?" he let out, stupefied by the ridiculous number.

"Ticket boy? Any problems?" asked ColdHand, alarmed by Roth's reaction. He was already walking toward him.

"It's fine! It's fine." Why would that stupid lion give him a legendary skill he couldn't use? Why give him a skill and not let him see its details? The maned idiot hadn't even warned him about how much energy it required. It wasn't like he could experiment with it before coming here. It was a one-time use skill! This was the worst possible situation. He was under the eyes of the top game players, including his family's landlords, who kept them safe in their private condo.

He couldn't afford to overthink or hesitate here. He had to play some powerful cards to make this work.

Chapter 34

Badger form!

Your intelligence is over 550.

[Inner Awareness] has been upgraded to [Strengthened Neurons].

Strengthened Neurons (Stat Bonus)

Bonus description: Your neurons have become exceedingly fast and resilient, granting you a powerful intellect.

Bonus effects:

+5000 energy;

+20 ep regeneration.

Restrictions: 550+ intelligence.

Your intelligence is over 600.

[Timely] has been upgraded to [Timeless].

Timeless (Stat Bonus)

Bonus description: Due to your great mental strength, the shackles of time can not restrain you.

Bonus effects:

+20% cooldown reduction;

Status effects caused by your skills are slightly strengthened.

Restrictions: 600+ intelligence.

His energy bar reached almost six thousand points, which still wasn't enough to activate this skill. Not even the combined effects of his [Forest Lambswool] set and its 10% intelligence bonus with his [Stat Prodigy] title were enough to bring his intelligence up to the required level.

“What did you do?”

Roth looked at the old man who had taken a step back and looked at him warily. “What do you mean?”

“Your power level just spiked. What skill is this?”

“It's a racial skill,” explained Roth.

In the meantime, ColdHand had reached Roth and watched his new badger-like look with a blank expression. “What's the matter?”

“I don't have enough energy to activate the skill.”

Instead of berating him, ColdHand calmly collected data and worked on solving the problem. “How much is needed to activate the skill?”

“10k energy points,” answered Roth, embarrassed.

He heard the old man next to him whistle and saw ColdHand's brow raise slightly. The slight twitch in the man's expression was the most expressive thing he'd seen him do all day. “How much energy do you have?”

“6000, give or take.”

“Come again?” asked ColdHand, as if he'd misheard. “You mean six hundred. Correct?”

“No. 6k. Six thousand.”

“What? But you're only level 31,” said the old man. “How can you have more energy than I do?”

“OK. We can still make it work.” ColdHand interrupted. This looked like the kind of leader who never lost his cool, no matter what. He gestured toward the medics, making a beckoning gesture toward Griffin.

The guild leader of the Griffins walked toward them as if a model on a catwalk. She had a graciousness to her that made it look like she didn't walk but glided.

“What's up, ColdHand?”

“Do you have [Energy Pool]?” he asked calmly.

“I do,” she said matter-of-factly. “It's an essential skill for medics.”

“I need you to use it on ticket boy.”

“Does the teleportation gate cost that much energy?” she said, immediately finding the crux of the problem.

“He needs 4000 thousand energy. Do you have that much?”

“Sure,” she said smugly, “You know I have one of the highest energy bars in the game.”

Jaw-Long, to the side, snorted, and Griffin looked at him quizzically. “What’s so funny?”

“Never mind,” interrupted ColdHand. “Please, go for it.”

The lady stretched out her hand toward Roth. “Take my hand,” she said. Roth obeyed. Her skin felt incredibly soft, and his cheeks flushed. Griffin, however, didn’t seem to share Roth’s embarrassment.

Energy Pool!

Griffin’s hands shone blue.

You can use Griffin’s energy bar to cast skills.

Roth’s energy bar climbed from 6000 to 11,000. Part of the energy bar was in the usual yellow, while the added 5,000 were in gray. He sighed in relief. Thank goodness he could still open the portal.

“Thanks!” he said excitedly. Looking up from his stats to the lady, he could hardly recognize Griffin. Her face was twisted in a terrified expression that aged her decades.

“How on earth do you have this much intelligence?! You’re 20 levels below me! You have a bigger energy bar than I do!” she shrieked.

Jaw-Long, to the side, chuckled at the sight of Griffin stupefied.

“Is that enough?” calmly asked ColdHand, ignoring the yelp of the medic.

“Yes. Thank you.”

Jaw-Long commented: “Another flustered old fox. This is a good day,” he said. Griffin gave him an annoyed look. For some reason, it looked like the old man was having fun watching these top players interact with Roth.

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” said Roth.

He kept holding hands with Griffin, who watched him as if he were a new pair of shoes she wanted to buy. “You must tell me how you got your energy bar so high.” Roth could feel a headache coming.

Something told him that these guild leaders would dissect him and steal all his secrets if they could.

“I’m sorry. It’s a unique skill. Even if I told you, it wouldn’t help,” he lied.

“I want to know anyway. I’m willing to pay you good money for it.”

“Let’s go, ticket boy,” spoke ColdHand from the side, interrupting Griffin.

Roth gave him a grateful look, and Griffin recoiled, still looking at Roth greedily. Before she could resume her interrogation, Roth spoke. “Here we go.”

The skill began channeling. The system took over, making him take an impossibly deep breath. Its inhalation provoked a breeze that rustled the leaves. The breeze picked up strength and quickly became a howling wind. The never-ending long breath made Jaw-Long’s dark robes and Griffin’s white dress flutter madly like flags in a hurricane. He had seen Zion do this before and knew what was coming. The wind became a windstorm that cut branches from the nearby trees and made the trees crack and groan.

Roth watched as 10,000 energy points left his energy bar. Then, suddenly, all went still.

Lion’s Breath!

You’ve unlocked a new title: [Energy Tycoon].

Roth released an earth-shattering roar. The pent-up air was all released in a blast that fractured reality in front of the hunting party, cracking the air and revealing a silver portal big enough for two people to walk through side by side.

Had he unlocked a new title because of the high energy cost of this skill?

Energy Tycoon (Rare)

Description: What energy crisis? You have access to vast energy reserves, and you’re not afraid of spending it.

Title effects:

+5 intelligence;

+200 energy points.

Conditions to unlock [Energy Tycoon]:

To use a skill that costs at least 5000 energy points {complete};

Or to complete a relevant quest.

This was already a valuable hidden reward for completing the quest issued by the Table. He would never have used such a demanding skill without it.

“MountainTop. Go in.” He read ColdHand’s command on the party chat.

The Lizardman marched toward the shiny crack in the air, but nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” asked ColdHand.

“It says that the first person to enter has to be Pax. Who’s that?”

*

Ten days had elapsed since Loki triggered the ‘Rise of the Hive King’ event.

The day before, he had finally reached level 80. He was the first in a game with a player base of hundreds of millions ever to accomplish this feat and he got a legendary title to prove just that.

Level Pioneer (Legendary)

Description: You brave new frontiers and are ahead of the pack.

Title effects: After each level up, gain 5% free XP.

Conditions to unlock [Level Pioneer]:

To be the first player to reach the level required for a job advancement.

Once he got the title, he finally understood how Jaw-Long leveled up faster than anyone else. The old geezer hid his name from the ranks, but he knew full well that the old man’s discretion was the only reason Zin was the game’s highest-level player.

In higher levels, 5% of an XP bar was a massive advantage over the opponents. Sometimes, players didn’t get that much from spending a whole day hunting. Jaw-Long had beaten everyone else to

reach levels 10, 30, and 50, but Loki had finally caught on and reached level 80 before that old monster.

The amount of experience necessary to level up from 79 to 80 was mind-boggling—almost as much as all the combined experience required to level from 70 to 79. Loki was the pioneer in reaching such a stage of the game, and he now knew that this would be a major bottleneck for players. He couldn't wait to get his third job advancement in his profession. However, it required seeing a special NPC in the capital to do that.

He didn't dare to leave the safety of the Dark Abyss, though. Even if there weren't millions of players who had chosen the human side, from the moment he became the alien king, he would never be welcome again in the capital or any other human city. So, for now, he stayed put.

The key right now was to squeeze every drop of potential from his privileged position. He knew these good times wouldn't last forever. There was no way that the game developers would allow him to stay so far ahead of the others. Being level 80 when the second-highest level player in the game was still in the early 50s was a significant gap. He was sure that they would eventually find him and terminate him. There was no way this event would go on forever. When the time came, he would have to pay a terrible price. So, for the moment, Loki tried to make the most of his privileged position and amass as many benefits as possible before these good times ended.

His two priorities while he was the Hive King were getting his guild ahead and amassing resources to restart his account in case he had to delete it.

He wasn't the one who ranked how powerful guilds were. Pegasus had been stuck in 10th place for a long while, but the next time gaming networks released a ranking, he was sure there would be a huge reshuffling, and Pegasus would climb several places. Based on Loki's intel on the other guilds and how much stronger Pegasus had become since the event started, he could safely say that his guild was now within the top three in the game.

The only guilds he wasn't sure he could overtake were number one and two in the rankings. The Phoenixes were a tricky bunch, and the Dragons even more so. They ventured into maps that were unexplored and very difficult to access, and the amount of data on

them was limited. On top of that, there was Jaw-Long. That old monster's strength couldn't be measured by the same standard as others. Despite Loki's overwhelming strength, high level, and the amount of stats he could provide to many of his guild, he still wasn't sure if he could overtake the old man and his army of freaks.

But even if Pegasus hadn't become the strongest guild, one thing he was sure of: They had become the richest. Loki got one gold in his coffers whenever a player joined the alien side. He looked in the direction of the guild's vault, hidden inside the observatory. He had amassed millions of gold in there.

Pegasus was so rich right now that he could clad even 3rd tier members in the highest-gear equipment without making a dent in his finances. Of course, that wasn't how this money would be spent. Everything had been decided already, and he would use the money to buy the best thing that money could buy: more money.

He already had the investments ready to go once the event ended. Those would solidify Pegasus's spot at the top, and he would finally overtake those greedy guilds that monopolized the game and looked down on everyone else from their lofty heights. It was time for a fresh start, a change, and he was the one who would bring it.

But there wasn't just money in that vault. No, there were treasures inside that not even the top 10 guilds knew existed, things that money couldn't buy. Before the event, Loki had Zin scout the Dark Abyss and find every dungeon and wild boss he could. Pegasus had been crossing names off that list, running dungeons, and hunting wild bosses as if there were no tomorrow.

If the boss was level 60 and Loki's presence prevented its appearance, he just sent a squad of Pegasus players bolstered by his stats, and they hunted it for him. If it was level 70 and above, he personally led the charge, and, using his high-level and unique racial skills, he steamrolled through the obstacles.

Pegasus was getting the first clear in several dungeons and wild bosses. Most players weren't aware of this, but the rewards for a first clear, or first blood, were incomparable to those afterward.

Items that had a 1% chance of dropping in a normal wild boss hunt or dungeon run would always appear the first time someone ran or hunted them. Whereas subsequent completions only yielded three to five items, first blood yielded fifteen to twenty! That was especially

true for the prize Loki sought the most, the secret to climbing back up to the top after the event was over: Consumables that permanently increased stats.

Chapter 35

Even though his short-sighted underlings probably believed that Loki was looking for stat-boosting consumables to eat now and increase his stats further and, in turn, make them stronger, Loki was just stashing them in the guild's vault. He still wasn't sure what would happen after being hunted down, but even if his account was crippled and he had to delete his avatar and start over, his guild coffers had so many incredible consumables, skills, and items that he would be able to recover his strength in a matter of months and come back even stronger.

The items obtained from the first clears of high-level bosses were of unparalleled quality. Only through extraordinary willpower could Loki stop himself from wolfing all these down.

Supernova Ash (Consumable)

Description: Ashes from a faraway star which strengthen the organism and grant incredible vitality.

Item effects:

+20 strength;

+500 hp;

Can only be eaten once.

Black Hippo Bone Dust (Consumable)

Description: Dust obtained from grinding the metal-strong bones of the black hippo alpha male that roams the swamps of the Dark Abyss.

Item effects:

+3 to all stats;

+10 darkness affinity.

Can only be eaten once.

These consumables were miles beyond those gained in the game's early levels. Pegasus ran from dungeon to dungeon, from wild boss to wild boss, picking the Dark Abyss clean of its black riches. Even when he fell from his pedestal, he would have gained so much that it would still be worth it. No one could take away all the goodies his high level had allowed him to collect.

Additionally, because of the increased guild activity and how much stronger they became because of Loki's strength, several players in his guild had gained two or three levels in just ten days, catching up to the top levels in the game.

Whereas before, only five places among the top 100 players were taken by Pegasus players, triple that number now graced the scoreboard. Loki would have taken the number one spot had he not chosen to hide his name from the rankings. The event was stimulus enough to get someone to come for him eventually. The last thing he needed was to scream at the top guilds to go after him, and letting them know he was level 80 would do precisely that.

Pegasus had already finished hunting all wild bosses level 60 and below and was currently going through dungeons and bosses originally designed for players between levels 60 and 70. Only because of Loki's bonuses were they able to make it through them

Loki sat in his guild's tent, following a hunt in the tar pits. Even though tar pits should have been devoid of life, the radiation of the Dark Abyss had twisted the genetics of the local wild boar population, who had gained a taste for bathing in tar instead of mud. Deep within the tar pits was the Tar Hog, a level 62 wild boss that had never been hunted before.

Due to the 18-level difference between Loki and the wild boss, he had to sit this one out and let his guild hunt it without him. He watched Anak lead the party and whittle down the boss' health, but the terrain was difficult to navigate, and they had taken heavy losses already. Even so, Anak persisted. Levels could be regained, but this was a one-time opportunity to gain whatever rare treasures this wild boss dropped on a first clear.

Loki suspected there would be a consumable here similar to [Power Truffle] and couldn't wait to add it to the coffer. As he kept watching the footage, he suddenly tensed. There was a deep rumble, a sharp sound. It was the roar of some kind of beast.

He sent messages to the guild members guarding the perimeter, asking about what was happening, but the prompt responses let him know that no one had heard anything.

Had he imagined it? He turned off the sound from the footage of the hunt and frowned. He was positive that the sound hadn't come from the video feed. Why would he hear a sound that no one else heard?

"Zin, something is going on at the observatory. Come at once."

The player you tried to reach is not online.

Loki frowned. Strange. Zin was always online at this time. Why had he left the game without telling him?

Loki was getting a bad feeling. He stood and walked to the next room, where the guild's vault was. He checked his inventory and deposited the latest batch of gold he'd received and all the precious items he didn't need to have equipped, just in case. In the off-chance assassins got to him, he kept his most valuable treasures inside the vault. With such an evil affinity, and as the alien king, it was likely that he'd drop all his gold and items if he died, and he couldn't have that. At least in the guild's vault, his treasures were safe. Breaking into a guild's vault was impossible without the required permissions.

He walked back to his armchair, frowning. Was he just imagining things? Lately, he saw enemies in every shadow. Enemies would have to fight through his numerous troops to make it to the observatory. There was no way anyone could make it all the way here without triggering one of the many traps and alarms he had installed in the perimeter. Maybe he was overthinking.

Loki caught movement from the corner of his eyes. It was hardly visible, but thanks to his high perception, he was still been able to detect it. He wasn't being paranoid. He really had company!

Black Void!

Loki snapped his fingers, letting a wave of energy ripple throughout the observatory. Sure enough, his skill canceled the camouflage of a nearby rogue.

The invader was freakishly tall and had broad shoulders. Even though he had [Camouflage] like a rogue, his clothes seemed more like a medic's. They were all made of green and white wool. All his jewelry was made of dark wooden berlocks, and he had a neatly trimmed beard. For some reason, his eyes were yellow, his beard and hair were dyed black and white, and he had whiskers, but his facial features were still unmistakable. Loki blinked his alien eyes a few times and rubbed them.

“Slayer?” he yelped.

Hearing his voice, the man also squinted, and his jaw dropped.

“Loki? Is that you?”

Loki stared at the Slayer in disbelief. He had never expected to see his nemesis here, right in front of him. A mix of excitement at seeing his prey and traumatizing terror at the memory of this man beating him to a pulp sent a jolt of pain to his deformed spine. How had he come here? Why had he come here? What was going on? He wanted to act, but this absurd scenario was beyond his wildest dreams.

Roth finally broke the awkward silence. “Why do you look so gross and ugly?”

The pain turned into anger, finally letting him break away from his stupor.

Shadow Shackles!

The Slayer looked around him, confused, seeing that nothing had happened. With this, Loki had canceled his previous spawn location. If he died, he would just respawn at the nearest graveyard instead of the last saved location. He couldn't run away from him anymore.

“I don't know why you're here, but I'm glad to see you. Finally, we can solve our unfinished business.”

The Slayer did something that Loki had never seen him do before. He turned tail and ran. Loki smirked at the futile effort. Loki had to be 50 levels over him. This was as simple as it got.

Abysal Bolt!

Dark lightning shot from his hand, and just as it was about to hit Roth, it bounced off a tall metal shield.

A large blue lizardman had appeared in the nick of time and dug his shiny massive shield into the ground. The lightning dispersed, hitting the walls of the observatory.

“MountainTop?” shrieked Loki in disbelief. What was the number two tank in the game doing here? How had he appeared out of thin air?

“*We’re under attack!*” he sent the alert to his guild. “*Observatory. NOW!*”

Even as he sent messages to his guild, he kept bombarding MountainTop with attacks.

Purple Beam!

MountainTop’s shield shone in a blue color; this time, it just absorbed the whole beam, heating the shield red. The lizardman hit the shield with his mace, and its accumulated energy was dispersed in all directions. Loki deflected the damage directed toward him with a wave of his claws. MountainTop had used [Mirror Shield] and [Shock and Awe]. Just how many life-saving rare skills did the lizardman have?

All these skills had long cooldowns, and Loki didn’t relent. He just had to make the tank spend them all, and then he could finish him.

Void Claw!

Loki scratched the air around him, sending another wave of damage toward the tank, and, his shield now shone orange, and the attack pierced a glass-like dome that had formed in front of him. He had [Life Barrier] too? Seeing his [Abyssal Bolt] had come off cooldown, he sent the attack again.

Abyssal Bolt!

-2341

This time, the attack landed, turning the lizardman into a sorry figure. He only had the tiniest sliver of hp left. He must have a skill that prevented him from being one-shot, probably [Second Wind]. Even as Loki observed him, he was already regenerating at a crazy

rate, and he could see his hp bar growing: one of the perks of the lizardman race. Loki smirked. The next attack would end this.

Coup de Grâce!

He sent his epic skill that could execute targets, and just as it was about to hit, a massive figure appeared and slashed the energy beam into two with his sword, dispersing Loki's attack.

"Ogre...." Loki's expression was grave. The number one berserker in the game, Ogre, was here too. Where did these high-level players keep popping up from? There must be a teleportation skill at play. He clicked his tongue. He had many ways to prevent prey from leaving, but nothing to prevent others from teleporting in. This was the first time he heard of an instance where players could teleport without using a gate.

His eyes focused on the man behind MountainTop and Ogre... The Slayer. It had to be him. He was the one teleporting them in. He was the one who disrupted things in the sewers of Hilsford. He must have unlocked some skill or quest leading them to his doorstep. He had foreseen the possibility of the game developers speeding the end of the event along, but he had never imagined that the Slayer would be involved.

The realization incensed him. He hated this man to the bone. He hated everything about him and how evil he was. Why did he keep pestering him? Why couldn't he just die and leave him alone?

"You..." he said, stretching his clawed hands toward Roth, "Slayer, I don't know how you got here, but I'll make sure that none of you leave this place alive."

From when MountainTop appeared until Ogre stepped in, no more than 30 seconds had elapsed. His guild guards would be here any moment now, but he didn't have to wait until then to deal with this small fry.

Ground Spikes!

Thanks to his high level, just about any basic skill he had could deal serious damage to these players 30 levels lower than him. Any life-saving skill in the game was a precious treasure, and even these players standing at the top could only have a limited number of cooldowns.

Iron Skin!**-1312****Cloud Step!**

Ogre activated a skill to negate some of the damage, but a third of his health was gone. As expected, the amount of health that Ogre had was impressive. The berserker crossed the distance separating the two and slashed Loki with his swords.

Double Slash!**-10****-9**

Loki savored the moment when the guild leader of the Ogres realized how little damage his powerful attack had dealt. Even though Loki was an esper, with his high level, he reckoned that even a slap could deal four digits to the berserker.

-1130

The guild leader's expression sunk even further, seeing how even a little slap from Loki had been enough to take another large chunk of his hp. Loki dealt another slap, but just as the hand was about to connect, his hand was pulled toward a new person in the room.

One For The Team!**-895**

TurtleShell, number eight in the tank rankings, had appeared and used a skill to absorb the incoming damage. Loki tensed. Him too? Just how many allies did the Slayer want to teleport in? Just how had he met all these idiots?

Chapter 36

Roth stared at the fracture in reality he had created with the help of the [Lion's Breath] skill. The portal manifested in the form of bright lines hovering in midair and cast a pale light on the two players standing next to Roth, making them look somber and pensive. ColdHand was lost in thought, and Jaw-long considered what Roth had just said with a frown.

"That would mean you must be the first to be teleported in. And after that, we can only teleport one person every 10 seconds," commented Jaw-Long.

"That is correct," confirmed Roth.

"If you're the first to go in, no offense, but you're not going to last," mumbled ColdHand in his characteristic robotic tone. He didn't mean it as an insult but was merely stating the facts. Roses were red, violets were blue, and Roth was a noob. "You are only level 31. For there to be a boss that requires at the very least 100 players to hunt means that you'll probably get one shot."

Roth bit his lip. It looked like he had to reveal another of his cards for the sake of this mission. "I think I could make it work."

Jaw-Long snorted while ColdHand looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"You can survive for ten seconds against a high-level boss?"

"Yes, I think I can hide for a while. And even if the Hive King finds me, at the very least, I can stall him for a few minutes, no more than that," Roth said thoughtfully.

"Are you positive?" Cold Hands asked.

"Yes, I can do it," Roth replied.

He and Jaw-Long exchanged doubtful looks. “There’s no other option,” said ColdHand. Roth believed that they would have taken literally any other road. But as it were, he was the only one who could open the teleport gate and had to be the first to go in.

“How are you going to do that?” ColdHand asked.

Roth activated [Camouflage], making his figure blend into his surroundings. Both men looked at him, shocked. “I thought you were a medic,” hissed Jaw-Long.

“I have a special class,” Roth explained.

Jaw-Long looked at his invisible figure from top to bottom like Roth had never turned [Camouflage] on. The skill seemed to do nothing to hide him from this old geezer.

“Very well. It can work. But not as it is now. Your subterfuge isn’t high enough,” ColdHand noted. Roth didn’t argue with him. He already had used [Camouflage] while in [Snake Form] and could tell the difference in how powerful [Camouflage] became when he had low or high subterfuge.

Even though his blue caterpillar jewelry slightly boosted his [Camouflage], Jaw-Long could still easily see through it. To make it worse, since Roth was in [Badger Form], his subterfuge had decreased from 60 to 30, making him lose a stat bonus that slightly improved invisibility.

He thought about canceling [Badger Form] to recover his normal level of subterfuge, but he worried he might have to use [Lion’s Breath] again. He might need to pool the greater energy bar provided by [Badger Form] with Griffin’s to open the way back.

ColdHand sent a message in the party chat.

“Griffin, please put together a list. Find out what medics in our party or the Ogres’ have buffs that can boost camouflage effects. Anything that boosts all stats, subterfuge, or gives some kind of bonus to invisibility. Same thing for items and equipment. If anyone has anything that boosts subterfuge, I want it here now.”

It didn’t take longer than five minutes for four medics to be gathered and several players to step up, volunteering to lend equipment that boosted subterfuge. Such equipment was largely meant for rogues, and between his ecotailor and his pacifist’s restrictions, he couldn’t wear it.

However, there was one earring that he could equip, which would help boost the power of his disguise.

Misty Moon (Rare)

Description: A moon-shaped earring crafted during a New Moon on a misty night.

Item effects:

Boosts your [Camouflage];

+5 subterfuge;

+5 dexterity.

Restrictions: Lvl. 30.

The owner of this earring was a rogue from Cerberus named BlackShoe, who was having a hard time parting with his treasure. Under ColdHand's stern, impassive look, the rogue said some loving parting words to his dear earring and handed it over to Roth.

"Don't worry. I'll give this back to you after this is done," Roth promised.

"Thanks," the man answered sadly. BlackShoe watched Roth equip it, then marched back to the formation with hunched shoulders.

In the meantime, Jaw-Long looked up from an intense exchange of messages with the smiling ease of someone who had just won a sizable bet. "Ticket boy. I called in a favor. You'll receive an invitation to join a guild. Accept it."

"Uh? You did what?"

You've received an invitation to join [Gorgons - Assassin Branch]. Do you choose to accept? [Y/N]

"What is this all about?"

"Just take it," commanded the old man. The name 'assassin' threw Roth off, and he didn't feel happy about joining one of these large guilds, even temporarily. However, the words had been spoken with such authority that, in Roth's mind, there was no choice but to obey his elder.

Are you sure you choose to join [Gorgons - Assassin Branch]? If you join, you must leave [Union Collective Guild]. [Y/N]

Roth confirmed the request and received several notifications.

The strength of the [Pale Chameleon Scale] runs in you.

+4 subterfuge;

+10 ep.

The strength of the [Great Wolf Black Paw] runs in you.

+3 subterfuge;

+1 dexterity.

The strength of the [Bottled Stormwind] runs in you.

+2 subterfuge;

+2% running speed.

The strength of the [Shadow Swallow's Tail Feather] runs in you.

+3% running speed;

+1 subterfuge.

The strength of the [Monkey Lord Tail] runs in you.

+2 dexterity;

+2 subterfuge.

The strength of the [Experimental Chemical SR12] runs in you.

+3 subterfuge;

+10 hp.

The strength of the [Flag of the Chameleon Duke] runs in you.

You've learned [Blend In].

The strength of the [Flag of the Monkey Lord] runs in you.

You've learned [Monkey Step].

The flurry of notifications dazzled Roth. Drake had told him that the Gorgons kept several branch guilds with specialized bonuses to individual classes, but it looked like the guild had gone to even greater lengths than that. These bonuses weren't for rogues in general but only for those who specialized in stealth and undercover missions. How many resources had the Gorgons spent creating different branches for different specializations in the guild?

And it wasn't just the resources required to maintain a guild's museum. He even got two specialized skills designed to help his

camouflage work better, which came from flags. He had seen the prices these flags went for. A simple estimation told him that the Gorgons must have spent hundreds of thousands of gold on setting up this network of branch guilds.

“This is incredible!” praised Roth.

“You can be a temporary member during the day. This should increase our chances somewhat. What do you think, ColdHand?”

ColdHand nodded approvingly. “Let’s see how his camouflage holds up with a little more help. Medics. Buff him.”

You’ve been blessed with [Silent Steps].

+20 subterfuge for 30 seconds.

You’ve been blessed with [Trespassing].

+10 subterfuge for 60 seconds.

You’ve been blessed with [Hush, My Darling].

[Camouflage] enhanced for 2 minutes.

You’ve been blessed with [Heroic Endeavor].

+2 to all stats for 2 minutes.

With the help of all these buffs, Roth’s camouflage had been severely boosted. “I didn’t know there were buffs to help rogues have more subterfuge.”

“Few medics learn them. We only use it in guild wars to increase the chances of assassins infiltrating the enemy lines and getting to the medics,” explained ColdHand. “What about now, Jaw-Long?”

The old man again inspected Roth’s blurred figure. This time, Roth didn’t feel as exposed.

“If I didn’t know he was here, it would take a few moments to realize he was present. Especially if I was focused on something else.”

“That’s good enough,” said ColdHand without any enthusiasm. Turning to Roth, he explained, “Don’t forget, as soon as you teleport in, find a quiet place and sit still. Do nothing. Don’t move. Don’t inspect or even stare at the boss; otherwise, you might draw its attention. Can you share your video feed with me?”

“S-sure. I just don’t know how to.”

Instead of berating him, ColdHand just calmly explained it to him. “Go to settings, privacy, and you can tick an option for it there. Then you need to accept my request.”

Roth found the option and selected it. He took a few moments to analyze just how much information on his character ColdHand could access. Roth fiddled with the options until he was comfortable. The last thing he needed was for these guilds to discover his secrets.

“It’s done,” said Roth, once he was satisfied with the options.

**ColdHand would like to access your video feed. Do you accept?
[Y/N]**

Roth agreed, and a little red circle with the text ‘recording’ appeared in the corner of his vision.

“Good. This way, I can see what’s happening and decide who to send in. If you’re spotted, we’ll send some help immediately. Remember, be as stealthy as you can, and above all, don’t die, or the portal might close.”

Roth nodded. He waited for the buffs to expire and then for the medics’ skills to come off cooldown. He received a new series of buffs, ensured the camouflage was on, and stepped in through the portal.

The moment he stepped in, he found himself in a dark space. It had been daytime where he’d left, and he wondered if it was night wherever he’d been transported to. He checked his world map and saw that ColdHand’s and BlueFires’ predictions were correct. Indeed, the Hive King was in the Dark Abyss.

A few meters away from him, with his back to him, was a creature. It had dark purple, shelled skin. From this angle, Roth couldn’t see the creature’s face, only its sharp claws. Roth avoided staring at the monster and only gave it brief sideways glances. The way it moved its clawed hands around told him this wasn’t an NPC. These were the hand movements characteristic of someone operating the game interface.

ColdHand sent a message in the party chat as if hearing his thoughts. *“It’s a player. Scenario 3. Get ready, barrier team.”* As ColdHand instructed, Roth fought the urge to inspect the Hive King. Some players had counter-surveillance skills, which triggered when

someone looked up their information. Roth stayed as silent and motionless as he could, not daring even to breathe.

After a few moments, the first rogue stepped through the portal and joined him in the Hive King's lair. *"I'm in."* Roth wouldn't have known that another rogue had come through the portal if it had not been for the messages on the chat.

Thankfully, the monster seemed oblivious to their presence. Ten seconds later, the second followed, displaying masterful invisibility. Even though Roth was looking for these rogues, he had no idea where they were. These were some of the best players in the game who specialized in infiltration missions. Their whole skill set and equipment were geared toward stealth, and they had much better chances of evading detection than Roth.

However, regardless of how good their stealth was, the more rogues in the vicinity, the higher the chance players with heightened perception would sense something amiss. Examining his list of buffs, Roth shuddered as the first one expired.

[Silent Steps] has worn off.

The moment the skill lost its power, the third rogue teleported in, and the Hive King stood up. Roth's heart raced as he took a better look at it. Roth could see that its weird, alien body resembled a mixture of a cockroach and a wolf. Its oval head, fully black eyes, and mouth that opened like double doors into some dreadful dungeon were unsettling. However alien the creature looked, it still maintained a humanoid general form.

Contrary to Roth's fears, the creature hadn't noticed anything was amiss and instead disappeared into an adjacent room, allowing Roth to breathe a sigh of relief. The messages on the party chat told him that rogues were still arriving. When the last rogue belonging to the barrier team arrived, the Hive King returned to the room and headed toward his chair. Roth's heart was racing, and he was curled up in a ball, trying to look as small as possible.

He looked at the second buff on the countdown and watched it reach zero. The moment the buff expired, the creature whirled in his direction and looked straight at him. It snapped its fingers, canceling Roth's [Camouflage]. Roth tensed, ready to use [Peace Decree] or run away, but the monster remained motionless. It was observing Roth

with quizzical eyes, and despite its disgusting form, there was something familiar about the creature.

“Slayer?!”

Only people who knew him in New Earth called him that. Moreover, he recognized this person’s voice. He had heard the detached, cold voice many times before and, more recently, a few days ago. Loki. Despite running from Loki for months, Roth found himself in the lair of his nemesis.

“Loki? Is that you?”

Roth’s brain went haywire, unprepared for the mental shock of being face-to-face with Loki. He felt like a computer that had gotten stuck in a faulty program and had to be reset. He had never expected Loki to be the alien king. The realization that his nemesis was the player the guilds were preparing to hunt dawned on him. The memory of the day he invaded Loki’s home and beat him black and blue made something in him snap. Bringing the guilds here had too many similarities to the event that got him arrested and triggered the chain of events that brought him to today. How had things turned out like this?

He was at a loss for what to say. Before he could think it through, he heard himself blurt out an insult. “Why do you look so gross and ugly?”

Chapter 37

Roth's insulting remarks woke Loki from his inaction, and he used a weird skill: [Shadow Shackles]. Despite Roth's panic, his hp remained unchanged. Before he could ask ColdHand what the skill did, Loki attacked.

The energy projection burned the air and made it smell like bleach. Even though Roth had been prepared to use [Peace Decree], it all happened too fast, and he still hadn't recovered from the surprise of finding Loki here.

MountainTop emerged from the portal, taking Loki's strike for Roth. The moment the broad-shouldered lizardman appeared on the battlefield. Loki kept throwing attacks, and MountainTop used one life-saving skill after another.

As Roth stood behind the tank, he understood why he was called MountainTop. The emotion of being shielded by this player was similar to that of being atop a mountain; he felt untouchable. It felt like nothing could get through him.

Loki's relentless barrage kept coming. Finally, MountainTop couldn't cancel the damage anymore, and he took a full hit, which brought his hp dangerously low. Just as Loki was about to finish him off, another player emerged.

The moment Ogre stepped into the field, Roth felt his palms grow sweaty, and he felt a fever he hadn't felt in a long time: The bloodlust of the berserker. Ogre danced on the blade's edge, just like Roth had done in so many battles in the past. Looking at Ogre throwing himself at Loki with an angry smile excited the dormant violence in him, making Roth feel ashamed.

Ogre lunged forward and slashed with his swords, dealing almost no damage. Even so, for the first time since the battle had begun, something told Roth to enter the fray and stop Ogre from hurting Loki. Maybe it was because Ogre reminded him too much of the Slayer, the bloodthirsty berserker he had once been, and Loki had been the Slayer's last victim. Even so, his feet were glued to the ground, and all seemed to happen too fast and in slow motion simultaneously.

Just as Ogre was about to take a hit from Loki, the dwarven tank of the Cerberus joined the battle and took the hit for his guild leader. MountainTop, who had gulped down a potion, had also recovered his hp back to the green zone and joined the frontline to share the load with his colleagues.

Loki looked everywhere but at the three warriors circling him, trying to make sense of where these players were coming from but, above all, to give Roth a few hateful looks. He stretched out his palm hand toward Roth, which began glowing in red.

Nether Beam!

TurtleShell's hammer gleamed with a yellow hue, and he hit Loki's hand.

Deflect!

The beam missed Roth. Loki angrily slashed TurtleShell. The dwarf just took the hit, and his hp dropped to the yellow zone. Ogre used this instance to attack Loki again and slash him three times in quick succession.

-8

-9

-13

TurtleShell took another hit, which brought his health bar to the red zone. Loki used this moment to set himself aflame in yellow flames.

-123

-312

-132

It was some AoE skill that dealt damage every second to everyone in close range. This dropped TurtleShell's health to nearly zero, but he used a life-saving skill that prevented it from dropping further. Ogre and TurtleShell kept hitting Loki with their weapons, not making a dent.

Loki had turned himself into a high-end boss. Every one of his attacks could insta-kill the average player, while an average player's strongest skill did nothing to him. Roth had to give it to the three warriors for maintaining their calm in spite of how the odds seemed to be against them.

Loki threw another skill at Roth, which this time Ogre's bear deflected with his sword. Skills such as these had to have long cooldowns, and Roth wondered how much longer they would last. That's when Griffin arrived. The moment she stepped onto the battlefield, she was all that Loki looked at, and at once, he threw several attacks in quick succession.

MountainTop had already placed himself in between Loki and Griffin, who also kept using skills non-stop to heal MountainTop. His health bar fluctuated crazily as if it were a yo-yo, but MountainTop held. One of her healing skills was also AoE, and it allowed TurtleShell's and Ogre's hp to go back to the yellow zone.

Enraged, Loki attacked her relentlessly. He couldn't be happy with the appearance of one of the top healers in the game. Even though he was much more powerful than them, having a healer like Griffin would considerably drag the battle out. Despite the chaotic situation, they managed to keep the door open for reinforcements.

*

Abyssal Bolt!

-913

The dark lightning was partially reflected by a translucent shield covering MountainTop, and a green light enveloped the lizard, bringing his yellow hp bar back into the green. Loki was spamming his skills left and right, but from the moment Griffin arrived, killing these tanks off became a harder enterprise. She was filling up the hp of Ogre, MountainTop, and TurtleShell faster than he could deplete

it. On top of that, every 10 seconds, another heavyweight from one of the top 10 guilds came out of the portal.

Where was his guild? Why hadn't they arrived yet? It had already been almost a full minute since the battle started.

"Where is everyone? I want a squad here now!" He messaged in his guild's chat. It wasn't that he couldn't handle these players. He just didn't know how many more reinforcements they would keep bringing, and having other allies around would help him wrap up the battle quickly.

"We were running patrol, sir. We'll be there in half a minute."

By now, Loki had detected the location where players appeared from. Sure enough, it was near the location where the Slayer stood, looking at the whole battle stupidly. After seeing four players arrive in intervals of every ten seconds, he also estimated that was how fast they could teleport people in. He counted ten seconds and threw a skill that way.

Doom Ray!

-4123

He insta-killed a medic who had come to reinforce Griffin. No doubt that medics were what they would want to teleport over more of. Even though Griffin was among the top 3 medics in the game, she couldn't keep up with such a furious amount of healing alone for long. He just had to keep throwing his skills around, and the battle would be over.

Spectral Spear!

-1312

Wave of Hate!

-1021

-1923

-1321

He kept shaving off chunks of hp from the tanks, and Griffin kept healing them up. Another 10 seconds and he threw a skill toward the portal. Nothing happened. Two seconds later, another player joined the fray. He clicked his tongue. They had delayed the teleportation on

purpose. Whoever was leading this expedition wasn't slow by any means. It didn't matter. His reinforcements were about to arrive.

You're stuck inside a [Quintessential Barrier]. Find the five shards of the barrier to destroy it from within.

He got a message from his patrol.

"Sir, there's a red skill around the observatory. It says it can only be broken from within. What do we do?"

Loki recalled the information he had about the quintessential barrier. It required five crystals to activate, which could only be procured from the Rock Golem dungeon, a level 52 dungeon in the Rock Canyon. The final boss had a one percent chance of dropping it. Each crystal went for five thousand gold in the market. He sneered, thinking of how committed these guilds were to destroying him. They had even prepared such a treasure to pin him down. The bad part was that he couldn't break the barrier unless he found each of the five crystals.

"You flatter me. To prepare a quintessential barrier to hunt me down is a compliment," he said between clenched teeth as he kept throwing damage skills left and right.

None of the players attacking him answered, perhaps because of how busy Loki was keeping them. The newly arrived medic was focused on healing only TurtleShell, which took some pressure off Griffin. Loki tried to snipe him, but he just blinked away, dodging the skill. He didn't know who this medic was, but he could tell he had top-notch skills from this alone.

He waited until the next cycle of 10 seconds had ended, and waited. This time, he managed to snipe a rogue as soon as he had appeared. He decided to ignore the fleas circling around him and went looking for the crystals. Even though MountainTop, Ogre, and TurtleShell kept hitting him, they weren't taking any of his HP, so he would just ignore them and look for whoever had the shards.

They must have sneaked five rogues here before Loki first detected the Slayer. That was the only explanation for how they had managed to activate a [Quintessential Barrier] right under his nose. All he had to do was kill them, and the barrier would be destroyed. Or, he could just go back to trying to kill the Slayer. Yes. That was even better. He was undoubtedly the one behind this invasion, and whenever he

attacked him, the others just threw themselves in harm's way to shield him. He would do that.

Blink!

Loki teleported right next to Roth.

Abyssal Bolt!

Courageous Taunt!

Just as the skill was about to connect, his body moved on its own and threw the attack at TurtleShell instead. How annoying. For the next five seconds, he couldn't attack anything but the dwarf tank. How had he been able to react so quickly? He had even used [Blink].

Thanks to Loki's high level, the taunt effect wore off after only two seconds, but the Slayer had already run away to the other side of the observatory. He tried it again. He buzzed his wings and flew in a long jump, lunging toward Roth.

Reptile Taunt!

MountainTop taunted him, making him miss another attack on the Slayer. These annoying idiots kept getting in the way. This wasn't supposed to be like this. He was thirty levels above them! However, they were incredibly skilled, were clad in the best gear for their level, and had a collection of rare and epic skills that couldn't be overlooked.

He tried it again. He waited for the 10 seconds between teleportations to pass and prepared a damage skill. Instead of going for whoever appeared out of the portal at the last minute, he used the skill to attack Roth again.

Nether Beam!

The beam cut through the air, and none of the three warriors seemed ready for it this time. After killing the Slayer, he would keep the enemy's reinforcements from coming, and he could just make quick work of them, putting an end to this assassination attempt.

Orbital Catch!

For the first time since the battle began, something finally overshadowed Loki's anger. It was a primal, dark emotion that Loki hated but couldn't help. He felt his mouth go dry and his heartbeat

racing. An old man stood in front of Roth. He had simple, black robes and looked at Loki with interest. Loki's brilliant attack seemed to have been caught in the man's gravity and spun rapidly around him, like a moon around the planet.

"Jaw-Long..." he whispered in awe. He had hoped he wouldn't get involved, but his worst fears had been proven true. Despite Loki's power and overwhelming level advantage, the only reason he wasn't entirely sure he was the most powerful player in the game was this man right here.

"Such interesting prey," said Jaw-Long.

Gravitational Slingshot!

The ray of red light that had been caught by the old man was sent back to Loki.

-561

For the first time, his HP bar came down significantly, and Loki couldn't ignore what he was feeling: fear. He could have dealt with all these idiots without a second thought, but this wasn't a man he could ignore. Jaw-Long had come to hunt him down.

Chapter 38

Despite Loki's fears, Jaw-Long just stood between him and the Slayer, doing nothing. He had expected the old man to join the frontline and make his life miserable, but nothing happened. What was he thinking? Why wasn't he attacking?

The three frontliners kept hitting Loki, but his hp bar was already recovering back to full despite the first significant attack thrown by Jaw-Long earlier. Before, there was always one of them between him and the Slayer, but now, they didn't care about this anymore. Could it be that Jaw-Long was here just to protect that brute?

Had that idiot really managed to get the best player in the game to become his bodyguard?! Were they friends or something? The more Loki thought about it, the angrier and more afraid he felt. Why wouldn't the Slayer just leave him alone? Why did he have to keep ruining his plans? He was a pebble in his shoe that he couldn't shake off!

He tried to keep himself calm. He couldn't let Jaw-Long's presence get to him. He was level 80, for goodness sake! He didn't have to fear anyone!

Self Immolation!

Now that this skill had come off cooldown, he set himself ablaze again, burning every second any opponent that was too close. In the meantime, one more medic had arrived, capitalizing on Loki's distraction, and each frontliner had their own dedicated healer now, making the monstrous damage he was dealing them with every second seem too little.

If Jaw-Long had come just to protect the Slayer, he was crucial to the guilds' hunt. That meant that he had to give it his all in killing him.

Abysal Bolt!

He threw the powerful attack toward Roth, but Jaw-Long's eyes just shone a brilliant white, and the bolt abruptly switched directions, twisted at a ninety-degree angle, and completely missed Roth. The old man's rumored hidden class and his triple-affinity were no joke. Loki waited for another powerful blow from the old man. Instead of counter-attacking, he stood still, waiting for Loki's next move. Before, when Loki had attacked, one of the frontliners blocked it, but this time, they didn't even react. That confirmed his suspicions.

They had first sent MountainTop, Ogre, and TurtleShell, who could survive almost anything for a minute, to plant their feet on the door and keep it open for the others. Then, they sent their best healer, Griffin, to keep them alive. As Loki focused more on the Slayer, they sent Jaw-Long, his bodyguard, to protect him. Their priority to keep Roth alive throughout the ordeal was indisputable.

-17

-21

-32

Loki's attention was drawn to the slightly higher damage numbers. Ogre. The longer he stayed in battle, the more powerful he became. It was still negligible, but one thing was certain: Time was not on his side. The more time he waited, the more players would arrive and the more powerful some of his opponents would become. This was no time to play around.

Jaw-Long's not taking an active role in attacking him told him that he was mindful of Loki's power. That was good. It meant that the old man recognized that Loki was stronger right now. He could deal with the old man.

Ten more seconds passed, and he threw a damage skill toward the portal.

One For the Team!

-1432

TurtleShell intercepted the skill, losing half his health, but a green light enveloped him, bringing his hp back to full. An esper came out through the cracks, making Loki swallow dryly. His black cowl covered his face, but he instantly knew who it was. There was an aura of decay and disease around him, which was unmistakable—another very troublesome opponent: Kraken.

The cloaked figure began throwing skills at Loki.

You've been afflicted with [Moping Mood].

-10% running speed;

-10% damage reduction;

You're more vulnerable to debuffs.

You've been afflicted with [Song of Sorrow].

-10 to all stats.

You've been afflicted with [Snail Pace].

+10% cooldown to all your skills.

As Kraken continued to channel debuff after debuff, Loki's movements became sluggish, and his damage numbers decreased. He hadn't imagined that the best debuffer in the game would come, too. But Kraken wasn't done yet. His debuffs weren't the most troublesome thing about him.

He started grabbing vials from his inventory and throwing them at Loki. Loki tried to swat them out of the air, but the vials twisted in weird angles as if they were homing missiles and landed on him.

You've been afflicted with Cobralite Poison.

Regeneration is halved.

You've been afflicted with Sulphuric Acid.

-0.5% health per second.

This only made him feel the pressing urgency to end this immediately.

The poisons weren't enough to offset his regeneration, but the longer Kraken was in the battle, the more debilitated Loki would become. His first skills didn't require channeling. They were on the

weaker side. However, the guild leader of the Krakens was already channeling more powerful debuffs.

In the back of the line, behind Jaw-Long, stood the piece that made all of this happen, and he hated his guts right now: The Slayer. He stood there like a lost puppy as if he had nothing to do with this crisis. Using inspection skills, he'd already determined that the Slayer's level was 30. All he needed was one good shot, and he would be done.

Looking at his skills, he saw one that couldn't be dodged but had a long cooldown. He needed a slightly long channeling time, but not even Jaw-Long could block it if he could set it off. Roth would die, and their backup and supply line would be cut. All he had to do was to get these three annoying pests off his back.

Psionic Push!

This simple skill, the bread and butter of espers, was designed to create distance between the caster and any melee attackers. Loki's high level, intelligence, and wisdom brought this skill to a new level, and practically everyone was sent flying.

MountainTop dug his shield into the ground, and Ogre, both his swords, allowing them to stay fairly close to Loki. They must have push-back resistance skills. Either way, they were far enough. He began channeling the skill.

Execution Burst!

This skill couldn't be dodged or blocked. The channeling bar signaled that the skill would take three seconds to set off. He smirked seeing the bar almost full, and imagining the sight of the Slayer collapsing, and then picking the rest of his opponents apart one by one.

War Cry!

Ogre was already in his face again, hacking and slashing, and he tried a skill that would have interrupted channeling skills, but Loki's resistance held.

Sun Roar!

Thanks to the higher number of players, Ogre had already summoned his troublesome bear, who used its own skill to try to

interrupt him. However, thanks to his sky-high wisdom, interrupting channeling skills was considerably difficult.

MountainTop was slightly slower, but his long, heavy, muscular tail glowed, and he hit Loki with its tip. The extra range it provided was barely enough to connect the skill.

Tail Whip!

Thanks to his high resilience, the stun it caused was incredibly short, but it was still enough to cancel the skill.

“MountainTop!” he roared, incensed. He’d been so close to killing off the Slayer.

Nether Beam!

Spectral Spear!

Doom Ray!

He spammed several damage skills on cooldown on MountainTop, but he turned into a diamond statue for a couple of seconds, and all the damage numbers returned null. He shot him again as soon as the damage cancelation skill wore off.

Withering Gale!

-1023

-1412

-1203

Ground Spikes!

-2341

Griffin threw heals with incredible precision between attacks and kept MountainTop’s health in the green zone. He shot a damage skill toward Griffin, but then MountainTop used a taunt, keeping him focused on him.

Was this what game bosses felt like? He was dancing to the beat of his enemies and couldn’t do anything about it. If only he could kill MountainTop. He was soaking in the most damage, and he and Griffin together were practically unkillable, even to him, who was 30 levels beyond them. No wonder the Griffins were one of the best guilds at killing difficult bosses.

As expected of the legendary unkillable lizard tank. How he coveted having a tank like this in Pegasus. He had tried to poach MountainTop multiple times, but he couldn't be bought no matter how high his offers.

Another ten seconds had passed. Loki threw an [Abyssal Bolt] to where the portal was, but part of the damage was deflected by a barrier erected by Griffin, which barely kept the warrior who emerged from it alive. Loki used the ground spikes next, but the warrior used some damage-negating skill and became immune for a few seconds, preventing Loki from finishing him. It was good that his foes hadn't been able to teleport all at once; otherwise, this would have been much more difficult to manage.

This formation was designed to whittle him down, and he had to pick it apart where it was the most fragile. The key for this whole thing to work was the three front liners interrupting his skills at crucial times. After trying to kill MountainTop and failing, he focused on the weaker link in the chain. He turned toward TurtleShell.

Even though TurtleShell was a well-known tank from the Cerberus Guild, he wasn't on the same level as the other two. Loki had to start dismantling this formation somewhere. The dwarf warrior was the best way to start. Additionally, the medic assigned to him wasn't Griffin, increasing his chances.

Wave of Hatred!

-812

-561

-784

He sent a wave, whittling down the health of all three around him and putting pressure on the medics. Then, he focused on TurtleShell. He slashed with his claws. Despite being an esper, this dealt a respectable amount due to his high level and stats.

-231

-312

The attacks landed on TurtleShell with a dry thud. TurtleShell focused on items and stats reducing damage, while MountainTop focused more on skills and cooldown reduction for life-saving skills.

Abyssal Bolt!

-1832

The dwarf's warrior hit the red with only the tiniest sliver of hp left. He thrust his hand again, but MountainTop taunted him. The system took over his body, preventing him from targeting anything but the lizard tank. Loki was prepared this time, though.

Dark Explosion!

-1391

-1319

-1231

-1241

[Dark Explosion] was his skill with the biggest AoE effect, and since it didn't require a target, he could keep damaging TurtleShell this way. Medics deployed shields, and Jaw-Long activated another skill to protect the Slayer, but damage managed to clean off the rest of TurtleShell's hp. The dwarf tank dropped a piece of armor.

"If only you could see your faces," mocked Loki. MountainTop and Ogre had twisted expressions right now. The other tank that had arrived took MountainTop's place, but Loki quickly finished him off.

He turned toward the medics. With TurtleShell gone, he should be able to finish one of them off now.

Death Ray!

Specter Spear!

Abyssal Bolt!

Loki threw rays and lightning bolts toward the medics, sizzling the air and adding to the smell of ozone in the observatory.

Undying Stand!

Ogre stepped in the way, screaming in rage, becoming unkillable momentarily. This skill prevented berserkers from dying for a few seconds and increased damage based on how much health they were missing. As the skill wore off, a cascade of healing skills fell on him. While the medics focused on helping Ogre survive, Loki shot a few more bolts toward the weakest medic.

Instead of blinking away, the medic erected a mirror barrier which was instantly shattered by Loki's attacks. One more medic down. He took a moment to appreciate the ugly faces of the players left. They were beginning to realize that they weren't going to leave this place alive.

Another ten seconds had passed, and Loki stared at the place where players were springing from like a hawk. Sometimes, players stepped out of the portal every 10 seconds, but sometimes, they waited a little. These little irregular intervals were messing with his tempo and making it harder for him to predict when they would appear. On the thirteenth second, another player appeared, and Loki sent an attack. The moment when a player was transported was the best time to finish them off.

MountainTop tried to slam his tail again to cancel Loki's attack, but the stun didn't stick. The newcomer arrived in a blaze of fire and glory. Loki's attacks phased right through him as if his body were made of intangible flames.

"BlueFire," mumbled Loki gravely—the fire general of the Ogres. Loki's face twisted in an unhappy scowl. This was a player that could deal serious damage. BlueFire positioned himself next to Kraken and began channeling a skill. Loki tried to send attacks his way, but his intangibility skill was still active, and the attacks passed through him without dealing any damage. When BlueFire's [Intangibility Flame] was active, only cryokinetic skills could deal him any damage, but Loki's abilities were all connected to his darkness affinity.

Searing Heat!

You've been afflicted with [Searing Heat].

Lose one percent health every second for one minute.

The combination of Kraken's poison and BlueFire's potential damage was enough to finally offset Loki's hp regeneration. BlueFire and Kraken specialized in hunting high-level bosses with monstrous amounts of hp. From now on, any damage the other players dealt would keep stacking and bringing him lower.

He had multiple life-saving skills to counteract such a predicament, but even so, if more players and medics appeared, this would complicate things. If they played the long game, there was the

possibility that they would kill him. He couldn't have that. It was too soon. He hadn't yet squeezed all the potential from his privileged position as the Hive King.

MountainTop's mace swung, and Ogre's swords slashed while Loki studied his next target. Who should he focus on next?

Chapter 39

Roth felt like he was dreaming. All around him, colorful skills flew and exploded, metal clanged on alien shells, and alien claws on armor. Every so often, Loki threw an attack his way, which Jaw-Long swatted away swiftly.

When he'd tried to imagine what witnessing this hunt would be like, he had never imagined that he would become paralyzed, unable to move. It wasn't because he was stunned or under the effect of any skill, but too many emotions were pulling him in opposite directions.

Every time one of the players of the guild alliance died, he felt the urge to get in the way of Loki's attacks and protect his allies. At the same time, the visage of the hunting party besieging someone he had put in a wheelchair made him relive the day he'd beaten Loki. The guilt of what he'd done to Loki that day made him want to get in the way of the guilds and stop their attack on the Hive King, his former victim.

On the other hand, every time Loki threw him a hateful glance and then sent an attack his way, he remembered being beaten up by IronIre, all the hardships his family had been through, and how he was stuck in this game, and anger made him want to throw himself at Loki's throat and beat him up all over again.

A game of tug-of-war was going on in Roth's heart, and the one losing was him, the rope being pulled in opposite directions, threatening to break. His vision began darkening, and he felt out of breath. What should he do? What should he do? He could feel control of his actions begin to slip, and he feared going into one of his crazy rampages again.

He had to find a way to keep himself distracted, to get away from this battle. He wanted nothing to do with it, and he was already regretting ever getting involved. No. He had to escape. Roth sat down on the floor and reached into his inventory.

*

Ten minutes had elapsed, and half of the hunting party had already died. Only the best and the brightest among the guilds managed to stay alive while facing Loki's barrages. The sad thing was that despite all the attacks being thrown at Loki, they hadn't even managed to get his hp bar out of the green.

ColdHand watched as BlueFire kept orchestrating the progression of attacks on the party chat.

"Water."

A few espers summoned frothing waves and sharp jets that hissed, cutting through the air and landing on Loki.

-9

-8

-9

The result was pitiful, and they couldn't break into the double digits. However, Loki was now soaking wet, making the next attack more effective.

"Ice."

This time, ColdHand joined in with the other espers who had attacks of this element.

Blizzard Rain!

Three other espers sent similar skills, and the water on Loki froze over, provoking critical damage.

-31!

-14!

-12!

-15!

The espers threw attacks of the called elements according to BlueFire's instructions. Elemental cycling was a standard strategy to

maximize damage and trigger critical hits. If a wind-based attack followed a fire one, both dealt bonus damage. If ice followed water, it was the same thing. A party could dramatically increase the damage output with the right order of elemental attacks. Every little point of damage counted in this hunt. Loki's stats were incredible, and they hadn't even gotten him down to the yellow zone.

Kraken was almost finished channeling another debuff, and Loki tried to snipe him to interrupt the skill, but ColdHand stepped in.

Ice Wall!

The wall that could typically last for several seconds against elites and bosses instantly shattered to pieces, but some residual damage landed on Kraken and knocked him back slightly. Thanks to ColdHand, Kraken came out unscathed, but the debuff he had been channeling was interrupted.

He had to give it to the guild leader of Pegasus. Even though he was surrounded, he could still keep track of any skills that represented more danger to him. Despite all the crowd-control skills they were landing on him, Loki interrupted key skills that would have tilted the battle. All the while, he was methodically identifying any weak spots in their formation and attacking them relentlessly. Any little mistake that the hunting party made was instantly punished. If only they could find an opening to use more powerful skills, they might start dealing serious damage to the Hive King, but Loki wasn't giving them the chance.

With more party members to protect the portal, the percentage of players joining the hunt increased. Another medic stepped in, shielded by two warriors who deflected one of Loki's attacks directed at the new arrival. Griffin assigned the new arrival a position in the medic squad while ColdHand instructed who would follow next. He also messaged Cerberus to check in on their secret weapon and received a thumbs-up from the guild leader.

Thankfully, the quintessential barrier was erected without a hitch, and they could devote more firepower to dealing with Loki. He wouldn't have been able to save Cerberus's bow if there had been other Pegasus players.

ColdHand took in the battlefield, focusing on the critical elements of this hunt. They couldn't be lost no matter what. Kraken was one

of them. The others were Ogre, BlueFire, MountainTop, and Griffin. As long as these players remained alive, they would make this work. They were the spinal cord, the lifeline of this hunting party. Finally, there was one last essential piece they couldn't bear to lose. He glanced toward Ticket Boy to make sure he was safe and sound and froze.

He rubbed his eyes in disbelief. What was Ticket Boy doing? The few moments of distraction almost cost him his life as Loki spotted his distraction and sent an attack his way. The instincts honed in many battles awoke ColdHand from his stupor.

Cryogenic Stasis!

ColdHand became encased in ice. This life-saving skill ensured he became unkillable for 10 seconds. He could still move and look around inside the block of ice and stared with his jaw gaping at the ticket boy. More and more people were doing the same, and even Loki had stopped fighting to follow the gaze of the other players and see what was going on.

ColdHand could count on the fingers of one hand the times when he had been caught completely off-guard and felt this level of shock.

He wrote a private message to Roth. He had never used full capitals like this before but felt that this moment deserved it. *"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"*

*

Loki clicked his tongue as ColdHand again blocked his attack with [Ice Wall]. The moment the cryokinetic tactician of the Krakens stepped out of the portal, he knew he was coordinating this hunt. The cold, precise calculations and the efficiency with which the hunting party adapted the formation were trademarks of the icy general of the Krakens. Yet another very troublesome opponent had come for him.

Thankfully, he was able to block that debuff regardless. He didn't need whatever nasty skill Kraken had been channeling for a full minute. He looked at the list of debuffs that Kraken had inflicted on him and grimaced. Just how many skill slots did he have? On top of that, he was under the effect of seven different poisons. Just how many thousands of gold had the mad scientist of the Krakens spent concocting this nightmarish collection of toxins and acids?

Although Loki had finished several players, the ones he wanted to kill the most were still soldiering on. He just had to settle with finding the next weak link in the chain.

He saw ColdHand's face in a very uncharacteristic emotional scowl. Loki had never seen ColdHand blink or raise a brow, much less look shocked. The Krakens' tactician was well-known for never losing his cool and always maintaining a stoic expression. What had made ColdHand lose his composure like that?

He threw an attack at him, hoping to catch him off guard.

Abyssal Bolt!

ColdHand reacted instantly and activated [Cryogenic Stasis], becoming invulnerable. More and more players stopped their attacks, glancing in the same direction as ColdHand. Loki wondered for a moment whether this was a childish attempt at trying to make him look that way too so that they could catch him by surprise with an attack from the opposite side, but his curiosity got the better of him, and he couldn't help but look.

They had all been looking at the Slayer. Jaw-Long, too, looked stupefied at the person he was trying to protect, and for a few moments, Loki's mind stopped working, unable to process the unexpected sight. Was the Slayer mocking him? Was this an attempt at insulting him? Why was the Slayer knitting while everyone else was fighting?

This went against everything he knew about the Slayer. Who was this man? Where was the mad berserker? Where was the brute who threw himself at his enemies if he was severely outnumbered? Where were his violent, bloodthirsty eyes?

Instead, the Slayer looked like a meek sheep, happily and peacefully knitting a blanket or whatever forsaken item he had been making. No. This had to be a prank. A practical joke. Or maybe the beating that the imbeciles from IronIre had given him had driven him mad.

The battlefield had gone dead quiet as if they had been navigating through a storm and had just reached its eye. But suddenly, a sound broke the quiet. Ogre was laughing. MountainTop, next to him, also began laughing. A few peals of laughter and chuckles went around the

group of players, and even Jaw-Long's serious face turned into a grin as he shook his head at the incredible sight.

Loki felt his face burn. He knew it. This was the Slayer trying to get to him. How dare he make fun of him? Couldn't he see how powerful he had become? Couldn't he see how he had one-shot several of the best players in the game? At this time, the Slayer finished knitting a pair of pants. He stretched them appreciatively and even asked Jaw-Long for an opinion on his work, wiping the old man's grin off his face and leaving him speechless and shocked again.

"SLAYER!" roared Loki.

Abyssal Bolt!

Spectral Spear!

Wave of Death!

Jaw-Long brought his hands together, then stretched them apart, revealing a black sphere that absorbed Loki's attacks. He then brought his hands together again, and the dark globe disappeared.

"How dare you!? I'm going to kill you over and over again."

Loki's vision went red. He didn't care about Kraken's poisons or BlueFire's flames anymore. All he wanted to do was to finish off the idiot who dared to knit instead of fighting him!

*

Roth whistled contentedly as he knitted a pair of trousers. It had been difficult to get in the groove, but the few episodes in which he'd had a gun against his head and had been forced to knit to keep himself busy helped him to tune the sounds of battle out. He tried to focus only on the needles and the thread.

As he finished knitting a pair of trousers, he received a notification.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Wool Pants].

+500 ecotailor XP.

Wool Pants (Common)

Crafting Grade: C.

Bottom

Item description: A pair of slacks that will comfortably fit any adventurer.

Item effects:

+30hp;

+2 wisdom;

+2 intelligence.

You manage to craft even when there's chaos and fighting around you.

+2 resilience.

It looked like his ability to craft, even when there was fighting around him, really paid off. He studied the stats of the pair of trousers he'd crafted with the sheep's wool he had left in his inventory.

It looked like he had to concentrate harder. The inhospitable environment had affected the quality of the product.

"Hey, Jaw-Long. Aren't you the best player in the game? What do you think? Any hints on how to improve?"

The old man just scratched his head uncomfortably. He was clueless. How disappointing. One would expect that Jaw-Long would know one thing or two about crafting.

"*WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*" came the inquiry from ColdHand. Hadn't it all been in capitals, Roth wouldn't even have seen it.

"*Knitting,*" he answered simply.

"*While the rest of us are fighting?*"

"*What am I supposed to do? Fumble with my fingers? I'm not fighting. I might as well make the most of my time.*"

"*Still... it...*"

A barrage of attacks from Loki made Jaw-Long step up and protect Roth. His hideous alien form was also screaming angrily at Roth. What had gotten into him? Wasn't he the only one here who wasn't attacking him? Why such animosity? This Loki was mad. Why couldn't he leave him alone in his corner, knitting peacefully?

"*Never mind. Keep knitting. Just do your thing. You're brilliant. Thank you, ticket boy.*"

ColdHand rearranged the formation and told the DPS team to use the window the ticket boy had valiantly created to use skills that took longer to channel. *Window? What window?* Roth hesitated for a few moments as the air in front of him was burned with energy projections of every possible color, but seeing Jaw-Long jumping up

and down, blocking them all, he shrugged and got started on yet another pair of trousers.

Chapter 40

At first, Roth was still aware of what was happening around him, but after the fifth pair of trousers, he couldn't hear anything anymore. Whenever Roth wasn't knitting, he felt fear and pain. Therefore, he couldn't let himself stop for even a second. There was only him, the wool, and the needles. At least, that's what he wanted to believe.

Sometimes, the erratic shifts in temperature threatened to bring him back to reality, but he hid himself in his cozy, soft woolen garments and focused only on the motions of the needles in his hands. He finished producing yet another pair of wool trousers using the stockinette stitch. This design was more three-dimensional and it required a more complex series of steps.

Even so, he was becoming more familiar with the process and after warming up, he was getting better results.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Wool Pants].

+750 ecotailor XP.

Wool Pants (Common)

Crafting Grade: B-.

Bottom

Item description: A pair of slacks that will comfortably fit any adventurer.

Item effects:

+50hp;

+4 wisdom;

+5 intelligence.

You choose not to do battle but pursue peace instead.

+10 righteousness.

The small notification at the end almost burst the bubble he had so painstakingly enveloped himself in, but before he could process it, he grabbed more fleece and kept crafting.

He was very comfortable with the knit stitch, but every time he shifted to the purl stitch, it messed with his flow, and his hands became clumsy. He had to perfect this technique, otherwise he wasn't going to get any better at this. As an experiment, he crafted a few cloths using the purl stitch.

A purl stitch was just a knit stitch backwards. If he turned the cloth over, it looked the same as all those he had crafted so many times in Mario's lab. The purpose wasn't to get him more stats, however. He wanted to smooth out the edges of his technique and get more comfortable with the purl stitch.

*

Bolts, rays, and flames made the inside of the abandoned observatory look like a fireworks festival. Loki screamed as he threw every skill at Ticket Boy while running and flailing his claws. Jaw-Long jumped, tensing his every muscle. He was still in midair for a split-second, like a coiled spring building up energy. As Loki and his barrage of attacks arrived, Jaw-Long unleashed it all.

Meteor Punch!

The colossal release of energy battled against Loki's own, but after holding for a moment, it gave, and Jaw-Long was sent flying. ColdHand cursed under his breath. Loki had been wary of Jaw-Long, afraid that the old monster was strong enough to contend with him.

The old man had bluffed beautifully throughout the ordeal, always keeping up appearances, even though he had already sent a message to ColdHand telling him that he was no match for how strong Loki was now. After this exchange, Loki knew he could wipe the floor with Jaw-Long. This would make things trickier.

Even though Jaw-Long couldn't block this attack, fortunately, he bought enough time for MountainTop and Ogre to arrive, and they were already trying to push back Loki and keep him away from Ticket Boy.

Ticket Boy remained serene and calm throughout the ordeal, like a lone flower amidst a hurricane, peacefully knitting. The sight of such a tall, large man doing something so delicate only added to the weirdness of this moment.

“Any skills with pulls or walls. Help Ogre and MountainTop.”

Other warriors arrived a moment later and used whatever skills had pushback effects. Espers also used whatever skills could pin Loki down and prevent him from getting to the weird knitter.

Loki was out of control. He didn't know if Ticket Boy's move had been an accident or a stroke of genius. He had managed to *taunt* Loki in a way that no tank skill ever could. Loki was so angry now that he could only see Roth Taylor tailoring before him. Judging Loki's anger not to be a feint, he called it.

“Espers. If you have long channels, now is the time.”

His boss started preparing a particularly nasty debuff that took a long time to channel. Other powerful espers, including ColdHand, joined in.

Ice Age!

The floor around ColdHand immediately froze, and he exhaled a puff of steam. His most powerful skill took one minute to channel and was easy to see coming. Only by relying on the protection of a reliable team did he dare even start channeling it.

Griffin has cast [Speedy Breeze] on you. Channeling is 20% faster for one minute.

ColdHand allowed himself the tiniest of smirks. He hadn't even known such a skill existed, but he was glad to have it on his side for this battle. He noted it, though, in case they had a falling out with the Griffins soon.

Howling winds and fierce thunder filled the room, and for the first time since the battle had begun, the most impressive skill animations weren't coming from Loki. The buildup of skills was a spectacle to behold.

Each of these skills was a priceless treasure and an important part of a guild's arsenal. Epic skills didn't fall from trees. He got [Ice Age] as a reward for the first clear of the Arctic Swallow Nest. It was one of the most difficult dungeons for level 50 players, and his guild had

paid for this skill with sweat and blood. Every last of these powerful channels could change the course of a battle, and they were all being used on one target.

ColdHand couldn't recall a gathering of giants like this, where so many powerful skills were activated simultaneously. BlueFire's skill animation, in particular, was a spectacle to behold. Loki awoke from his single-minded attack, drawn by the powerful fluctuations coming from the different players.

"Pin him down! Only a few more seconds."

The front-liners triggered taunt after taunt, using every skill possible to keep Loki focused on them. By the time Loki finally broke free, it was too late. The first skill to finish channeling was that of a hydrokinetic esper from Cerberus.

Tsunami Blast!

The sound of crashing waves drowned out every other sound in the room. Whirlpools of water shot up and entwined like threads in a rope as they all crashed on Loki, sending him flying against the wall.

-252

Even though the damage wasn't too impressive, it was still a mile beyond what they were able to score on Loki usually. Additionally, even though much of the damage was mitigated, these powerful skills usually had bonus effects, in this case, a powerful pushback effect.

The next player to finish channeling was Kraken. The floor around him was melting as if he'd been leaking acid onto it. An eerie atmosphere took over the wet observatory, and brown lines spread through the walls like spider webs, making the building groan in complaint.

Rusty Mist!

The lines converged on Loki, making his whole body brown and his movements sluggish. This was his boss' most powerful debuff, and the battle should become more manageable from now on. Rusty Mist had a chance to interrupt a target's skill and came with a considerably slow debuff.

ColdHand discovered that the animation was over and unleashed the power of [Ice Age]. A large crack echoed in the room as if icebergs and fjords had shifted around the observatory.

Ice Age!

-281

Loki became a cube of ice. The last time he'd used this on a boss, he'd bought ten seconds for his team to pull itself back together. However, this time, the ice encasing Loki cracked almost instantly. His resilience was just too high.

Finally, it was the turn of BlueFire's attack. BlueFire had been focusing all his flames into one compressed white-pearl sphere.

Rising Sun!

The pearl flew toward Loki, and ColdHand's vision went all white. There was a massive boom as it connected with Loki. Once the dust settled, the sight of a disgruntled, blackened Loki with a yellow hp bar greeted them.

-612

-12

-12

-12

ColdHand allowed himself the tiniest of smiles. Finally, there was light at the end of the tunnel. He frowned as he checked Loki, burned, frozen, and rusted. Why was he so calm? Surely, all these debuffs were too much, even for him.

Loki grabbed a bottle from his inventory, and ColdHand recognized the consumable immediately. *"Interrupt him! Quick! Don't let him drink that!"* MountainTop rushed toward Loki but bounced off an invisible wall that Loki had created.

"There's still time. Attack the barrier. We can't let him drink that cleansing potion!" All players started attacking the barrier frantically. Thankfully, it didn't share the high resistance of its summoner, and the damage numbers they were used to seeing were a sight for sore eyes.

-2193

-1237

-1932

-1919

Unfortunately, despite their unrestrained barrage, it wasn't showing signs of giving soon. Just how powerful was this skill? It didn't even require any channeling time. Loki just finished drinking the potion calmly, and after a few seconds, all the debuffs they had painstakingly stacked on him disappeared.

ColdHand felt his gut twist. Hunting a powerful boss was already difficult as it was, but this was a player. He had treasures and consumables just like they did. To top it off, he wasn't an ordinary player. This was the guild leader of Pegasus, someone with access to many powerful resources.

"Don't lose your cool. We'll just debuff him again. I doubt he has more than one such potion. Remain calm, and whittle down the barrier's hp," he messaged the team. This would be a long battle.

*

Roth returned to the stockinette stitch after crafting ten cloths using purl stitches. All he had to do was alternate between rows of knit and purl stitches. Roth got down to knitting the main body of a new pair of trousers. Roth skillfully shaped the pants, increasing the hips and making subtle decreases for a tailored fit. The knitting needles danced in his hands as the garment began to mirror the contours of his body.

After the main body was done, Roth worked on each leg separately. He was still using the system lines but was confident he wouldn't need them after a couple more tries. He carefully followed the pattern, precisely knitting to create the pants' front and back.

Roth cast on additional stitches and worked on the inseam, closing the circle and bringing the legs together. He tightened the region around the ankles as he knitted down each leg. Once he was satisfied, he cast off, finishing the piece.

The pants were very loose in the waist, and Roth followed the system's suggestion, using a thread to go around the waist and tightening it slightly. Once he was done, he received a notification.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Wool Pants].

+500 ecotailor XP.

Wool Pants (Common)

Crafting Grade: B+.

Bottom

Item description: A pair of slacks that will comfortably fit any adventurer.

Item effects:

+50 hp;

+5 wisdom;

+5 intelligence.

You manage to craft even when there's chaos and fighting around you.

+1 intelligence.

The results were slightly better, but he knew there was still a lot of room for improvement. As he inspected this pair of pants, he noticed that the first stitches of each new row were coming out wonky. His transition between stitches wasn't flawless yet, and he seemed to take a few stitches to warm up.

More aware of his shortcomings, Roth decided to perfect his technique before crafting more items. As an experiment, he began alternating between knit stitches and purl stitches within the same row. This would force him to master transitioning between the two and hopefully elevate the crafting grade of the next items he made.

Roth inserted the right needle into the loop of the first stitch on the left needle from front to back. His right hand guided the needle through the loop, capturing the yarn with a fluid motion. The yarn gracefully wrapped around the right needle, temporarily embracing the existing stitch. Roth's fingers worked harmoniously, ensuring a connection that wasn't too tight.

As the right needle emerged through the loop, Roth gently pushed the old stitch off the left needle, allowing the new stitch to settle onto the right one. The completed knit stitch was now nestled confidently on the right needle. He took a deep breath and allowed himself a smile. He had performed this motion thousands of times. It was comfortable and easy. It was time to practice his transition.

Roth's hands shifted clumsily as he inserted the right needle into the front of the second stitch on the left needle, now moving in the opposite direction from right to left. The motion felt unnatural and uncomfortable as if he were trying to write with a non-dominant

hand. His needles looked like a driver who realized he had not taken a turn and swerved on a highway, barely making the exit.

The yarn slid between the needles. Roth's trembling left hand tried to steady the left needle, providing the necessary support as the right needle moved through the stitch, but he pulled too hard, and the knot came out too tight. As he studied the result, he saw a confident knit stitch sitting next to a twisted, choked purl one.

He just needed to practice more. He took a deep breath and tried again.

Chapter 41

Roth continued practicing changing between stitches on a simple piece of cloth. The motion was initially uncomfortable, but he felt he had improved somewhat when he finished crafting the item.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Woolen Cloth].

Crafting Grade: E.

+125 ecotailor XP.

Woolen Cloth (Consumable)

Item description: The cloth can wipe armor and give it extra shine for a while.

Item effects:

+1.5% damage resistance to a piece of armor for 30 minutes.

+1% status resistance to a piece of armor for 30 minutes.

Congratulations! You've learned a new profession skill: [Rib Stitch].

+2000 ecotailor XP.

[Ecotailor Level Up!]

Rib Stitch (Profession)

Description: This technique produces a textured fabric with vertical columns of knit stitches alternating with purl stitches. It provides stretch and elasticity to fabric.

Effects:

Pieces of equipment crafted with this technique gain one bonus stat. Consumables gain half a grade.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Roth blinked briefly, reading the new notification. No way! Had he just learned a new stitching technique? He studied the piece of cloth he'd just made. Truth be told, the stitches were a strangled mess; however, he could still see the vertical columns of knit stitches, as mentioned in the skill's description.

It was delightfully simple, actually. If he alternated rows of stitches, he was using the stockinette stitch. He used the rib stitch if he alternated stitches inside the same row. Roth pulled out his ecotailor manual. Since he'd last handled it, its pages had become filled with more information, and he checked the section that described his professional skills. He wanted to compare the effects of [Rib Stitch] with those of [Stockinette Stitch].

Stockinette Stitch (Profession)

Description: By alternating between knit stitches and purl stitches, you make your fabric stronger and more durable.

Effects:

Pieces of equipment crafted with this technique gain one bonus stat. Consumables gain half a grade.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

The effects of the skill were the same. What did that mean? That it made no difference whether he used one stitch or the other? He scratched his chin in thought, trying to figure out how to use these techniques best. He looked at his own clothes that had been knitted by seasoned tailors. They had used more than one knitting stitch when making them. Did that mean he could stuff both techniques all in one item, thus stacking the bonuses?

He picked a few more skeins of yarn from the sheep wool he had left. Although he had stuffed most of his inventory with raw alpaca wool, he had also brought some sheep wool to practice with before he tried his new techniques on the more valuable material.

He started making a new cloth using the rib stitch. He moved the thread through the loop with the right needle, then switched gears and performed the same motions but in the opposite direction. He was getting the hang of it, and changing stitches didn't feel as

uncomfortable anymore. He kept crafting the cloth using the new stitch he had just learned until he finished the fifth row.

Once he got to the second half of the cloth, he stopped alternating stitches within the same row and made one full row of knit stitches. He switched techniques during the crafting process to determine if his suspicion was correct. His excitement made him miss more than a few stitches, but he was too excited about how it would turn out.

Finally, he cast off and admired the new [Woolen Cloth] he'd made.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Woolen Cloth].

Crafting Grade: D-.

+130 ecotailor XP.

Woolen Cloth (Consumable)

Item description: The cloth can wipe armor and give it extra shine for a while.

Item effects:

+0.5% damage resistance to a piece of armor for 30 minutes;

+0.5% status resistance to a piece of armor for 30 minutes;

+1 strength.

Even though the crafting grade was subpar, his theory was confirmed! He had made this consumable grant not only damage resistance but also status resistance and even a stat! What a major difference! That wasn't all. Even though his crafting grade was terrible, it was still clear to him that he was gaining more XP by utilizing different stitches during the crafting process.

An absolute beginner could make a simple woolen cloth that only granted damage resistance, but a more seasoned tailor could use the same materials to produce a much more powerful item. The better the tailor, the greater the difference they could make in the quality of the equipment.

Screams and sounds of fighting around him finally reached him, and he was brought to reality. Loki sent an AoE skill that finished off two warriors, but the espers unleashed a powerful attack as a response, shaving off some of Loki's hp. His muscles tensed, and he

clenched his teeth, but he stopped himself. He made himself look away. He forced himself to think about something else.

The discovery. The stitches. Yes. This discovery was huge. He had to move. He had to do something. He would celebrate. He started dancing. All this nervous energy had to go somewhere. He had to let out some steam; all he wanted to do was dance.

The bursts of light and temperature variations around him as the battle progressed tried to shake him off his funk, but he just tried to imagine that the lights were a disco ball and the explosions a beat to give him rhythm. A little voice in his head told him to join the battle around him, but he just drowned it out with music.

“Stitch, stitch, stitch.

I’m in stitches.

I’m in stitches.

Stitch, stitch, stitch,

I’m in stitches.

I’m in stitches.”

Roth slightly twisted the lyrics of a song he liked, making it more suitable for the occasion he was celebrating. He didn’t usually sing, but thankfully, he had always been a talented singer and could make it work. Roth danced vigorously with everything he had. It was too bad he wasn’t filming this; he was feeling inspired. He kept dancing and moving until he was panting. He hadn’t danced like this since he had gotten his relationship with the snakes to adored status.

It felt good to pump some oxygen into his brain. Some of the tension had ebbed away, and he felt at peace again. He had danced his way back to another world where no fighting was going on. Satisfied with his performance, he sat back down and picked up the cloth he’d just made.

Roth fought the urge to discover more different patterns. Juliette was right. He had to focus on one thing at a time and build his tailoring from the ground up. He returned to crafting cloths using [Rib Stitch], hoping to perfect his transitions between stitches.

*

Ninety-eight of the ninety-nine players of the hunting party had used the teleportation gate, but very few from the entourage survived long. Loki had already wiped out fifty players, and the battle was

brutal. ColdHand had to sacrifice more than ten players to Loki's renewed assault after he drank the [Cleansing Potion] before they could stack enough debuffs on him again to slow him down. On the other hand, they had finally managed to shatter the barrier, and it didn't look like Loki could reuse that skill again soon.

Loki combined a high-level boss's overwhelming strength with a player's cunning and smarts. He kept alternating targets, making it exceedingly difficult to manage the battlefield. He would send a barrage of skills toward Ticket Boy, only to then target the medics and the espers. They kept chasing after him, trying to pin him down, but even so, it was like trying to control a hurricane. ColdHand wasn't sure they'd be able to finish the monster off.

Ice Shards!

ColdHand saw an opening and threw a series of icicles toward Loki.

-12

-13

-11

The damage wasn't too impressive, but thankfully, other team members were doing better.

Double Slash!

-69

-45

Ogre brandished his two swords in a cross-slash pattern, and two big numbers came up. The longer the guild leader of the Ogres fought, the more damage he dealt. After twenty minutes of fighting, the bonus was becoming increasingly visible. His bear also kept shooting sunbeams at Loki, significantly damaging him. He was in the lead regarding DPS and fighting for the first place with BlueFire.

Simmering Heat!

-10

-10

-10

Many of BlueFire's skills dealt damage per second, and the burn damage kept stacking. The duo was formidable. ColdHand had fought the Ogres many times and knew how much havoc this duo could wreak. MountainTop and Griffin also stabilized the hunt, soaking much of the damage and taking some of the pressure off Ogre.

The only player left to teleport in was Cerberus.

"Can I go in or what?" he asked ColdHand in a message.

"Please hold. Keep charging." He had already asked several times in the chat when he should come in, but ColdHand wanted to save him as a last resort to execute Loki once they got him low enough. Even though Cerberus wasn't here yet, his guild's players were fighting valiantly.

Loki tried to use an execution skill on Griffin.

Coup de Grâce!

Manny stepped in, stomping the ground.

Tangling Roots!

A series of vines emerged from under Loki and pulled at his arms, interrupting the channeling. Manny punched and kicked Loki, making flowers sprout from wherever he hit him, which shortly after exploded, dealing generous damage.

Manny had a weird mixed class that combined plants and melee fighting. Many of his skills had short stuns, and if ColdHand had seen him fight before, he would have had him join the fight much sooner. He'd already saved Ogre twice, and counting this instance, Griffin three times.

ColdHand glanced in the direction of Roth Taylor. Ticket Boy was in a world of his own. Now he knew that Ticket Boy hadn't taunted Loki on purpose. The young man wasn't a genius. He was just not

right in the head. They had tried to message and call him, but he kept his eyes glued to his needles, whistling happily as he knitted pants. He reminded ColdHand of his grandfather, who'd gone senile toward the end of his life.

Considering what he knew about him, he wasn't surprised. If the account was true, Ticket Boy had spent years in jail, only to be trapped in the game and tortured and chased by Loki. He could see how that kind of pressure could traumatize a man. Even so, for him to have accomplished so much in the game so far was tremendous, and if this was how he coped, so be it. At least he wasn't getting in the way.

Suddenly, Ticket Boy stood up and started performing bizarre movements. His body twisted at weird angles in a disturbing sequence of jerking movements. ColdHand was startled at the abrupt shift in behavior.

"BlueFire, Ogre. I think Ticket Boy is having a stroke!" ColdHand messaged.

BlueFire and Ogre turned toward Roth, and they weren't the only ones. Everyone had stopped fighting again to watch what Roth was doing. Even Loki's head bobbed to one side, trying to make sense of it.

"How can he be having a stroke? The pod would have logged him out by now," replied Ogre. *"Ob. Never mind. His pod is bugged."*

"I already sent some people to check his pod. We'll call an ambulance if needed," added BlueFire.

Just as things couldn't get any weirder, Roth opened his mouth and let out a series of screams. They were shrill sounds that brought shivers up his spine. It really was a heart attack. What a tragedy for someone so young to have a stroke like this. The pressure really had been too much, and his heart couldn't take it anymore.

After a few moments, ColdHand started making sense of the words being shouted. Something about *stitches*, and *I'm in stitches*. ColdHand squinted and kept watching Roth's movements. His jaw dropped. He noticed how the shouting had a certain sequence to it, and Roth was jerking at the same time he shouted. Could it be?

"Guys, I think he's just singing and dancing," said ColdHand.

"No way. How can that be singing and dancing?" protested Mel.

ColdHand stood speechless for a few moments. It was the second time today that this guy managed to defy all reason and do something

completely unexpected like this. Once people realized he was dancing and singing, a roar of laughter went through the group. They pointed at him and laughed. Mel and Cyclops, especially, laughed hysterically. The only two people who weren't laughing were Loki and ColdHand.

"Why are you provoking me like this, Slayer?! Haven't you done enough? I swear I will kill you until you're level zero!" shouted Loki.

Roth just kept dancing as if he hadn't heard Loki's threats. Loki's anger returned in full, and he charged Ticket Boy like a bull again, but Jaw-Long used his [Galaxy Shield] and absorbed the hit.

ColdHand had to review his conclusions. Was Ticket Boy really crazy? Or was it all just an act? On the one hand, dancing like this had *taunted* Loki again. On the other hand, what sane person would sing and dance so poorly?

It didn't matter. This man was a puzzle he didn't need to solve. All that mattered was the window of opportunity he had created.

"Rogues, get ready to attack on my signal. Manny, Kraken, get your stuns ready."

Chapter 42

Roth felt more confident in his technique after a few rounds of crafting using the rib stitch. From measly E's and D's, he was starting to get solid B's and C's. Although he understood why Juliette had chosen to teach him [Stockinette Stitch] first, [Rib Stitch] was much better to practice transitioning between purl and knit stitches. Whereas in the stockinette stitch, he only had to alternate the type of stitch whenever he got to a new row, with rib stitch, he was forced to transition between the two all the time.

After making a few wool cloths, Roth felt it was time to move on to other recipes. He could keep honing his skills while making more valuable items, so he would go back to knitting woolen pants.

However, before he could do so, he had to prepare the new crafting material he'd purchased from Juliette.

Alpaca Wool (Crafting Material)

Description: Wool sheared from alpacas.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Raw alpaca wool looked as brown and dirty as sheep's wool, although hued in a different tone of brown. He felt the fibers in his hand and found they felt lighter and softer than raw sheep wool. He was curious to see how that would affect the final product.

He started by skirting the wool, looking for any dirty bits, pieces of straw, or debris to remove. As he did, he noticed that the process took longer than it would have with a fleece of sheep's wool. He kept finding new bits to remove, no matter how thorough he was. The

progress bar increased at a good pace but significantly slower than what he was used to.

[Raw Alpaca Wool] has become [Skirted Alpaca Wool].

+30 ecotailor XP.

Despite taking longer, he received triple the amount of XP compared to skirting sheep's wool. It looked like all those bonuses he'd seen in some of the tools he'd purchased were valuable. He grabbed the new set of carding pads he'd gotten from Juliette.

Novice Carding Pads (Common)

Description: These carding pads are made of sturdier wood and can help you comb fibers a little quicker.

Item effects: Carding is 10% faster.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

Ten percent might not sound like a lot, but he guessed that the more one progressed in tailoring, the longer it took to process the materials. Having good tools would become even more important later on. He would have to go to the auction house and look for how expensive better tools were.

He patiently went through stack after stack of [Alpaca Wool]. As he immersed himself in the process, he lost track of time. All he was interested in was finding and amputating the bad pieces of the alpaca fleeces. Once he was finished, he checked his profession's progress bar. Even though he hadn't gained a level in his profession from doing this, he still had progressed significantly.

Now, it was time to wash the wool. He grabbed the two copper buckets he had purchased less than 24 hours earlier.

Copper Bucket (Common)

Description: These buckets can hold heat for a little longer, thus speeding up the washing process.

Item effects: It's 10% faster to dry fibers.

Restrictions: Tailor, lvl. 10.

They looked better than the old tin ones he used to have. The speed bonus that they granted would also come in handy. He placed them on the ground and prepared to fill them. Unlike last time, he

didn't have access to a faucet, so he resorted to one of the consumables he had prepared.

Fresh Water (Consumable)

Description: Water is a treasure that isn't readily available everywhere you travel. A seasoned traveler always keeps a few of these in his bag.

Effects:

+20 ep.

It was one of the most basic ways to replenish one's energy bar, but that's not what he would use it for. He opened the bottle of water and poured its contents into the bucket. Once the buckets were filled, he grabbed another consumable.

Hot Stone (Consumable)

Description: The stone of a water volcano that heats whenever it is in contact with water. Perfect for making tea or coffee when you're in the great outdoors.

Effects:

Heats water.

It was another cheap consumable designed to help players with the chef profession who wanted to cook while traveling. He threw stones into both buckets and watched the water gently bubbling and steam emerging. He put his hand into the water and, satisfied with the temperature, soaked as many fleeces of alpaca wool as he could fit into the water.

More dirt and debris came to the surface. Roth kept waiting for the oily lanolin to separate from the water, but nothing happened. He frowned. Why wasn't lanolin coming out? Was the water not hot enough? Had he done something wrong?

To ensure there wasn't anything wrong with his tools, he grabbed one bit of raw sheep wool he had in his inventory, quickly skirted it, and put it in the bucket. The thicker substance immediately separated from the wool and came to the surface. He clicked his tongue. Juliette hadn't mentioned that alpaca wool had no lanolin! Then why did he buy the [Lanolin Extractor]? Was that only good for the most basic wool?

His current equipment was made of lambswool, and he'd seen other types of sheep wool for sale in the auction house. He would probably keep returning to sheep wool throughout his career and use the lanolin extractor later on. He shrugged, stored the [Lanolin Extractor], and focused on washing the alpaca wool.

Since he didn't need to wait for lanolin to come out, washing alpaca wool was significantly faster. He just put the fleeces in the water, moved them around, and they came out cleaner. All he needed now was a place to hang these to dry. He wetted his finger and waved it around, looking for the warmest spot possible. There were bursts of chilly wind and sprays of water splashing due to the skills used in battle.

"No, Roth. No battle. There isn't any battle going on. Happy thoughts. Happy thoughts," he mumbled.

In addition to the chill and the moist, gusts of dry, hot air were coming his way now and then. It was BlueFire who was burning and throwing flames like a madman. Roth grabbed his buckets filled with alpaca wool and ran toward him.

*

ColdHand took stock of the resources he had left. After two hours of fighting, they were down to thirty players, and they still couldn't get Loki's health bar to the red zone. It was an unfair fight. Whenever Loki got a lucky shot or landed a critical hit, one of them died. However, no matter how many mistakes the Hive King made or how brilliant their moves they couldn't make a sizable dent in him. The alliance danced on the blade's edge while Loki leisurely picked them off individually.

He glanced over in the direction of their hunting party's resident looney bin. He was now washing wool in buckets. The gall that this man had. How could someone craft so leisurely while the rest of them were here giving it their all in battle?

Ticket Boy jolted upright, put his finger in his mouth, and then waved it around as if trying to determine the direction of the wind. What was he doing now? His crazy eyes landed on the opposite side of the battlefield. ColdHand tried to determine what had piqued Ticket Boy's interest and followed his gaze toward BlueFire. What was he trying to do?

Roth picked up both buckets filled with water and soaked wool and ran across the battlefield. Jaw-Long flailed his hands around.

“Get back here! I can’t protect you if you run around!”

Roth acted as if he hadn’t heard him. Seeing his prey running to his arms, Loki grinned excitedly.

Psionic Push!

Loki used his knockback skill to get the warriors off his neck and shot a beam of red energy toward Ticket Boy.

Reality Bend!

Jaw-Long’s eyes shone white, and he twisted the fabric of reality, deflecting Loki’s attacks, but Loki was already lunging toward him. With a gap of almost fifty levels, the slightest graze would instantly kill him.

Mel’s hawk shone in a brilliant red and crashed into Loki, shifting his attack’s direction and causing him to miss Roth, who kept running toward BlueFire, followed by Jaw-Long, mumbling and complaining throughout the whole chase. “And here I thought that I’d seen everything. A man works hard, reaches the top, and still can’t help getting caught in these annoying little errands.” That was the longest sentence ColdHand had ever heard the old man say.

The espers were divided into three squads. ColdHand had organized things this way to make it more difficult for Loki to target them simultaneously. Incidentally, he was in the same squad as BlueFire. Loki had mostly ignored them until now, but now that Roth was running toward them, he was bringing the big bad wolf in tow.

“What are you doing?” ColdHand calmly asked him as Roth passed right by his side. The young man’s eyes were empty as if he were in a separate dimension or a trance. He really had lost it.

BlueFire wasn’t so calm. “You moron! What are you doing? Are you crazy? Why are you bringing Loki here?!” ColdHand had never seen his rival so flustered. “Is this how you thank me? Come on, man! We saved you and your family! I even accepted your ludicrous prices for the Antioch guide! What more do you want?”

While completely ignoring BlueFire’s protests, Roth approached the wall behind the squad, removing the dripping fleeces of washed wool from the buckets and hanging them all around the pyrokinetic.

Death Wave!

Spectral Spear!

Abyssal Bolt!

Loki had arrived in fire and fury and spat skills everywhere.

Ice Wall!

Crystal Dome!

Fire Barrier!

The squad of espers used shields of different elements layering them to protect them from Loki's attacks, but Loki just pierced through them all as if they were made of paper. Jaw-Long had to use a [Meteor Punch] to keep him at bay long enough for Manny, Ogre, and MountainTop to arrive and keep Loki away from them.

ColdHand bit his lip. Even if he died, they couldn't afford to lose BlueFire. He had to get him out of harm's way.

"All esper squads. Rotate 30 degrees clockwise," he messaged in the party chat. The whole formation shifted like a herd of buffalos running away from a lion. Everyone ran while sending attacks to Loki, thus reorganizing the battlefield so that the DPS teams could be as far away from Loki as possible with a line of melee fighters in between to prevent Loki from getting to them.

Seeing that BlueFire had run off, Ticket Boy just picked up all the fleeces of wool he'd hung earlier, put them in the bucket again, and chased after him.

"What are you doing? What do you want?!" BlueFire's voice had become hoarse and whiny. The shrill voice coming from the usually calm general was unsightly.

Seeing Ticket Boy running away with his buckets, Loki also tried following. Cyclops charged him, and Manny summoned trees and vines to hold him, but they barely managed to keep him in place.

This couldn't continue. Ticket Boy was turning the battlefield upside down. What had gotten into him? Why this fixation with BlueFire all of a sudden?

"Get off me! What are you doing, boy? Are you crazy?!"

Despite BlueFire's protests, Ticket Boy again hung the wool around him and even tried to put some soaking wool on top of him. As the wet wool made contact with his hot body, it sizzled, and steam came off it abundantly. Seeing this, ColdHand's brows shot up.

“He’s just trying to use BlueFire as a radiator to dry his wool. Formation. Shift again. Jaw-Long, please guard BlueFire and Crazy.”

The professional gamers’ faces were filled with disbelief and contempt. This was the most critical battle in the game right now, and they all had to accommodate this crazy guy who kept knitting, dancing, and using their firepower to dry his clothes. Still, no one dared question ColdHand’s commands, and the formation shifted again.

ColdHand was sure that if BlueFire hadn’t believed they needed to keep Ticket Boy alive because of his quest, he would have already blown him to smithereens. The fleeces of wet wool were all letting off steam as BlueFire kept throwing pyrokinetic skills one after the other at Loki. ColdHand didn’t know if anger made a pyrokinetic’s flames hotter, but it certainly felt that way.

Chapter 43

Roth pushed the pedal up and down with his foot, making the wheel turn quickly, creating a smooth, relaxing turning sound. He gently teased the strands of alpaca wool he had just carded, ensuring they were evenly aligned and free from any tangles.

The wheel drew the fibers into its spokes and twisted them into a fine thread. Roth's foot moved rhythmically, controlling the speed and tension of the process, while the bobbin wound the thread into a skein of yarn.

The difference in speed between using a spindle and a spinning wheel was significant. On top of that, with this skein of yarn, he was fortunate enough to trigger the [Plenty of Fiber] skill.

Plenty of Fiber (Common)

Skill description: You're in such a hurry to get crafting that you put in the extra effort to get the fibers ready for tailoring.

Skill effects: There's a 5% chance of completing a process twice as fast when preparing fibers for crafting.

Restrictions: Tailor, Lvl. 10.

The bar rose and filled up, fast as a rocket, and Roth finally finished processing all the raw alpaca wool he had purchased from Juliette.

Carding: 20%...56%...

Carding complete!

+100 ecotailor XP.

[Carded Wool] has become [Alpaca Wool Yarn].

It turned out that working with superior materials was already proving its worth even before he got crafting with it. The abundant exp gained by processing these higher-level fibers was absolutely worth it. In this case, he gained ten times more XP from spinning alpaca wool than he would have gained from basic sheep wool.

Processing all this wool had taken much less time than he thought because the washing and drying processes had been surprisingly quick. He had found a nice hotspot inside this building, which had become even hotter for some reason after he had started hanging the wool out to dry as if the universe was taking the initiative to help him.

Roth had already gained another level in this profession and unlocked a new skill.

[Wool's Will] had been upgraded to [Linen's Will].

Skill description: As you become better acquainted with materials in nature, you realize their potential.

Skill effects:

Passive. Whenever you're wearing wool or linen equipment, +2 intelligence per piece;

If you're only wearing wool or linen, +5 dexterity.

Restrictions: Lvl. 12.

Roth loved the upgrade. First of all, he had gained a bunch of stats from this alone. [Wool's Will] had granted one intelligence for a piece of clothing and a bonus of 2 dexterity if he was only wearing wool. The bonus had doubled! Secondly, although he loved his current outfit, always limiting his choices to just wool could quickly become troublesome. His class already limited quite a lot of the equipment he could use, but at least now, the material pool he could choose from had expanded somewhat.

He started dismantling the alpaca wool processing line, putting away the spinning wheel, the carding pads, and the buckets. Now, he could start crafting with it and experiment with all the different stitches he had been practicing.

Roth only wanted to focus on trying one new thing at a time, so he stuck to crafting trousers for now. This time, he would attempt to

incorporate all the different skills he knew into this one piece of fabric. First, he started working on the waistband to shape the center of the pants.

The rib stitch offered some elasticity, so he incorporated this technique into the waistband for a more comfortable fit. He worked his way down toward the legs, using the stockinette stitch to enhance the fabric's strength. When he got to the ankles, he returned to the rib stitch to avoid making them too baggy or loose.

Even though his transitions were far from perfect, they were smoother now, and the result reflected that.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Wool Pants].

+750 ecotailor XP.

Wool Pants (Common)

Crafting Grade: B.

Bottom

Item description: A pair of slacks that will comfortably fit any adventurer.

Item effects:

+80 hp;

+7 wisdom;

+5 intelligence;

+5% damage reduction.

Compared to the pairs of trousers he'd crafted before, he gained 50% more XP from crafting, and the pants even came with an added stat! Using different techniques on this one piece of clothing was proving its worth.

He studied the pants more closely and noted that some stitches were still too tight or uneven. Were it not for his collection of titles and unique profession, he was pretty sure he would have gotten a C at best.

He still had plenty of alpaca wool to go through, and he decided to knit wool pants until he could get an A. He kept focused on the needles and just the needles alone, ignoring all the messages and sounds of battle around him.

Four hours into this battle, ColdHand judged their situation dire but not hopeless. Of the 98 players that had come to fight Loki, only 25 remained. He had managed to keep their most important pieces alive, but some useful ones, such as Mel, who had a very high DPS, and Cyclops, a powerful part of their frontline, had already perished under the vicious strikes of the Hive King.

Now that there were fewer players, keeping track of the hundreds of cooldowns was easier. After such a long, drawn battle, he was fairly confident that no one was holding back. Top players from opposing guilds, who typically kept powerful skills or trump cards close to their chest, had been expending them all, willing to let go of an advantage in future battles with the other guilds to pull Loki down from his pedestal.

Even though they had lost many players, the truth was that their DPS stayed the same.

Triple Slash!

130

112

136

Ogre's passive skills meant that the longer he spent battling and the more overall health he lost, the more powerful he became. For four hours, his health bar had been fluctuating madly. He must have lost and recovered hundreds of thousands of hp. At the start of the battle, he barely broke double digits, but now he was comfortably into the triple digits. As long as Ogre was kept alive, this could work.

ColdHand was now contemplating whether he should call four of the five rogue players hiding to maintain the barrier up to help a little with the DPS. The quicker he could end this battle, the better. And there was some serious firepower in his trump card if he played it carefully.

"Sir," came the message from one of the Krakens' rogues, who was sending him this information privately.

"What is it, DryGrass?"

"I found their guild's coffer."

ColdHand furrowed his brow ever so slightly. Most guilds kept their coffers in the capital, but now that he thought about it since Loki had essentially been banished from every human city after betraying the human race, he had been forced to bring some of the guild's most important infrastructure here.

"Does it already have the [Safe Lock] upgrade?" Coldhand asked, knowing full well what the answer was going to be.

"Yes, sir, there's no way we can break into it."

ColdHand wasn't too disappointed. It was expected. Even though beginner guilds couldn't afford the hefty upgrade to prevent others from breaking into the safe, a guild such as Pegasus had more than enough resources to make the coffer inviolable and impossible to break into.

"Never mind, just leave it. Even the best rogue in the game can't break into that thing. Stay put and be prepared to join the battle at a moment's notice. I might need more DPS if things come down to it."

"Very well, sir."

ColdHand glanced at Ticket Boy and saw how he had again sat down, peacefully working on his clothes. He had to admit that seeing a craftsman so focused on their work was rare. Most craftsmen in his guild would have already logged out to have a cup of tea or coffee, as the crafting process could often become repetitive and mind-numbing.

Roth Taylor, however, had a look of excitement on his face and crafted and knitted as if his life depended on it. Maybe this crazy single-mindedness and out-of-the-box thinking enabled him to unlock the quest that brought them all here.

He glanced at Loki's health bar. They had already brought it to red once, but Loki triggered a life-saving skill that replenished his hp back to full. Such a skill probably couldn't be used more than once a day. They had to work their way back to the red zone before he could call Cerberus to use his execution skill and finish this.

"Okay, everyone, stay sharp, and remember, whatever happens, Ogre stays alive."

*

Zin had taken some time to get used to his boots' passive skill.

Gecko Feet (Rare)

Description: Laced with state-of-the-art technology, these shoes will take you places.

Effects: You can walk on walls and ceilings.

After using it extensively in stakeouts and spying missions, he had gotten used to making sense of things while upside down.

Shoes glued to the observatory's ceiling and hiding in shadows, Zin watched the battle unfold. His boss was doing a wonderful job of whittling the invaders' forces down and making them pay the price for coming here—a good thing, too. There were several people down there with whom he had to settle a score.

Very few times had he come close to dying in the game, and several of the culprits for his near demise were right under his nose. Manny from Cerberus was here. When Zin stole the kill for the Turtle Giant from their guild, the biomonk had nearly killed him. ColdHand was also problematic, as well as BlueFire, more because of their cunning strategic thinking than their battling skills. MountainTop he had tried to kill eight times but only succeeded in killing once, when he was lucky enough to catch him with all his skills on cooldown. Ogre had technically killed him, but a treasured consumable that prevented his death once had saved his life. Finally, there was his old master, Jaw-Long.

When he had tried to assassinate his former general, the old man had toyed with him and given him a good beating. He was terrifying in the real world, but here, where his age didn't impede his motions, he became a beast. How foolish of him to think he had become stronger than his master. He just needed time, though. Time and the opportunity before his very eyes.

Had Zin joined the battle and aided his current employer, he was sure they would all have died already; however, Loki would have survived. The best possible outcome for him would be for everyone to die. Everyone but him.

He clutched his hand on his legendary dagger, finding comfort in its lethality. Timing. That was what there was to it. He had to get the last hit on Loki. With that and what was in the guild's vault, he could finally ditch him and carry out his plan.

The biggest uncertainty was Jaw-Long. The old man could intercept him if he wasn't fast enough. Everyone else, he was sure he could evade, although he had a feeling he couldn't ignore.

He studied the sight of Roth crafting peacefully in the corner. He had seen all sorts of broken souls. He had broken his fair share of them. It wasn't sympathy he felt for the young man. That word wasn't in a killer's dictionary. He did feel some admiration toward Roth Taylor. Rarely had he seen people change in his life, much less someone as violent as him. From a raging bull, he had become a meek sheep. The change was so dramatic that his boss couldn't even comprehend it. All the while, Roth was right under Loki's nose, but he couldn't find him because the Slayer he was looking for had already died. Well, that and Zin's interference, too.

Logic told Zin that Roth's level was too low, and he couldn't interfere with his designs. His gut, however, told him otherwise. There was something about the looney craftsman that bothered Zin. There was an uncertainty about him, an unpredictability. Zin's instincts had saved him countless times. Should he ignore them this time? He took a deep breath. This opportunity was too good to ignore. He would go for it. Even if he didn't get the last hit, he could get to the guild's vault if the boss was dead and remove all its treasures.

For now, he just had to wait.

Chapter 44

At first, the bumps caused by the horse's ride were pleasant. They helped rock little Lin to sleep. He was a kitty cat with a lot of growing to do and plenty of milk in his belly to digest. Whatever help he could get in sleeping more was welcome.

No matter how he stretched and twisted, only soft, fluffy, warm wool surrounded him, making him feel comfortable and safe. Growing up in the machine's egg had been cold and lonely, but here, in the safety of this softness, he could hear his human's heart beating, one more instrument in the lullaby that kept him well-rested.

Life for a kitty cat was simple. Eat, sleep, eat, sleep, a clickety-clack similar to the horse's canter and the human's heart. But now, there was a third component to life. It was an expansive desire that came in the form of burning questions: What is beyond this softness? What is beyond this safety? At first, it was just a tiny question, something to be dreamed about, but now the thirst to know more was creeping into his conscious thoughts and, worst of all, was starting to affect his precious sleep.

The first time he felt this emotion building up, the only thing that had appeased it was leaving his soft nest. When the warmth of the wool became scorching heat and the human's heartbeat became noisy, coming out and seeing a little of the vast, wide world was the only thing that offered some relief. Soon, however, the world became cold, scary, and lonely, and he had to retreat into the safety of his human's soft clothes.

After a while of the bumpy ride, the human resumed his two-legged traveling motion, which made his heart beat faster but offered a smoother ride. The shift was enough to wake Lin from his slumber.

He sniffed the air around him and encountered all sorts of exciting new smells. Since he was born, he had only smelled the city and its sewers, but now the smells felt fresh. Soon, the scent changed, and the noise of many humans talking overwhelmed little Lin's senses.

He wanted to see what was going on out there, but something greater than his desire to explore stopped him from leaving the safety of his human's robes. There were other powerful creatures here. Unlike the distant memory of other scents like his, these were scents of different entities, dangerous uncertainties.

Lin took a nap, and when he awoke, it was to a thunderous noise followed by a deafening silence. He couldn't hear the skittering sound of that funny ball his human carried in his pocket anymore. Where had his little ant friends disappeared to? And was that a roar he'd heard?

The explosive sound filled him with hope, and he anticipated a reUnion with his uncles and aunties. The last time he had heard such a roar, Aunty Sawabi had fed him the most delicious milk he'd ever tasted. His human kept feeding him milk, and he knew that he meant well, but he really had much to learn from his aunty. Lin's belly had never felt as full as after having that delicious meal.

He also remembered earthy smells, hot breaths, and the cleansing tongues of others like him, cleaning and nurturing him, making him feel loved and cherished. Even though his human was nice and fluffy and fed him, he never licked him! What was wrong with him? Those uncles and aunties filled a void in his kitty cat's little soul, and he loved them for it.

He waited for his uncles and aunties to arrive; however, the scent changed abruptly, and Lin's elation turned into terror. His human was in danger, too. His heart was beating furiously, and all his muscles were tense. Lin instinctively tried to make himself as small as possible, avoiding making any sound. All he dared to do was to sniff the air around him discreetly, but past the smell of the human and the warmth of wool was only the stench of death and decay. Why had his human brought him to this place?

There was quiet. The big bad monster hadn't yet spotted them. All of a sudden, however, chaos unfolded. Sounds of explosions, clashes, screams, and the smell of burning air overwhelmed Lin. A little spark

of curiosity drove him to peek outside and see what was going on, but he couldn't move. He was afraid of being found and harmed.

Heart racing and muscles shivering, he curled into a little ball, hoping his human would take him to safety, and sure enough, his pet didn't fail him. Lin didn't know what the human had done, but the sounds of battle became more distant, and his human's heartbeat slowed, signaling that the danger had passed. After a few long minutes of quiet, little Lin cautiously climbed his owner's chest and poked his head out of his robes.

They were inside an ugly, abandoned building. It had a very tall ceiling and was spacious inside. He felt the urge to hiss at the ugly bug that had made him afraid. It smelled dangerous and looked nasty. He would leave that for another day, though. His human was pursuing one of his little hobbies, working with thread. He nodded approvingly. Little Lin liked soft things, and those fluffy balls looked fun. He would request one from his human later.

Curiosity satisfied, Lin retreated into his human's robes, but just as he did, he poked his head out again.

Sniff. Sniff.

Lin's little nose twitched. Hidden under the filthy stench was the smell of food. His stomach rumbled in response. He had been famished since his human had gone into that gathering of humans, but he had waited for a time when there weren't other dangerous smells around. This smell, however, awoke Lin's hunger.

It didn't look safe to leave his human and go check where the yummy food was. He would just signal his human that it was time to tend to him.

I am hungry. Milk. Now.

He waited for the human to respond but kept playing with wool, ignoring him. Why wasn't he giving him milk?!

I am hungry. Feed me now. NOW!

*

Roth was knitting his second sweater. He made the sweater's waistband using [Rib Stitch] and observed the final product.

Congratulations! You've successfully crafted [Wool Sweater].

+960 ecotailor XP.

Wool Sweater (Common)

Crafting Grade: B+.

Top

Item description: A comfortable sweater that will keep the chill away.

Item effects:

+85 hp;

+8 wisdom;

+3 dexterity;

+5% status resistance.

Surprisingly, he had come very close to getting an A on his second try. The transition from the sleeves to the main body of the sweater was slightly asymmetrical, and he had missed a few stitches. Cracking his neck, Roth tried again. There was nothing but the needles in his hands and the pull and push of yarn. There was no battle, messages, or notifications, just the sweater.

*

Lin tried again to ask for milk, but his owner wasn't paying attention. Lin's mood soured, and he contemplated the need for training this human further. How dare he put wool above his happiness? Lin was at a crossroads. On the one hand, he felt afraid of leaving his disobedient human, and on the other hand, he was hungry, and no one was feeding him.

He decided to wait. His stomach rumbled louder, louder, and louder until it became as loud as Uncle Zion's roar. His hunger eventually became strong enough to overcome his fear, and Lin decided to find out the source of the enticing scent. He quietly left his human's clothes out through the back door and retreated into the shadows. The observatory's walls were gray, similar to his fur, helping him blend in and feel safer.

Suddenly, the monster charged straight toward his human. Lin froze. He wanted to run, but his legs wouldn't move. Another human stepped in and blocked the attack, saving little Lin. With the danger

gone, he dashed away toward somewhere safer and, coincidentally, where the yummy food was.

This was the farthest Lin had ever been from his human, and his tiny heart was racing. His instinct told him to return to the safety of the robes, but here, the aroma was stronger, and his hunger only grew. Overtaken by curiosity and appetite, he found a big metal box.

Seeing it, excitement awoke in little Lin. He had never felt this before. There stood the big metal box that belonged to someone else. So did the food inside. He knew it was wrong, but why did the idea of taking something from where it was considered safe fascinate him so much? What would it be like to break into that box, eat all the food, and then get away without anyone knowing the wiser?

Once the thought formed, it became an overwhelming compulsion, a song he couldn't turn off. Compelled by the tantalizing scent, he tried to open the box. Drawing his claws out of the paw, he fumbled around the door. Nothing happened. Then, there was a blur and a gust, and the lock gave way.

Someone had helped him. Who? Before he could think more of it, the faint scent became a lush, irresistible aroma, and Lin entered the box. There was something weird about this box. The inside of it was much bigger than it should have been. There were piles of junk and mountains of golden metal, but Lin didn't care about any of that. He ran, excited to get to the prize.

Finally, there it was—sweet, perfumed food of all possible colors, glittering under the light and calling for little Lin. The little kitty cat excitedly climbed the first rack and found a tiny fish that smelled amazing. He sniffed it and licked it. The flavor explosion made his tail stand erect and his pupils dilate. He bit into it. The explosion of flavor gushed into his mouth and only made him hungrier.

This was so much better than his human's stinky milk. It reminded him of his auntie's delicious treat that had made him stronger and sharper. He kept eating the fish, and even as he chewed on it, he felt his claws become harder and his fur shinier. Filled with newfound strength and clarity, he moved on to the next meal in his course. He would keep eating until satisfied and maybe bring back some for the human. He would use it as a treat to reward him whenever he did something right. His instinct told him that positive reinforcement was a good way to train humans.

He wondered if his human had noticed he was gone and if he was worried about him.

*

ColdHand - *“What are you doing, Ticket Boy? Why are you crafting?”*

BlueFire - *“Roth, we’re trying to talk to you. Are you having a stroke? Why are you moving like that? You’re freaking everyone out. We’re calling an ambulance.”*

BlueFire - *“Never mind. The Ogres have a psychiatrist. Ogre tells me he’s willing to pay for a few appointments for you once this is done. Just so you know.”*

Lin is hungry. “I am hungry. Milk. Now.”

Lin is hungry. “I am hungry. Feed me now. NOW!”

You haven’t fed Lin.

-1 affection.

ArmlessShark - *“Hi, Roth! I got a message saying you left the guild. What’s going on? We haven’t heard from you in hours. Is everything OK? Please let me know how the quest is going, Drake.”*

Lin has triggered [Naughty Antics]. Beware! He might get himself into trouble.

Lin’s genes awaken as he sees a vault. Lin has self-taught [Breaking and Entering].

Lin has eaten [Celestial Sardine].

+8 dexterity;

+7 wisdom;

+20 hp;

[Level Up!]

+2 dexterity;

+3 subterfuge.

[Level Up!]

+3 subterfuge;

+1 strength;

+1 dexterity.

Congratulations! Lin has learned [Stealth].

[Level Up!]

+2 subterfuge;

+3 dexterity.

Lin has eaten [Supernova Ash].

+20 strength;

+500 hp.

[Level Up!]

+3 subterfuge;

+2 dexterity.

Congratulations! Lin has learned [Prowl].

[Level Up!]

+4 strength;

+1 dexterity.

Lin has eaten [Black Hippo Bone Dust].

+3 to all stats;

+10 darkness affinity.

[Level Up!]

+2 subterfuge;

+3 dexterity.

[Level Up!]

+3 subterfuge;

+2 dexterity.

Congratulations! Lin has learned [Double Jump].

[Level Up!]

+3 subterfuge;

+1 strength;

+1 dexterity.

Chapter 45

ColdHand studied the battlefield and grimaced. Things were coming to a turning point. In his estimation, if they lost two more players, they would lose the battle. They had just enough crowd-control skills right now to stop Loki at crucial moments, but they were soon going to be short-handed, and they would reach a point in the battle where their skills were on cooldown while Loki's weren't. Once that happened, Loki would make quick work of them.

They had been so close, too. Ogre was putting out serious damage now. If only they had some way to buy more time, one minute to give their cooldowns enough time to refresh and help them bring Loki's health a little lower. Then, he could teleport Cerberus and execute Loki's remaining health. Sadly, Loki was just too strong. Knockbacks, stuns, and freezes were largely ineffective against him. He had such a high level and such a high resilience stat that he almost instantly snapped out of whatever crowd control skill they threw at him.

Not even with Kraken's debuffs had they reduced his resistances enough to make their crowd control effects last longer. Loki sidestepped the icicles that ColdHand threw his way and feinted an attack toward MountainTop, making him waste a life-saving skill. Instead, he sent an attack in the opposite direction toward BlueFire. BlueFire's [Flame Body] and [Fire Shield] were on cooldown. There was no way that he could save himself. They couldn't afford to lose BlueFire, so ColdHand did the only thing he could.

"Cooler. I'm sorry." The polar bear threw itself at Loki's attack, blocking it and dying. He would have to pay a hefty price to resurrect his pet later, but he had kept BlueFire alive for now.

"Thanks for taking that hit for me, Cold," messaged BlueFire. *"I owe you one."*

With each player's death in the hunting party, the pressure on Loki lessened, and he moved more freely, causing them more trouble. His attacks were becoming harder to predict. He sent a series of attacks against Ticket Boy again, which Jaw-Long repelled with difficulty, and then turned to Manny. The biomonk used a life-saving skill, but Loki blinked to close the gap and slashed with his claws. Manny's other skills were on cooldown, as were MountainTop's and Ogre's. He couldn't do anything but take the hit and drop dead.

ColdHand bit his lip. This wasn't good. Losing Manny was a severe blow to their plans. They had hit the tipping point. They needed time to refresh their cooldowns. They were falling like flies.

*

Roth's hands worked with a life of their own. What before were clumsy transitions between stitches now looked effortless and seamless. The difference was notable not only in the seeming ease of the technique but also in the garments. After getting more comfortable switching between purl and knit stitches, he started paying more attention to other details in his workmanship, elevating it to another level.

One of the improvements was knowing what stitch to use in each clothing segment. Whenever he worked on sleeves, ankles, waistbands, or collars, he used the rib stitch, which provided a little bit of elasticity and spared him the need to run a band or a thread to tighten the fabric. Whenever he wanted to make the main body of the clothing, he resorted to the stockinette stitch to grant the fabric more strength. Thanks to these and other minor adjustments, instead of getting C's and B's, Roth steadily got As and even the occasional S's.

He worked through the recipes he had purchased before leaving the city, making sweaters, pants, socks, and capes, working through his stock of wool. After finishing yet another cape, as his hands moved towards the pile of skeins of yarn, he found nothing but air. He had used up everything.

As he looked left and right and found no skeins of yarn, the anchor that had kept his mind distracted from his surroundings collapsed. The illusion Roth had cast on himself was like a castle of sand hit by

an ocean wave. The desperate shouts and the bangs and rings of explosions returned in full.

What had just happened? He only remembered feeling the need to get away, and suddenly, he was crafting, and then he was here again. He checked the time. Had he been crafting over the past six hours? He didn't remember anything about the battle since he'd grabbed his needles. It looked like instead of his PTSD manifesting as him going on a rampage trying to prevent the battle, in this instance, it just motivated him to close himself off in his own world and craft non-stop.

He remembered where he was. He was in a battle between the top guilds and Loki. However, the scene had become more manageable for his distressed and traumatized mind. Fewer people were fighting. Where had everyone gone? He remembered he could transport 99 others, but why were only 20 people here?

The battle scars dug deep into the observatory's walls, ceilings, and floors answered his question. Loki himself didn't look unscathed from the confrontation either. His health bar had reached the dangerous red zone, and his previously pristine exoskeleton had scratches, tears, and scorch marks. As haggard as he looked, he seemed much better off than the ragged bunch attacking him.

The long hours of hard battle had taken its toll on the guilds. MountainTop and Ogre had baggy eyes and a saggy demeanor, and even to Roth's untrained battle reflexes, it was obvious that they weren't moving as agilely and swiftly as when they had arrived. The ones who looked better off were the espers who stuck in the back shooting skills whenever they could. Even Jaw-Long seemed to have started participating more actively in the battle. He was not only guarding Roth but attacked Loki at every chance he got.

He opened his messages and found hundreds of notifications. He remembered reading the ones related to crafting, but he didn't remember reading any of the others. Some were from his *temporary teammates*.

ColdHand - *"Ticket Boy, what are you doing?"*

Jaw-Long - *"Get back here so I can protect you, you imbecile!"*

ColdHand - *"What are you doing, Ticket Boy? Why are you crafting?"*

BlueFire - *"Why are you trying to get me killed? What did I do to you?"*

ColdHand - *"Stop running around the battlefield. Leave BlueFire alone."*

BlueFire - *“Roth, we’re trying to talk to you. Are you having a stroke? Why are you moving like that? You’re freaking everyone out. We’re calling an ambulance.”*

BlueFire - *“Never mind. The Ogres have a psychiatrist. Ogre tells me he’s willing to pay for a few appointments for you once this is done. Just so you know.”*

There were many other similar messages from other teammates. Roth flushed embarrassedly as he realized that to these guys, he looked bananas. After all, what sane person would start crafting while everyone was fighting for their lives? How were they going to take him seriously after this?

As he skimmed through the old notifications, a new one arrived, which left Roth speechless.

Lin has eaten [The Great Ash Buffalo’s Sirloin Steak].

+12 strength;

+10 dexterity.

[Level Up!]

+2 strength;

+1 perception;

+2 subterfuge.

“Where is Lin?” He mumbled to himself, jolting upright. He opened his jacket, looking for the little kitten. He was gone.

Lin has eaten [Moon Mushroom Fruit].

+6 perception;

+7 insight;

+10 ep.

Lin was somehow gaining absurd stats and values. What were all these treasured consumables? Where had he found them? The notifications were live. He was eating all sorts of rare things and gaining levels right now. Where had he gone? What was happening?

Roth filtered his notifications so only pet-related messages appeared, and he tried to make sense of what had happened. Lin had repeatedly asked him for food hours ago. The poor thing. He must have been so hungry. While he was in a crafting trance, his little kitten

had been desperate for milk—no wonder he had run off and looked for food elsewhere.

He kept scrolling until he saw Lin self-taught the [Breaking and Entering] skill. What did it mean he self-taught it? Was it because he was Oli's clone? Maybe cat burgling was something encoded deeply in his genes.

After that, it was just a never-ending list of notifications about Lin eating and leveling up. He hurriedly looked up Lin's stats, and his jaw dropped.

Lin (Pet)

Pet rating: S+

Lvl. 41

Alignment: Darkness (79/100)

Affection: 64/100

Subterfuge: 312

Strength: 204

Dexterity: 302

Insight: 51

Perception: 101

Intelligence: 121

Wisdom: 191

Mischief: 241

Skills: [Nine Lives]; [Owner]; [Breaking and Entering]; [Stealth]; [Steal]; [Pickpocket]; [Felinian Dash]; [Dodge]; [Scratch]; [Slash]; [Counterfeit]; [Criminal Mastermind]; [Wool Steps]; [Double Jump]; [Triple Jump]; [Predatory Eyes]; [Prowl]; [Bite]; [Double Bite]; [Naughty Antics]; [Independent Thinker].

How was Lin level 40? How on earth had he surpassed his level? What were all these stats and skills? There was even a stat that he had never heard about: mischief. It was freakishly high, too.

"Lin!" he shouted. As soon as he did, several eyes turned toward him. The most intense gaze came from Loki, who looked at him with a crazed fury that Roth had never seen in the psychopath's eyes. The guild members looked exasperated for the most part. Ogre was the exception, with an amused smile on his face. Roth didn't care about their judging looks. All he cared about was his little kitten. "Lin!" he called again.

He searched around desperately and finally saw his little kitten. He seemed to have grown since he last saw him. Instead of a clumsy,

mousy thing, he did more justice to his species now. His limbs were slightly longer, and his eyes were no longer blue, but a greenish yellow. He also had learned to walk with elegance and grace.

Seeing Roth calling for him, the little kitten's tail sprang up, signaling his joy. That only lasted for a moment before the tail went back down, and he sat, looking sideways, ignoring Roth.

"Come here, Lin. I'm very sorry. I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll get you some food."

The cat seemed uninterested in the proposition. Probably, his belly was too full from all the eating. By now, the fighting had simmered down as people paid some attention to the exchange between Roth and the little cat while performing half-hearted attacks.

"Come here, little kitty," Roth screamed, not daring to get in the middle of the battlefield. "I promise I'll play with you to your heart's content. I'll get you a toy. Two toys. As many as you want."

Hearing the words 'play' and 'toy,' the cat seemed slightly more interested. He weighed his options for a moment and finally headed toward Roth.

*

Loki dodged yet another skill and threw another attack. He was tired. If only his spinal cord hadn't been damaged, moving around would have been so much easier. Movements that he could have done with his legs had to be coordinated through the nerves in his arms, making it all the more difficult to move and attack simultaneously. But still, despite his limitations, he had already eliminated more than 70 players.

Only the most troublesome remained, but the fewer of them there were, the easier it was to finish them. He could feel the scales slowly tipping. There were fewer crowd control skills landing on him, allowing him to move more freely and attack without hindrance. If things kept going this way, it wouldn't be too long before he could crush them all with one last bout of attacks. Good thing, too. He didn't have it in him to fight much longer. Ogre's hits were falling like hammers, and he was already dealing monstrous chunks of damage.

He would have been long gone if not for the level difference and his high resilience. The thing that tired him the most was being angry, being angry at that brute lunatic who went out of his way to make his

life miserable and hellish. He had come along in this hunt solely to annoy him and mock him, and he couldn't take it anymore. He regretted not having killed the Slayer when he had the chance. Why did he have to play with him? Why had he made such an unwise decision?

"Lin!"

"Uh?" He stopped and looked at the Slayer. Had he finally stopped knitting to make fun of him? Had he finally decided to man up and fight him like the old Slayer would have done?

"Lin!"

Lin? Who was Lin? Loki looked everywhere but found nothing. Only after following the glances of everyone around him did he finally spot the cat. There was something off about it. If Loki wasn't fully focused on it, he couldn't see it. Was this the Slayer's pet? He had never seen a cat in the game. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen cats, tigers, lions, or felines of any type. Why didn't he know about them?

The Slayer started talking to the pet, ignoring Loki and the battle. Was he mocking him again? Loki clenched his jaw. He would kill the cat, he would kill the Slayer, he would kill them all. How dare he still make fun of him after he fought so valiantly and killed so many of the top players in the game? The Slayer was out of his depth, and it was up to Loki to remind him of that. He threw a skill at the cat, who turned into a blur and evaded it. Such impressive speed! Loki shot another skill; this time, the cat seemed afraid of it. Good, that dodge was just a one-time life-saving skill. Just as the skill was about to land, the Slayer screamed, and the whole scene around them turned gray.

Peace Decree!

Chapter 46

The gears turned in ColdHand's mind as he considered the options available. He had already sacrificed four rogues allocated to maintaining the barrier to increase the DPS. Maybe he just had to run the risk of calling in the last rogue from the barrier team, having Cerberus join the battle, and praying for a miracle.

“Lin!”

ColdHand looked toward Ticket Boy, terrified of whatever shenanigans he was up to now. He was a loose cannon who defied logic and turned the hunt upside down whenever he moved. So far, it had been for their benefit, but who knew what he would do next? The last thing he needed was Ticket Boy to turn the battlefield chaotic again.

“Lin!”

Who was Lin? He didn't recall having a Lin in his hunting party. Finally, ColdHand spotted who Ticket Boy was talking to: It was a cat. The creature was so small, and its fur blended so well with the gray background of the observatory that he would have missed it if Roth hadn't called for it.

A cat? Wasn't that the pet born during the auction that Mel told him about? Mel had been so impressed with the invasion of different felines bursting through the auction house. ColdHand had regretted not going to the auction himself after hearing about how interesting the whole thing was.

Seeing Ticket Boy's pet, he couldn't help but think about Cooler. He was going to pout for days before he forgave him for the death. He had spent a whole week completing a quest in the ice mountains to obtain the polar bear cub. Since Cooler died, his skill's damage and

energy regeneration had plummeted. More than most, ColdHand could appreciate how much of a difference having a powerful pet made.

Just how powerful was that pet? How would he compare to his late polar cub? Ticket Boy kept calling out for his cat, who seemed to ignore him, just as Ticket Boy completely ignored the battle around him.

“Come here, little kitty. I promise I’ll play with you to your heart’s content. I’ll get you a toy. Two toys. As many as you want.”

Roth goaded the little kitten to return to him. Just where had he gone off to? And hadn’t Mel told him he was born only three or four days ago? How had it grown so much in such a short time? ColdHand had Cooler for three months, and it only grew a little, but Ticket Boy’s kitten was already well-developed.

ColdHand pushed his considerations about the cat aside and focused on Loki. Knowing by now how the leader of the Pegasus guild lost his cool where Ticket Boy was concerned, he wasn’t surprised when he went berserk and tried attacking them left and right. The cat seemed to be hit by Loki’s attack, but it was just an afterimage. The feline dodged Loki’s attack brilliantly, only enraging him further. He set out to attack again.

That’s when Ticket Boy did something completely unexpected. He joined the battlefield. Sprinting toward his pet, he shouted, activating a skill that shifted the air in the observatory and turned everything black and white.

Peace Decree!

Null!

Null!

Null!

Loki’s attacks hit like dry thuds, not dealing one ounce of damage. ColdHand’s jaw dropped. What kind of grade did this man’s skill have to be effective on someone 50 levels higher than him? At the very least, it had to be epic, perhaps even of a legendary grade. The atmosphere of the observatory remained black and white.

It wasn’t only Loki’s attacks that were being denied. Everyone else’s were too.

Null!

Null!

Null!

Roth's skill canceled Ogre's attacks and everyone else's. They were all twenty levels above him, and he could stop them all from dealing damage. What kind of skill was this? This was unheard of.

One second. Three seconds. Five seconds. Eight seconds. The seconds kept ticking, and the skill's effect persisted. ColdHand looked terrified at Loki's hp, dreading that this would give Loki the chance to recover.

-21

-19

-16

-12

-14

Seeing that the stack of BlueFire's burn effects and Kraken's poisons were still ticking and preventing Loki's health bar from recovering, ColdHand sighed in relief.

Loki charged toward the Ticket Boy, but all the damage was still being canceled. This skill was just what they needed to change the outcome of this battle. The time it was buying could probably help them refresh their cooldowns and turn the tide.

"Jaw-Long, protect Roth. We need him alive. This skill is key to this battle."

Jaw-Long appeared between Roth and Loki and brought his hands together, causing a thunderous sound.

Space Clap!

A series of shockwaves pushed Loki back, step by step, creating a small distance between him and Ticket Boy.

Ice Wall!

ColdHand chipped in with a skill to help Jaw-Long get Roth to safety while counting how many seconds the crowd control effect lasted. Fifteen seconds, twenty seconds. What an incredible skill. It had the downside of nullifying the damage of both enemies and allies,

but even so, it could make a huge difference when activated at the right time.

After being pushed back several times, Loki gave up on killing Roth and tried to use the opportunity to drink a potion and recover his health. Thanks to Jaw-Long, however, ColdHand already knew that crowd control skills would still work despite [Peace Decree] being activated.

“Quick! Try to stop him! Use any crowd control skills you can to interrupt him!”

Stunning Blow!

MountainTop’s shield gained a brilliant glow, and the lizardman rammed into Loki.

-Null

The skill dealt no damage, and the stun only lasted for half a second, but he still managed to prevent Loki from drinking a potion. [Peace Decree] stuck for a whole minute before it stopped working. ColdHand didn’t recall receiving so many surprises from the same person in one day. Maybe they should have tried harder to bring Roth into their guild. Despite his crazy quirks, he didn’t seem like a board piece they could afford to ignore.

“BlueFire, Kraken, make sure that the damage per second skills are kept activated. They’re the only thing that keeps Loki from renewing his hp while Ticket Boy skill sticks. Jaw-Long, talk to Ticket Boy, find out the cooldown on his skill, and see if you can convince him to activate it when we want,” he commanded with renewed confidence. This was the piece that he needed. He might just make this hunt work.

*

Roth hugged Lin and put himself between Loki and his cat. He had used [Peace Decree] without hoping it would nullify Loki’s attacks; after all, he must be dozens of levels above him. He was ready to feel unspeakable pain, but the attacks landed on him without causing any damage. He opened only one eye uncertainly and saw how everything around him had turned black and white. [Peace Decree] had worked.

He read the notifications to figure out what had happened.

You face a creature of darkness. [Darksbane] is in effect.

You face a creature of darkness. [Inner Light] shines brighter.

Roth sighed in relief. Loki had an affinity with darkness, which seemed to give him an advantage when fighting him. He owed the success of [Peace Decree] to the difference between their affinities and the [Darksbane] title.

Darksbane (Rare)

Title description: You're not afraid of the dark. The creatures that hide in the shadows stand no chance against your brilliant light.

Title effects:

Darkness becomes weaker around you.

It's easier to gain reputation with creatures of the light.

Conditions to unlock [Darksbane]:

Defeat a dark creature 20 levels higher than you {complete};

Or defeat 1000 dark creatures.

He had unlocked this title by accident when he blew up the grenade in the sewers, and it was the first time he felt its power to weaken darkness.

Roth petted his cat, a tear forming in the corner of his eye. He hadn't realized how attached he'd grown to this digital creature. Lin's growth was all the more obvious now that he was in his lap. Before, the kitten fit in the palm of his hand, but he had practically doubled in size. His fur had become much shinier and softer. He was stronger, too. Lin purred while biting his hand playfully.

"Ouch!" Maybe not playfully after all. He bit hard enough to convey his displeasure at Roth but not so hard that it pierced his skin. "I get it. I should have taken better care of you. I'm sorry, Lin. I promise you it won't happen again."

Lin is in a forgiving mood.

+2 affection with Lin.

In the meantime, Loki had closed the gap and was furious. “Why are you doing this to me? Why don’t you leave me alone?” shouted Loki, clawing and throwing attacks at Roth while waving his claws.

“What’s wrong with you, Loki?! I’m not doing anything. You’re the one who keeps targeting me. I’ve told you I’m sorry about your injury. Please just let me go in peace.”

“Peace?!”

Space Clap!

Loki yelped as Jaw-Long arrived and pushed him back.

“Step back, Roth. Get away from here.”

Roth gladly ran away, chased by Loki. An ice wall formed between them, slowing Loki down. That didn’t prevent him from threatening Roth from across the barrier. “After you brought all these people to hunt me down, you want me to let you go? Peace?! No. You don’t deserve peace!”

Orbital Push!

Jaw-Long sent another skill to create distance between Loki and Roth. Seeing how much Loki hated him was unsettling. He had somehow managed to make their irreconcilable differences worse by coming here.

“Don’t worry. He’s just talk,” spoke Jaw-Long reassuringly. MountainTop and Ogre had arrived and were now successfully pinning down Loki.

“Just talk?” asked Roth in disbelief. He felt his blood boil. How was trapping him in a booby-trapped capsule and going after his family *just talk*? Did the old man have any clue about how ridiculous his statement was?

“That skill you just used. What’s its cooldown?”

“Five minutes,” answered Roth sourly. Even though he had said something incredibly insensitive, he had already saved Roth’s life several times today, so he answered.

Hearing the number, Jaw-Long’s eyes twinkled with excitement. “Is that so? Can you use it again if we ask you?”

“No. I only came here to bring you to the Hive King. I don’t want to be involved in the fighting.”

“You just used it!”

“I used it to save my cat. That was different.”

“So, save us, then.” Roth bit his lip. He would have liked it better if no one died, but this was not his fight. His sympathy for these guilds was gone after the auction for his life. Having to fight for their attention and convincing them to save him and his family had hardened his heart. Jaw-Long’s cold remark only worsened it. “No. This isn’t my fight.”

“This isn’t your fight? Seriously?” the old man looked offended by Roth’s defense. “You brought us here! You started this fight!”

“I didn’t start this fight—Loki did. I only brought you here so you can end it and spare everyone the pain of this event!”

“What’s the difference between bringing us here to kill Loki and you doing it yourself?”

“There is a difference.”

“No, there isn’t. Using a sword to kill him or using us is the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t. How I feel about it differs. What you do is just as important as why you do it. I used [Peace Decree] to save Lin. You want me to use it to kill Loki. I brought you here to prevent thousands of NPCs from being infected by hivies. You came here to make your guilds stronger. You and I are not the same!”

Jaw-Long locked eyes with Roth and then looked away, sighing. “Fine. Don’t help us, then. Just stay close so that I can keep you alive.”

Had he just butted heads with the strongest player in the game and won? Roth eyed the old man suspiciously, but he seemed to have accepted Roth’s arguments and now just kept his eyes focused on the battle.

After the effects of [Peace Decree] ended, everyone seemed to have received a boost of energy. Resting for a few seconds had relieved some of the pressure, and the players’ movements were noticeably sharper. Loki’s hp was getting progressively lower, and guild players were using their skills more boldly.

Roth watched uncomfortably as Loki activated a skill that made his attacks more powerful and shot beams and lightning everywhere for several seconds. He just wanted this battle to end so he could return to the city and leave this whole thing behind him.

“What’s your cat’s name again?” Jaw-Long asked from his side with a kind tone.

“This little guy? His name is Lin,” Roth answered proudly.

“He’s so cute...” Jaw-Long reached out his hand toward the cat. Before Roth could react, Jaw-Long’s hand flashed in a blur and grabbed Lin by the scruff of the neck.

“What are you doing?” asked Roth, terrified.

“Loki! Here is Roth’s pet!”

Jaw-Long threw the cat into the middle of the battlefield.

Chapter 47

Roth couldn't believe the old man would make such a dirty move. Seeing his baby being tossed into the battlefield like that, Roth was incensed. More than that, though, he was terrified Loki might get to little Lin. As he saw his kitten screaming mid-air with his paws outstretched and his fur prickled up, he couldn't help but fall for Jaw-Long's obvious trap. No matter how much he wanted to remain neutral in this battle, he had to save his kitten.

Peace Decree!

Once again, the atmosphere of the observatory shifted, becoming black and white. Loki's skills failed to cause Lin or the players around him any harm.

Roth looked back to Jaw-Long, who grinned at him triumphantly. Roth then glanced across the battlefield toward ColdHand, who regarded him coolly. It looked like the moment he refused to play along with the guilds, they devised a strategy to pull him back in.

That's why the guilds had been so carefree with their cooldowns earlier. They knew they would have one full minute to rest. Roth clicked his tongue at the guilds' vicious move, but what mattered was that Lin was safe.

Roth had to give points to Jaw-Long for having such an accurate aim. Lin had landed on Loki's head and was clawing at his face. Loki grabbed the little kitten away from him and threw him onto the ground, shooting skill after skill at him. Roth was already running and saving his pet.

"What's wrong with you, Loki? Can't you see it's just a baby?"

“Just a...? No. You are doing this on purpose. What a twisted mind you have to come up with such a scene to mock me. This is all revenge for what I’ve done to you, right?”

“Just get off my case, Loki. I told you it was an accident. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to put you in a wheelchair, and I didn’t want to get in your way here in the game. I’m just trying to live my life, man. Just leave me and my cat alone.”

Loki, again, went on the barrage and tried to attack Roth left and right. Roth waited for Jaw-Long to come and save him, but the old man remained motionless this time, watching from far away. While Loki punched, bit, and shot him with skills, Roth was sent flying from one place to the other. He wasn’t suffering any damage but wasn’t having a good time either. He felt like a football being kicked around.

As [Peace Decree]’s duration came to an end, Espers around the field channeled powerful attacks. Were they using him as a distraction? As Loki kept slashing, shrieking, and screaming, attacking Roth with every skill he had, Roth realized Loki had lost it, and he didn’t even see the attacks coming.

He knew what this was. He had felt it many times. Back in his gaming days, he didn’t see anything or anyone when he went into berserker mode. He could only see what was in front of him. Loki was having a rage fit. It looks like coming here really angered him.

Jaw-Long finally jumped in.

Wormhole!

He teleported to Roth and then back to the observatory’s rim. Just as Loki’s fit ended, a series of skills fell on him, bringing his hp dangerously low. Loki was hit with fire, lightning, ice, water, and rocks. It was Ogre’s turn after Loki received the rain of skills from the espers.

39 Hit Slash!

Ogre’s sword blurred as he performed a complex choreography that made his sword hack and slash Loki at every angle quickly, bringing dangerous numbers over Loki.

-312

-714

-217

-183

-12

-48

-12

-181

-711

Ogre had thrown all caution into the wind and went all in.

Spectral Spear!

-4120

Loki's attack finally interrupted the onslaught, and Ogre fell. But as the berserker died, a newcomer arrived through the teleportation gate. Cerberus had his bow drawn, and as soon as he arrived on the battlefield, he let out a brilliant arrow.

Accumulated Potential Arrow!

This was the most powerful attack Roth had ever seen a player do. He didn't know how long Cerberus had been channeling this attack, but one thing was sure: Even without much battle experience in this game, he could tell it would be enough to end the battle.

Just as the arrow was about to hit Loki, the wind rustled, and a cloud abruptly formed in the shape of a man. The slender player had everything but his eyes covered, white leather armor, and two daggers drawn. Roth recognized him. It was the same man who had warned him that Loki would be coming for him. He got in front of the arrow.

Parry!

The arrow clashed against the newcomer's dagger and was deflected, crashing into the observatory wall and opening a massive hole in it. Everything was still for a moment. Jaw-Long had a slack jaw, and ColdHand was in a panic.

"Zin. You finally came. Thank..."

Zin? This was Zin? The number one player in the ranks? Roth hadn't known the identity of his savior, but he could never have imagined that it would be the famous Zin. Now that he had joined

the battle, things would get impossible for the guilds. They were all going to die. Before Roth could come to terms with his upcoming death, Zin plunged his other dagger into Loki's heart.

Sacrificial Execution!

-4132

The dagger dug into Loki's body, finishing off his hp. Zin's body lit up a few times, signaling he had gained several levels,

"Zin, you..." Loki spat, drolling.

Zin turned to Roth and gave him a thumbs up. "Thank you, boss. Your plan worked," he told Roth, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"You! You two are together?!" Loki's body finally disappeared, leaving a pile of loot behind.

"Boss? What are you talking about?" Roth had a sinking feeling in his stomach. Why was Zin making it sound as if they were friends? They had only talked once!

Zin just ignored Roth and pocketed what had been one of Loki's pieces of equipment.

"Stop him!" urged ColdHand.

MountainTop, who was closest, crossed the small gap between them and hit him with his shield just as Zin pocketed a second piece of the loot.

Shield Bash!

Zin just activated a life-saving skill and became untargetable, making MountainTop's skill phase through him. Jaw-Long had already arrived, though, and he made sure his attack connected.

Reality Punch!

Punching Zin in the gut, the air around them seemed to shatter like glass. Zin's previous ethereal form was sent flying away from the pile of loot.

"Jaw-Long," Zin spat through clenched teeth while regarding the old man hatefully. Seeing Cerberus' arrows flying at him, he activated [Camouflage] and disappeared. As his form faded, all eyes turned to Roth.

"Are you in cahoots with Zin?" demanded one of the espers.

"Did you betray us?" asked MountainTop.

“Who? Me?” Roth asked in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? Of course not!”

Several players complained angrily at Roth. ColdHand calmly stepped in. “Calm down everyone. Collect the rest of the loot so we can leave. We’ll settle this matter later.”

The players dispersed, moving toward the pile of loot. Roth nodded gratefully toward ColdHand, but he just walked away and, calling Jaw-Long and BlueFire, began conferencing with them on the side. Roth had the sinking feeling he knew what they were discussing.

The pile of loot quickly disappeared, leaving only one black ball on the ground. Roth watched curiously as a player tried to pick it up, but his hands phased through the object.

Finally, MountainTop ran over to ColdHand and talked to him in hushed tones.

“Ticket Boy,” ColdHand called out. “That item can only be picked up by whoever has a relevant quest. That’s got to be you, right? Go ahead. You can pick it up.”

As he said that, angry looks were thrown at ColdHand, but he was already conversing with BlueFire and Jaw-Long again, ignoring the players’ discontent. Roth walked hesitatingly toward the black sphere.

Hive King’s Egg (Quest Item)

Within this sphere, there’s the embryo of the monarch of the Parasitoid race.

Effects: Unknown.

[Surgically Remove the Darkness] has been updated.

Surgically remove the Darkness (Epic)

You have successfully led a team of players to hunt the Hive King. To finish the quest, bring the Hive King’s egg to one of the members of the Table.

He had wondered whether the quest would still count if he didn’t land any attacks on the Hive King, but it looked like all that was required was for him to be in the vicinity when it died. Thankfully, too, the quest didn’t permit other players to grab the key to complete the quest.

He took in the scene around him. He had never imagined that Loki was the Hive King. It looked like their lives were entwined, like two threads in a cord.

The battle had completely disfigured the abandoned building. Some parts were still burning, others were encased in ice. The conflicting emotions wrestling in his heart didn't feel much different. Some were burning anger at Jaw-Long for almost killing his kitten and Zin for implicating him in Loki's death. Other parts were encased in cold numbness at the sight of Loki's demise or the guild's bittersweet battle.

Had bringing these players here really been the right thing to do? His thoughts were interrupted by ColdHand.

"Let's start teleporting back. Ticket Boy, go to the portal and see if it works."

Roth approached the crack in reality that [Lion Breath] had formed.

If you enter the portal, it will close for good. Do you wish to use it?

"It says that I have to be the last one to use it, or it won't work," explained Roth.

ColdHand exchanged a knowing look with BlueFire and Jaw-Long, who nodded. Was Roth missing something here?

"Very well. Everyone, go—first, the guild leaders, then the warriors, then the medics, then the espers. DryGrass, you will stay behind. Dissolve the barrier and try to make it out on your own."

"Why not leave Ticket Boy behind? Didn't he betray us?" the rogue asked unhappily.

"Are you questioning my orders?" ColdHand asked. Kraken remained quiet to the side, but something about the air around him had turned acid, and Roth felt his eyes burn.

"No, sir."

"Good. Let's go."

*

"ZIN!" screamed Loki as he appeared in the capital graveyard. He couldn't believe his most powerful player and best-paid employee betrayed him like this. It all made sense now. How hadn't he seen it

before? The blindspots in his intelligence. The leaks of information. Why else would someone like Zin be so competent in some errands but fail to find a few specific people if it weren't because he didn't want to find them? The assassin had played him.

Zin has attacked you.

-4132

You have died.

You are Level 0.

You lose all your stats. No physiotherapy can save you.

You will be brought back to your last saving point.

The penalty was as harsh as Loki had expected. He hadn't foreseen how he would be killed before it was time.

Fortunately, he had taken several precautions in case he was ever betrayed. For example, he told the guild's management that the safe's combination was one when, in reality, it was another. If anyone tried to use one of the wrong combinations to open the safe, he would be notified immediately. Sure enough, he got the notification he expected.

Zin has tried to use the guild's vault. Access denied.

He sure had been fast. It was a good thing Loki had been prepared. He allowed himself a tiny bit of satisfaction for this little victory.

Loki implemented the protocol he had prepared in case one of the guild elders ever turned their back on him. First, he blacklisted Zin from the Pegasus organization and sent an alert to his security. He then opened the game's menu.

Are you sure you wish to delete your avatar? After you've done so, there is no going back. [Y/N].

Loki accepted. He had to hurry.

Speed was paramount. Just how much of the guild was compromised? How much had Zin stolen? Zin knew almost every secret of the guild. Loki kept the most valuable things to himself, but even so, his betrayal was disastrous. He couldn't waste a second. He had to take stock of what was left and return to his guild's vault as soon as possible.

He remembered the last thing he saw before being killed. Zin had given Roth the thumbs-up. Was he really the Slayer's ally? It was impossible. The money required to hire someone of Zin's caliber was beyond Roth's comprehension. Was he trying to play him? The most hateful thing was that it was working. Even though Zin had dealt the final blow, he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming hatred toward the Slayer. His back hurt like never before. He felt like in the day that the Slayer had almost killed him.

He hurried to create a new avatar and sent messages to Anak and Xerxes.

"Zin has betrayed us. Xerxes, come get me. Anak, safeguard the perimeter. See if the guilds are still in the observatory. We are on the highest alert."

First, he would clean up Zin's mess. Then, he would go after Zin. Finally, he would go after the Slayer.

Chapter 48

One by one, the participants in the hunt went through the portal and returned to Green Country. In the end, only DryGrass, ColdHand, and Roth were left. Roth wasn't sure if the cryokinetic esper had stayed behind due to courtesy as the expedition's leader or if he was afraid that one of his teammates would have torn Roth to shreds if he left them alone.

While they waited for the ten-second interval to elapse so that the next player could teleport back, Roth decided to plead his case with ColdHand.

"I'm not in cahoots with Zin." Roth grimaced at how childish his statement sounded.

"We know. We'll explain it to the others later."

"You know?" Roth had worked himself up for nothing. Did they believe his innocence? "How?"

"The Ogres have your family and your real body in their compound," he explained. "If you and Zin were allies, he would never let that happen."

Roth wasn't sure if he understood. "Is that it? Just that, and you believe me?"

"There's more," ColdHand assured. "But you don't have to worry, Roth. You've done your part. It was our fault for not considering Zin would pull such a move." ColdHand nodded toward DryGrass. "Best of luck, friend."

The thin esper in baggy clothes entered the portal and disappeared. Only after he did did Roth realize something. He hadn't called him Ticket Boy. This was the first time ColdHand had called him by his name. He wondered why that was.

After ColdHand left, DryGrass went to take his place near the edge of the barrier, preparing to make a run for it. The rogue from the Krakens didn't seem confident. Loki had to have summoned all his troops and was ready to storm this place the moment the barrier came down.

He could tell that the rogue resented him for being the one staying behind. Roth stepped toward the portal, and just as he was about to enter it, he hesitated.

Should he go back or try his luck in the Dark Abyss? ColdHand seemed relaxed at the whole ordeal, but on the other hand, this hadn't been a happy day for the guilds. Not only had they been unable to land the last hit, but Zin had successfully stolen several pieces of loot. What if there were only accusations and hardship on the other side of that portal?

As he considered his options, Roth realized he had no choice. The Ogres had his family. There was no way he could run from them. Failing to go through this portal might even be perceived as evidence of his culpability. He couldn't have that.

He spared one last look at DryGrass. They were deep into Pegasus' turf. If that rogue, specializing in stealth missions, didn't feel confident in leaving this place alive, there was no way that Roth could get out of here on his own.

"Are you ready, Lin?"

The kitten didn't respond, but his eyes were fixed on the portal. Taking a deep sigh, Roth stepped forward and returned to Green Country.

*

During the time they were away, night had fallen on Green Country. The Ogres had set a few torches at the edges of the clearing, illuminating the tired faces of all those who had taken part in the hunt. Looking around, Roth found that all players who died during the hunt had already respawned in the nearby fishing village's graveyard and made the short trip to the command post of the Ogres.

Roth approached the circle of players gathered around ColdHand, who was managing the aftermath of the hunt. As he neared, all eyes turned toward him, and there was an eerie silence. His fears were

proven true. It looked like he was going down because of Zin's arrival at the last minute.

"You can go. You're dismissed," spoke Ogre.

Roth frowned. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. You've fulfilled your end of the deal. Goodbye."

Ogre turned his back to Roth and rejoined the conversation with the guilds. They discussed the loot from the Hive King and negotiated which guild got it. Why did he feel like he had been fired? Roth stared at the group and felt disgusted. Was that it? They had used him, so he was a piece of trash to be discarded. He expected outrage and suspicion for his betrayal but had never expected to meet this indifference.

He walked away from the group, shaken. Whenever he dealt with the top guilds, he came out of their exchange depressed. What was up with this reaction? And why did indifference feel even more bitter than accusations?

"Wait up, Roth!"

Turning around, Roth found a pretty girl with blonde hair and green eyes running to him. A hawk flew by her side. "Mel?"

"Hey, Roth! Can I walk you out?"

What was she playing at here? Since when had she become this polite? Roth remembered how heartless the girl had been at the auction and his outburst then. He also remembered all the messages in which the girl regretted how she had treated him. Truthfully, he had criticized her too strongly that day and owed her the benefit of the doubt.

"Sure."

They walked in silence toward the clearing where he had buried the acorn. Roth dug it up and noticed Mel remained quiet. She was usually curious about everything he did, asking him questions left and right.

"You're not going to ask me what this acorn is?" he probed.

"Nope."

"Why?"

"I'm proving a point."

"That point being," prompted Roth.

"That I can be civil," she said, winking an eye at him.

Roth laughed. It looks like Mel was trying to show she wasn't as heartless and nosy as he believed. "Look at that. You really can."

Turning his attention back to the Leafies, Roth excitedly skimmed through the notifications about his colony. It looked like [Forage] considerably sped up the colony's growth.

Leafie nanites find [Grass Seed].

+10 xp

The expedition to retrieve [Grass Seed] is successful.

+100 xp

Leafie nanites find a [Grass Seed].

+10 xp

The expedition to retrieve [Grass Seed] is successful.

+100 xp

[Level up!]

+3 intelligence;

+2 strength.

Opposed to just being fed, treeants seemed to grow stronger when they were given a chance to forage their surroundings and handle their own food. Better than that, it was passive growth, so Roth didn't have to worry much about it. Now that he saw how beneficial this was, he regretted showing the acorn to Mel. Perhaps this was a good spot to plant it.

He remembered how cold the guilds were to him, and his heart hardened. He should pack his things and go. He'd find another quiet place to leave the Leafies. As he was about to pick up the acorn, he noticed the workers were on a foraging expedition.

Leafie nanites set out to retrieve a [Blue Berry].

Time until their return: 4m 31s.

He would wait until this was finished and then go on his way.

"I just need to wait for a few minutes. You can go if you want," Roth told Mel.

"It's OK. I'll wait with you."

Roth had several burning questions, and Mel seemed to be in a helpful mood. It would be foolish not to seize this opportunity to understand what had happened earlier. “Mel, why did the guilds let me go?”

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. I thought they would roast me, accusing me of being friends with Zin and wasting everyone’s time and whatnot.”

“Some people believed Zin, but most didn’t. Certainly not the top brass.”

“Did you believe Zin?”

“No. I didn’t,” she said with a second’s hesitation.

“Why not?”

She looked over her shoulder and spoke in a hushed tone. “Just between us?”

Roth nodded.

“This isn’t my first interaction with Zin, you know? I’ve fought him and his troop of assassins multiple times. Not only that, but he used to sell us information about Pegasus.”

“He was your informant?!”

“Not just ours. Talking to the other guilds, we just found out that he had dealings with several of them,” she said, looking back toward the clearing.

That was in line with the little Roth knew about this Zin character. Had he been 100% loyal to Loki, he would never have warned Roth about his execution. Zin himself had admitted this to Roth when they spoke. “What kind of information?” Roth asked curiously.

“Whereabouts of wild bosses. Location of Pegasus’ squads during guild wars. That kind of thing.”

“I still don’t get how that proves me innocent.”

“It does because we know how Zin operates. Zin is a control freak, you see. He plays solo and doesn’t trust anyone. Why would he trust you? Especially when you and your whole family are with the Ogres?”

“That’s what ColdHand said.”

“And you’re kind of a nobody. How on earth could you be *Zin’s boss*? No offense.”

Roth was too tired to get upset at her jab. “So I’m off the hook because I’m broke?”

“Among other things, yeah. We ain’t stupid. We all saw how Loki becomes irrational where you’re concerned. You were just a tool to Zin. If he were loyal to Loki, he wouldn’t have been selling information. He has been planning this, and Loki won’t take his betrayallying down. Zin’s move was very straightforward. He doesn’t want Loki solely focused on him, so he painted a target on your back.”

“Hooray for me!” Roth let the implications of all this information sink in. “I still don’t get one thing. If I were the guilds and had a kill stolen from under my nose, I would be looking for someone to blame. I’m having trouble seeing how you all can be so forgiving....” as soon as he said it, Roth understood. “You are also happy to have Loki chasing after me. That means he won’t have so much time to cause you trouble! Doesn’t it?!”

Mel nodded. “You’re right. For what it’s worth, sorry, Roth.”

Roth’s mood soured even further. Everyone was happy with Loki going after him because the more time Loki spent on him, the less time he would have to get back at them.

Mel sat next to Roth. “The top brass isn’t as upset as you think about losing the kill. They are actually kind of happy about it. The two scariest things about Pegasus were Loki and Zin. Now that they are at each other’s throats, Pegasus will come down a notch. The only thing we didn’t want was for there to be a power shift. Before this, the guilds feared that Pegasus would break into the top 5, but after today, they might even lose their place in the top 10. We’ll see.”

So where did that leave him? Zin had thrown him under the bus, and the guilds had discarded him. If Loki had only playfully chased after Roth before, now he would hit him with everything he had.

“There’s also another reason why the guilds let you go,” Mel continued.

“Really? What is that?”

“Has the event ended yet?”

Roth’s eyes widened. “My quest.”

“That’s right. They still want you to finish the quest to end the event. They believe they can gain something from it if you do.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? Who told you to come talk to me?”

“Actually, I’m here as my own person, not as someone from the Krakens.”

“Why?”

“I like you.” The moment she said it, she flushed. “Not in a weird way. I-I just admire you; that’s a better choice of words. Despite all that has happened to you, you have been making the best of it. I truly am sorry about what the guilds have decided, but at least this way, you understand better who’s after you. I wish you the best of luck.”

Goldie, who had been perched on a branch of a nearby tree, flew down and landed on Roth’s shoulders, rubbing his head affectionately on Roth’s.

“Goldie, leave Roth alone!” Mel said, exasperated.

“Squawk, chirp, squawk. Chirp, chirp, squeak.” The hawk emitted a series of sounds and then flew over to Mel. Roth gulped as he studied the woman and the hawk seriously.

“Well, I just wanted to say goodbye. I wish you all the best, Roth,” she said with a sad smile.

A little dazed after hearing Goldie’s message, Roth picked up the acorn from the ground. “Mel, thank you.”

Her cheeks reddened, and she gave him a bright smile. “Don’t mention it!”

“Look at that. You really can be civil.”

Her smile turned into a pout. “Just get lost, you crazy man. I’ll send you a few funny videos I recorded of you crafting and Loki going ballistic.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

Summon!

From behind the trees, Lua appeared cantering quickly in their direction. She shone beautifully in the moonlight and was happy to see Roth. Lua let Mel pet her while neighing a greeting to Goldie. Roth hopped on her saddle and took off toward Hilsford. Mel watched Roth’s back recede into the distance.

As his figure disappeared, her eyes widened. “Wait! Doesn’t he have a cat and Antioch’s other pet?! How does he have a horse, too?!” She laughed. Just how many secrets did this boy have?

*

Roth galloped toward Hilsford. Goldie’s warning resounded in his mind.

“Marrtyrrr, Mel wanted me to tell you that the guilds have placed spies on you. You’ve shown too much in the hunt, and they arrrre interested in you. Be carrreful.”

He owed Mel one for getting this message to him. He still didn’t fully understand why she had helped him. He needed to come up with a plan.

Chapter 49

Ogre stretched his muscles as he emerged from the capsule. He had been in AstroTerra for several days, and his physician had recommended that he not spend all his time in the game. He bobbed his head from one side to the other, cracking his neck. He then performed a series of movements to crack his shoulders and back.

After he was done, he looked out the window. His penthouse offered him a good view of his empire. It was a full moon tonight, and the buildings inside of his compound had some lights on. They looked like ships in the sea at night. In this case, separating the buildings were beautiful gardens. Seeing the beauty of his compound, his mind quickly went to how much money had gone into supporting this empire. After taking a deep breath, he sat at his desk and looked at some paperwork, waiting for his approval.

BlueFire had negotiated a deal with Tel Fiction for a series of commercials featuring him, Cyclops, and BlueFire. He signed off on it. Commercials were always good money. Next, Finish Line Sports would pay six figures if they renamed the ‘Ogrelords’ as ‘Finish Line Ogrelords.’ He signed it, too.

There was a knock on his door. “Come in.”

BlueFire came in through the door. Seeing someone’s real body after spending so many hours in the game always took some getting used to. Clothes were much duller in the real world, and after seeing everyone with swords, staffs, and shields in their hands, seeing someone empty-handed looked weird.

BlueFire was dressed in a simple black sweatsuit; his hair wasn’t quite as lush and shiny, and his features weren’t as sharp and striking. The one thing that didn’t change was his blue, intelligent eyes.

“Good to see you finally getting that paperwork done. You could also sign those in-game, you know?”

“I know, but I like to leave IRL stuff to IRL,” Ogre said as he approved another deal. “What a brutal battle, hey?”

BlueFire’s silence proved that this is what he had come to discuss. Ogre kept signing deal after deal. He only refused a request from the Gorgons, who wanted to buy one of his medics. Even though, in BlueFire’s opinion, his performance was subpar, and they should let him go, Ogre had seen him in battle and saw some potential in him. The pile of paperwork was finally done, and BlueFire was still silent, looking out the window.

“Your apartment is only one floor below mine. Does it make such a difference in helping you think?”

“Yes,” he answered drily.

Ogre stood up and took a stand next to him.

“Was it worth it? Did we break even?”

BlueFire nodded. “Loki’s drops are something else. And you’ve seen the stats on your diamond armor.”

Ogre grinned. He loved the upgrade. It was a good thing he’d been part of this hunt. All participants were allowed to upgrade their gold sets into diamond ones. The difference in quality was incredible.

“What’s gotten you thinking then? Is it the boy?”

BlueFire nodded. “Yes.”

“Have you told him that he can see our psychiatrist?”

“I have. But he’ll probably think it’s a maneuver to extract his secrets.”

“Is he wrong?”

“He is not.”

“Let’s just hire him. You’ve seen all he can do. He is a loose cannon but seems to be worth the trouble.”

BlueFire twitched his nose, signaling his disagreement.

“What?”

“What if we hire him, and his faulty capsule explodes? Do we want a bad rep? Do we want to be implicated in such an incident?”

“No progress on disarming it then?”

“No. Nexus can’t do anything, either. If we force it open, it explodes.”

Ogre let out a deep sigh. This industry was profitable partly because Nexus claimed its capsules were 100% safe. This incident could call that into question and affect the market. “The other guilds are interested now. You can’t let him go to them either. If you do, they might use this to accuse the Ogres of negligence.”

“I know. It’s a mess.”

“So what do we do for now?”

“We buy time for our technicians and Nexus to get him out of the pod. It will make everything simpler. The guilds know that we bought him for three months. They will wait until the period ends before trying to poach him.”

“And until then?”

“We do what everyone else will. We assign a tail and learn how he got his class, race, pets, and skills. Maybe by the time they get him out of the pod, we won’t need him anymore.”

“Or we hire him.”

“Or we hire him,” consented BlueFire.

*

Roth rode toward Hilsford. The moonlight reflected off Lua’s white mane as she galloped along the river, this time downstream. Since the trip was at night, Lua’s speed bonus was activated.

Moonlight Gallop (Pet Skill)

Description: The moonlight herd exhibits its true strength and speed at night.

Effects:

Passive. If it’s dark, your pet can move 50% faster.

The difference in speed was noticeable but offset by [Badger’s Form]’s low dexterity. Roth considered reverting to human form to regain more balanced stats and increase his speed but decided against it. He needed the time to think.

Goldie’s warning resounded in his mind. Initially, he had planned to head straight into the Green Woods to turn in his [Vanquish the Darkness] quest with Oli, but it turned out that it wouldn’t be so simple. Roth had called too much attention to himself.

First, he discovered Antioch and entered the Hall of Fame. Then, there was the creation of the Union, followed by the auction, where

a legendary magister appeared together with a group of god-tiered NPCs and revealed Lin was an S+ pet. However, this expedition was the last straw. He had revealed the power of [Badger Form], [Peace Decree], and his light affinity.

Roth had needed to attract the guilds' attention to get one of them to save him, but attracting too much of it wouldn't be good. Mel hadn't said it, but perhaps there was another reason why the guilds were happy to have Loki chase after Roth. That would stunt his growth. Were they starting to perceive him as a threat?

At the same time, it looked like they weren't eager to finish him off. He'd been assigned a tail, and there would be more effort in prying his secrets out of him. The guilds wanted first to learn his secrets and only squash him after. So much of his gameplay had already been exposed, and he couldn't afford to show all his tricks to the guilds. He had to figure out how capable the rogues sent to shadow him were and how to lose them.

He tried to understand why Mel had gone to the trouble of giving him the warning. Was she really looking out for him? Or was she playing some kind of game? And why hadn't she just sent him a private message? Could it be that the message history of high-ranking members of Guilds was monitored to ensure no leaks? Was that even legal? And if so, just how had Zin eluded Loki?

It was all very confusing, but one thing was sure. Be it because of Loki or the other guilds, Roth had to lay low, disappear, and start fresh. He would go through with his original plan that had been interrupted. Before Xerxes had trapped him in Antioch, he was headed toward a different world region. It was time to revisit this plan.

Before that, he had to find a way to shake off his tail. He wasn't sure if there was some item that would mark him and allow rogues to locate him, even if he teleported. Back in New Earth, plenty of tracking skills could show where an enemy player was or where they'd been.

As Lua rode in the darkness of night, a plan started coming together. All Roth needed was to purchase some things from the auction house.

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The hardest thing about starting his character fresh wasn't the large sum of money he had to pay Nexus to be given the same player tag as before. It wasn't the loss of dozens of titles either, or the hours of gaming that had been lost. No. He wasn't short of funds, and the knowledge of obtaining titles couldn't be taken away from him. The worst was not knowing whether his sacrifice was worth it anymore.

Loki had been pulled down from his privileged position much sooner than he had hoped. He thought he had at least one more week of hunting bosses and plunging into the riches of the Dark Abyss before he was caught.

Anak soloed the centipede cave ahead of him, clearing a path to the guild's headquarters in the observatory. Even though he was already doing everything he could as he traveled, he needed access to the guild's vaults and other infrastructures to make management easier. His trip from the beginner zone of the Rock Canyon to here felt extraordinarily long and unnaturally short at the same time. His avatar followed after Anak, but his mind was somewhere else.

Loki looked into his logs and records, reviewing every conversation he had had with Zin. Despite all his precautions, Zin had still caught him completely by surprise.

Loki finished reviewing the list of two years of missions and targets he had assigned Zin. All of them had to be thoroughly researched. Who knew how many of them Zin had sabotaged? When Loki thought of some of the targets he had Zin execute and the possibility of them still being around, he felt a headache brewing. Loki hated loose ends, and Zin had purposefully left him with a tangled mess.

Loki started looking at his organization. How much of it was compromised? How many had become Zin's agents? Who could he count on? Anak had been his subordinate for many years, and he was confident he was trustworthy. Even though Xerxes was too eager sometimes, his rivalry with Zin was genuine. He reckoned that he could be trusted, too.

He reviewed a list of his highest-ranked employees and tagged them as 'trustworthy,' 'compromised,' and 'probably traitors'. He messaged those he believed to be trustworthy and assigned them to investigate the others, promising hefty rewards for each mole and traitor found.

Then, he contacted his chief of security and ensured Zin had been blacklisted. He demanded security to be doubled and sent all the information he had on Zin to his friends in the police, in the government, and wherever else he might be wanted. After some thought, he also sent all information on Zin to the other guilds. They had to be upset at Zin for interfering with their hunt, and they would probably be happy to get back at him.

What a nightmare. It was difficult as it was to keep morale in the guild after they lost the extra stats Loki's unique race had provided. Knowing they lost their strongest player while submitting the entire organization to another purge would put a damper on the guild's high spirits.

They finally left the centipedes' cave, and the scent of death and decay greeted him. Seeing the landscape of black ash and sand, he took some solace. At least he had planned for his fall and had already carefully planned his next moves. He hadn't shared these plans with anyone, so there was still hope.

From the centipedes' cave, it was a short trip to the observatory. The barrier had already fallen, and the one lone rogue who stayed behind had been easily killed by his troops. They had taken such a long time to respond to his distress call and ended up doing nothing but finishing off one single rogue.

Loki pushed down the anger that threatened to surface at the incompetence of his guards. He now knew that Zin had arranged for his security to be laxer than it should be. His guild didn't need him to go on a fit of rage. No, they needed him to show confidence and calm. He walked calmly into the observatory and headed toward his office.

It was time to rebuild his power. He entered the password for the guild's coffer, which allowed him administrative access. He first opened the guild's statutes and added his new avatar as guild leader.

Satisfied that he'd been prudent enough to deny anyone else access to the guild's vault, he prepared for the next step. He would rebuild his power using the valuable consumables he'd secured.

He had already determined in which order he would eat all of them to maximize the benefits. For now, he only had the four main stats that every beginner player began with. First, he would focus on consumables that unlocked stats he didn't have, building up to other

consumables that increased all stats. If his plan worked, he could return to where he was in three months, perhaps even stronger.

After Zin's betrayal, he didn't know if Pegasus could enter the top three. Depending on how much of the guild was compromised, he might not even be able to climb in the ranks. However, one thing was sure. He would, at the very least, maintain his standing.

Loki opened the guild's vault tab containing all consumables and froze.

"No, no, no, no."

Fishbones (Trash)

Description: What is left of a fish? Something ate it and left it here.

Effects:

Maybe it can be used as fertilizer?

Nutrient-Filled Poop (Rare)

Description: A creature did its business here! It looked like it ate something amazing before it did, though.

Effects:

A powerful fertilizer. Can increase the success of a crop by 30%!

Instead of the prized consumables he had stored, there was only trash. Who? How? Why?

"It can't be. It can't be. No. No. NOOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

The castle of cards that Loki had built to hold onto his calm demeanor collapsed.

Chapter 50

“I see,” spoke Drake somberly after hearing Roth’s report.

“It’s not hopeless. The fact that the guilds want to spy on Roth shows how valuable he is,” commended Sarg, a little more optimistic.

Roth wasn’t too far from Hilsford. The torches lit on the city’s walls, and the moonlight reflected off the white stone of the citadel, making it a bright dot in the distance. He had to wrap up this conversation.

“*So we all agree I should go somewhere else for now?*” Roth messaged, trying to get this conference call over with. This call had taken longer than he’d expected. He would have talked but feared the spies chasing him would eavesdrop. Therefore, while everyone else talked, he sent text messages.

“If you can lose them, yes. That would be best,” said the sergeant.

“They probably have spies in the Union already,” stated H.

“Let us know when you’ve made it out,” spoke Drake, forcing a smile. They all left the call. Everyone had unanimously agreed that it was time for him to move on to another region.

The tiny white dot in the night became bigger and bigger as Lua approached it. Roth galloped past the west gate and into the bustling city. Not too long ago, the sight of thousands of players between levels 10 and 40 walking everywhere had dazzled him, but honestly, after being around the top guilds for the last few hours, they all looked lackluster.

Roth headed into the auction house. He chuckled at the memory of Zion roaring those guild representatives into oblivion and Shadow killing them all again by accident. At the time, his life had been on the

line, but now that some time had passed and his distaste for the guilds grew, he could see the humor in it.

Arriving at the shopping area, he looked for the necessary items to escape and cover his tracks. Such consumables did exist, but they were pricey!

Cleanser Spray (Consumable)

Description: A spray that can remove any odors or stains.

Effects: Clears tracking skills.

Each one cost 100 gold! Clenching his teeth, he purchased three. It was a worthy investment if he could get the spies off his back. Thankfully, he had mooched some extra gold from BlueFire just before the expedition began.

Looking at his inventory, he weighed his options and, sighing, unloaded all of the clothes he had crafted in the Dark Abyss. Even though he would have gotten better money from selling these at Golden Mountain Inc., knowing that guild spies were trying to find out his secrets, he didn't want to reveal his connection with Soros. The guilds were disrupting his life and costing him a fortune, too!

He just selected the auction house's automatic feature to assign the items at market price. According to the value calculated by the auction house, he would still have made a good profit, even though he would have made more at Golden Mountain Inc.

Thinking of what Soros had told him the last time they were together, Roth bought an assortment of herbs that were easily found in Green Country but were rare in Rock Canyon. They were light and easy to transport, and since he would make the trip, he might as well make the most of it. After some thought, he also purchased some more alpaca wool in case he had time to craft in the near future.

Knowing that he could get better deals on these items for a few minutes of travel left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he had to settle with the reduced profit for now. Once he shook off the spies, he would return to making good money.

He was careful to leave enough room in his inventory to receive any rewards for his quest while not overloading the reduced weight-carrying capacity of his zoomorph forms. Thankfully, he could carry plenty of weight due to all the bonuses he had gained in Antioch.

Satisfied with his preparations, Roth again mounted Lua and rode away from the city.

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DryGrass waited for his target to leave the auction house. He didn't know what he had done wrong to get the back-to-back lousy missions. First, he had to stay behind in the Dark Abyss to give his life to let the little crazy tailor escape. After the barrier came down, he was insta-killed.

After losing a level, he was reassigned immediately to monitor the little troublemaker. DavyJones, the chief of Kraken's Intelligence, wanted to know where he'd gotten his cat and any secrets related to his affinity, class, and race. He didn't understand why this level 30 player could be so interesting to an organization as powerful as the Krakens, but he obeyed; that's what he was paid for.

The target left the auction house and summoned his white horse. DryGrass couldn't help but feel a little envy toward Ticket Boy. Not only did he have a cat, but he also had a horse! That meant that at least one of the pets had a bonus that allowed him to have one extra pet slot. It was probably the cat. According to his briefing package, it had an S grade.

Pets that didn't take pet slots were exceedingly rare, and he only knew two people in the guild with such pets. Maybe this mission they were sending him on was more worthy than he cared to admit. Instead of cruising the city, Ticket Boy rode on his horse back toward the west gate.

DryGrass chased after him. Most rogues who specialized in stealth missions like himself had no pet they could ride. The reason for this was simple. Camouflage only worked on oneself, not on one's pets. Therefore, since they traveled camouflaged most of the time, they couldn't afford to have a pet that gave their position away. Even so, on foot, DryGrass was faster than many players riding a horse.

Even without his speed-boosting active skills, his movement speed surpassed 400%. He could easily keep up with Ticket Boy's ride. He was only level 30, after all. There was over a 20-level difference.

His target still seemed unaware of his presence and traveled across the grasslands until he reached the southwest road. It looked like his briefing package was right. He was heading toward Antioch.

According to his intel, Roth Taylor had been the one to discover the new world region, which was probably located in the Green Woods. If that was the case, things would get tricky since he didn't know how to enter the city.

Perhaps by observing how his target got in, he could find the juicy secret of how to enter the hidden world region. DryGrass chased Roth mile after mile. His target didn't seem to stop to recover his energy, and he kept going. Just how many endurance and energy points did he have?

By now, DryGrass was sure that other rogues were around, and he noticed signs of their presence. An unsettling feeling in his stomach, the prickling of his hair, and goose bumps on the skin of his arm were all telltale signs that there were rogues nearby—good ones at that, for those had been the only signs he could pick up. Were he not trained to interpret those sensations, he would have ignored them.

For now, he tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. A big part of being a good rogue was being patient. He would wait in the shadows, keeping his eyes open, and eliminate any competitors if the opportunity came.

Eventually, before sunrise, they arrived in the beginner region. Once they left the grasslands with mice and entered the woods, DryGrass relaxed. Here, there were more shadows, obstacles, and trees to climb. If he had been invisible on the road here, he would be absolutely undetectable from now on.

His target arrived at the clearing, the entrance to Antioch. Seeing that he was galloping without hesitation toward the barrier, DryGrass hurriedly grabbed his blowpipe and shot a dart.

Prey Mark!

Seeing the skill land, he grinned. With this, he could follow his target, and if he left the city of Antioch, he could keep following him. He found a comfortable branch to perch himself onto and sat. Now, all that he had to do was wait. Just as he was about to finish preparing for a long stakeout, he received a notification that made his jaw drop.

[Prey Mark] has been canceled. You've lost your target.

What? How? Did he have a cleanser spray? He dug his face in his hands. DavyJones would roast him for this.

The Ogr Lords didn't have it easy inside Antioch. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't find a way to communicate with the NPCs that sold [Miniaturizing Honeydew]. They had been so excited when BlueFire sent them a new, more detailed map of the city. But what use was there to know where a shop was if they couldn't interact with the shopkeeper?

They had done everything that the guide said. They had found work and made themselves useful. Still, no matter how many times they tried, no shop window opened up. Ultimately, as the expedition leader, Trampler asked the others to leave the city and pass all the miniaturizing honeydews left to him so he could have more time to figure out this mess.

He studied the line of ants waiting to interact with the bloated shopkeepers. Trampler tried to find out how they talked to each other. However, they looked oblivious and detached and didn't seem to be speaking or communicating with each other in any way. Was there some secret language he needed to learn before talking to these ants?

"Sir, you won't believe what just happened," came a message from Ray.
"What is it?"

"We just spotted Pax, the player in the Hall of Fame. He entered the dome and miniaturized before we could speak to him and entered the city."

"What?!"

The original discoverer of the city was around. That meant he could ask him how he could buy these cursed items. Even if he didn't want to cooperate, he would chase after him and pick up on clues about how he communicated with the ants. With this, he would have something to show for his efforts in his next report.

Leaving the pantry behind, he ran towards the entrance of Antioch. Sure enough, luck was on his side. Trampler found him!

"Hello, friend! Good to see another player here. Mind if I introduce myself?" he said, smiling as he approached the newcomer.

He had expected a player who looked like an adventurer but found someone different. He had heard the stories from his friends who had joined in the fight against Loki, but now he could see him in person. He was tall; if this were real life, Trampler would be scared of such a tall man. His shoulders were broad, and his hairline was somewhat

receding. He had a neatly trimmed beard that covered most of his face. He wore woolen garments with a marbled green and white pattern.

When the player spotted him, his eyes widened, and he took off without a word.

“Oh no, you don’t!”

Even though the player was fast, Trampler was sure he could outrun him. He chased him through the tunnels, gaining ground on every step. Just as he was about to reach him, a tunnel shut in front of him. It was one of those ants with big heads!

“No, no, no, no.” He drew his weapon but paused just as he was about to force his way through. He was surrounded, and if he attacked an ant, he would become hostile to all these creatures. After that, he would never have the chance to buy the consumables from them. Instead, he just waited patiently. After a while, the turtle ant moved its head, and Trampler resumed the chase. Coming at a crossroads, he clenched his teeth and turned left. There was now a 50% chance he was on the wrong stretch chasing after Pax. He kept running. Arriving at another bifurcation, this time, he turned right. The chances of finding him were decreasing.

Thankfully, luck again seemed to be on his side. He spotted Pax leaving the main tunnel again. Trampler kept gaining ground, but just as he was about to touch him, the player activated some sort of skill and gained a massive burst of speed. Trampler saw the figure of a tall man with two round ears and a tail disappearing into the distance. Had he always had a tail and two ears like that?

Trampler wasn’t ready to give up yet. He activated every dash and sprint skill and ran down the tunnel. There was a chamber up ahead. Finally, he would drive Pax into a corner. Four ant soldiers stepped out as he approached and stood in his path.

“I need to go in there,” he tried.

The soldiers stood unmoving.

“Please let me go in there.” He took a step forward, and the soldiers clenched their bladed jaws twice in unison, threatening to attack if he made another move. He kicked a nearby piece of dirt and grimaced. He had lost track of the explorer who had discovered Antioch. How was he going to explain this to his superiors?

Chapter 51

Roth opened the hatch and emerged from a hollow branch of a tree somewhere in badger's territory. What a thrill. Sure enough, when he used the track cleanser, he wiped six different marks from spies chasing him. Good thing he had taken the precaution.

What he had forgotten about was that there were players from Ogres exploring Antioch! It was a good thing that he had a good relationship with the treeants and could ask a turtle ant to block the path for him. He also had access to more of Antioch than the newcomers, so he got to enter a tree leading to a secret exit and lose his pursuer there. The treeant gatekeepers would keep him at bay.

Although the whole city was in lockdown when he was first trapped in Antioch, things had calmed down plenty since. The guilds had given up on forcing their way into Antioch, so the treeants had lifted the emergency lockdown and unlocked all the alternate exits and entrances throughout the woods. It wasn't difficult for Roth to ask one of the ants where the nearest hatch was and make his way there.

The only annoying thing was that he had to spend a second track cleanser to ensure none of these other players had left a tracking mark on him. He ended up wasting a large sum of gold for nothing, though. None of the Ogre players had marked him.

Confident no one was chasing after him anymore, Roth picked up the item he had removed several days ago and put it on again. As the witness protection mask melted into his features, his hair changed color, and his figure became slightly more slender. His avatar's name also changed from Bridgefinder3 to RainyCloud.

He agilely climbed his way down to the forest floor. It had been a while since he had last been in [Ratan Form]! He had no choice but to activate it to run away from that Ogre player. After experiencing its speed, he realized how much he had missed this form.

He deactivated [Ratan Form] and changed equipment to a few noob drabs he bought for some copper at the auction house. Checking no one was around, he deactivated [Miniaturize]. Any guild spy who spotted him would only see a noob with a torn and ragged outfit. Since using Lua would be too conspicuous, he made the next part of the journey on foot. It was time to collect the reward for his quest.

It was a quick trip from badger territory to Oli's hideout. Hopefully, the cat would be home. The last time he visited, his hideout had been locked, and he had to wait for the cat to appear of his own volition.

His fears were for naught. The sun had risen, and even from far away, he could see the cat lying on the grass, soaking in the morning rays of sunlight. Could other players also see Oli, or was he seeing him because the cat let him?

It would probably be the second. Most guilds seemed so surprised to discover cats existed in the game that he doubted everyone could catch sight of this cat so easily. If that were the case, many others would have found Oli already.

“Hi, Oli!”

The cat kept both eyes closed. “Hey, Martyr,” he greeted in a sleepy voice. Roth's disguise was useless in front of the cat. “Did you bring my nephew?” he asked.

Little Lin had already poked his head out of Roth's clothes and was eager to join Oli.

“Let him come. We'll have a bath together,” Oli declared imperiously. Roth let little Lin onto the ground, and he rushed curiously toward the older cat. Oli was relaxed, lying on his side and letting Lin sniff him at will. Once he drew closer, he pulled him in and started licking.

Lin's hair becomes smoother and cleaner. It becomes harder to detect him.

+1 subterfuge.

The bath makes your pet healthier and stronger.

+1 strength.

After a short while, both cats were purring. Little Lin was already self-grooming, too, and after a while, grooming Oli back.

Roth just sat in the sun as the two cats groomed each other. He hadn't realized how much pressure he was under until he stopped and rested. He was more than happy to relax while Lin received free stats. He closed his eyes and took in the sunlight. After so many years in prison, being able to sit on the grass and sunbathe wasn't something he took for granted.

He was sure now that he was in the clear; otherwise, Oli would have said something about spies. If Oli, one of the most powerful NPCs in the game, was relaxed, he could be, too. Probably, there was an illusion mechanism nearby, courtesy of the Lord of the Woods shielding their presence.

He only opened his eyes again when the sound beside him shifted from purring to chirping and trilling. Oli was still lying down, rocking his tail provokingly, while little Lin seemed hypnotized by it. Little Lin was dead still, shifting his muscles, preparing to pounce. As he tried to catch Oli's tail, he took it out of the way, dodging Lin's strike effortlessly.

Roth sat, seeing the two cats play. He lost track of time, savoring the moment. After a while, a few notifications awoke him from his daze.

Oli has had some itches he couldn't scratch for a long time. Little Lin has helped him.

+10 reputation with Oli, the cat.

It's been a long time since Oli has had the chance to play with a little kitten.

+10 reputation with Oli, the cat.

Before today, despite all his interactions with Oli and his sizable charisma, he had only gained one measly reputation point with the cat burglar. Yet, suddenly, he was gifted 20 for doing nothing except bringing his little kitten to play. He should bring him here every week, then!

Although befriending Oli was inviting trouble, he was worth it. Thanks to Oli, he had an S-plus pet, a cloning machine, and hydrogen grenades in his inventory. Even if he didn't want to use the grenades and had no plans to use the cloning machine, the truth was that these were incredible items he would never have gotten if it weren't for him.

Little Lin yawned and cuddled with Oli, preparing to nap under the sun with his uncle. Seeing Lin had had his fill of playing and grooming, Oli finally turned his attention to Roth.

"What a surprising adventure you had in the Dark Abyss. And you didn't even lift a finger, did you?" Oli said mockingly.

"What?! Were you there?" Roth asked.

"Of course! You didn't think this little one would break through all those layers of defense in the Hive King's coffer without my help, did you?"

"So it was you! You taught him how to steal!"

"Nah! I didn't teach him. The knowledge is already in his cells. I just nudged him in the right direction," there was a twinge of pride in Oli's voice. "Let me tell you, it's almost as much fun seeing someone else steal as doing it yourself. I'm so proud of you, little kitten. Meow, chirp, chirp, trill."

Oli vocalized a series of meows, purrs, and chuffs, encouraging little Lin, who lay on his back, outstretched, completely open, showing his submission to Oli and Roth. His eyes were almost closed. He would fall asleep in a moment.

"Besides, he was starving. He had to have a little food. Since some appropriate snacks were inside that safe, I thought letting him eat a little was good."

"Thank you?" Roth answered uncertainly. The only things Roth knew about the safe were the notifications saying Lin had self-taught a break-and-entry skill and the list of god-tiered consumables his kitten had eaten. Oli confirmed the origin of the food: Lin had stolen from Loki's stash.

Did Loki know it was his pet who had broken into his safe? How much more hatred would he feel toward him after discovering his pet had eaten all his precious stat-boosting consumables? He couldn't help but shudder.

"Anyway," continued Oli, "you fulfilled your mission, and the Table wants to reward you. Do you have anything for me?" Oli said

as he stood up, careful not to disturb Lin's sleep. He stretched his limbs, ready for some action.

When Roth grabbed the black orb retrieved from Loki's corpse, Oli was already focused, claws drawn. Roth extended his hand, presenting the black orb to Oli, and in the blink of an eye, the orb was gone.

The [Parasitoid King's Egg] has been destroyed!

+300 light affinity;

+150 righteousness;

You've unlocked a new affinity bonus: [Speed of Light].

"300?" Roth couldn't help but say out loud, gasping. The previous egg he had turned over to the Table had only awarded 30 light affinity points. This one gave ten times more! It was enough for him to break into the next threshold of his affinity. He checked what his new bonus did.

You've unlocked [Speed of Light].

Speed of Light (Stat Bonus)

Bonus description: Your step is light, and the sun energizes you to run unhindered.

Bonus effects:

+300% movement speed in daylight.

Roth stood speechless, reading the notification. "300?" he couldn't help but say again. It seemed to be the number marking his day. 300% movement speed was insane! True, it was only when the sun was up, but even so. If he combined this and [Ratan Form], he would probably become the fastest player in the game! Just for this, the quest had already been worth it, but a ring followed. This wasn't the reward for completing the quest yet.

[Surgically Remove the Darkness] has been completed.

Completion Rate: A.

Quest rewards: +100,000,000XP; +100 nature affinity; +30 reputation with The Table; 1x[Table's Blessing]

Congratulations! You've unlocked the nature affinity!

You've unlocked a new affinity bonus: [Call of the Wild].

Your nature affinity resonates with your race.

The cooldown on all [Zoomorph Forms] has been halved.

Your nature affinity resonates with some of your skills.

[Ratan Dash] has upgraded into [Mouseketeer Dash].

[Ratan Stride] has upgraded into [Ratan Sprint].

[Snake Slither] has upgraded into [Cobra Slither].

Bonus rewards: +100,000,000XP; +50 nature affinity; +20 reputation with The Table;

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

[Level up!]

Roth felt dizzy at the appearance of so many notifications. It had been a while since he had received so many in one go. He had to say he wasn't expecting to receive an A-grade. What had he done in the quest? He had opened the teleportation gate to the guilds. Maybe the system had rewarded him for, despite being a pacifist, still being able to hunt the Hive King anyway.

His experience bar skyrocketed, and he leveled up multiple times, finally stagnating midway through level 39. Completing this quest gave him eight levels!

He had also finally unlocked nature affinity. Before this quest, it had been at the threshold, and he finally gained the first tier. He never imagined that it would empower his racial skills and reduce their cooldown so much. When he first received his race, he had to wait a whole day to change between forms, but after this incredible reduction, coupled with all his cooldown reduction bonuses, he could

do so every ten hours! This would make a massive difference in the future!

Roth checked his new stat bonus.

Call of the Wild (Stat Bonus)

Bonus description: You have found your calling in the lush green grass, the vast blue sky, and the boundless wilderness.

Bonus effects:

+100 hp;

+10 hp regeneration;

All nature skills are empowered;

Pets grow faster.

He had expected something nearer the level of light affinity, but it looked like light was a unique element. Compared to gaining 10 of each stat, the hp bonus wasn't such a big deal, but it was still quite something. The part about his natural skills being empowered was the most appealing.

After unlocking nature affinity, [Ratan Dash], [Ratan Stride], and [Snake Slither] had all evolved! Until now he had to change into one of his zoomorph forms for this to happen, but now he could just enjoy the enhanced skills all the time. He wondered if zoomorph forms would enhance them even further. Did the skill evolution effects stack? He couldn't wait to change into [Ratan Form] or [Snake Form] to find out!

Certainly, the very last benefit was also appealing. After all, he had three pets! If they could grow even faster with this bonus, he wouldn't complain! He would take every bit of help he could get.

There was only one thing left to discover.

“Excuse me, Oli. What is this [Table Blessing]?”

“Oh, right. You have to pick one of these. Take your time.” While Oli yawned and cuddled with Lin, several windows appeared before Roth.

Chapter 52

“Le-legendary S-s-skills?!” yammered Roth.

Blessing of the Cat (Legendary)

Description: Oli, the cat, has taught you how to circumvent any lock.

Effects:

Passive. You can open any lock;

+1 skill slot.

Blessing of the Panther (Legendary)

Description: Shadow, the panther, has taught you how to become invisible.

Effects:

Passive. Upgrades [Camouflage];

+1 skill slot.

Blessing of the Caracal (Legendary)

Description: Nira, the caracal, has taught you to defy gravity.

Effects:

Passive. Become weightless;

+1 skill slot.

Blessing of the Tiger (Legendary)

Description: Maudib, the tiger, has taught you how to pulverize your enemies.

Effects:

Passive. Crits deal four times more damage;

+1 skill slot.

Blessing of the Lioness (Legendary)

Description: Sawabi, the lioness, has taught you how to hunt.

Effects:

Passive. Attacks can't miss;

+1 skill slot.

Blessing of the Lion (Legendary)

Description: Zion, the lion, has taught you how to roar.

Effects:

Passive. Voice skills are empowered.

+1 skill slot.

Roth couldn't believe it. He could choose one of six different legendary skills! He didn't care about [Blessing of the Tiger] or [Blessing of the Lioness]. These skills would favor much more those who engaged in combat. But still, old berserker Roth would have turned heaven and earth upside down to get a hold of such skills.

Each skill offered one extra skill slot, which meant it was free. Even if all his skills were occupied, he could still equip it. These skills were heavenly just on that point alone. Plus, some of these effects were utterly broken. He studied one at a time.

The first one offered the possibility of getting Oli's blessing. Not surprisingly, it was a bonus that helped with thievery. Was that a path he wanted to take? He scratched his head. Even though being able to open any door sounded alluring, it couldn't be as simple as that, could it?

He probably couldn't instantly open any door if he took this skill. Some locks would probably take longer to get through than others. Oli had hinted at this earlier. Didn't he say that without his help, Lin would have had a tough time cracking Loki's vault? He couldn't imagine that there were many coffers with precious treasures inside that were left unguarded. Even if he used [Peace Decree] to buy himself some time, it would require work and a skill tree geared

toward treasure looting. He twisted his mouth. This wasn't his style. He would set this option aside for now.

After this, there was [Blessing of the Panther], which upgraded his camouflage. Roth guessed that this brought [Camouflage] to a whole new level. How handy would this skill have been when he infiltrated Loki's lair? If he had this blessing, Loki would never have been able to spot him unless he chose to reveal himself.

What followed was [Blessing of the Caracal]. The only cat that could be the caracal was that one with long legs and long ears. Its long legs hint at speed and jumping ability. The granted skill mentioned that its user would become weightless. What did that mean? Would he become able to fly or jump over mountains? Or did it mean he would gain attack speed since he didn't have to worry about his body weight? Or... did it mean he could carry all the cargo he wanted?

Now, that made it alluring: if a broker could make all his cargo weightless, then his only limitation would be how much product customers were willing to purchase and how many items were in stock. Even so, he couldn't be sure that a player's inventory would become weightless instead of the player himself. He suspected that that would be the case; otherwise, the skill might be too weak. But it could also be a trap. What a nightmare to have to choose between these superb skills.

He already had discarded [Blessing of the Tiger] and [Blessing of the Lioness], which only left the [Blessing of the Lion] to consider. King Zion had left a profound impact on Roth. He remembered the king's arrival at the auction house and how he'd obliterated some of the best players in the game with a single roar. Plus, it had been such an incredible sensation when Roth used the borrowed [Lion's Breath] skill to open the portal.

Roth had three voice skills: [Peace Decree], [Screeching Terror], and [Taunting Bellow]. These were his bread-and-butter skills, which he used to protect others, scare them, or negate damage. Empowering them with this last legendary skill sounded appealing.

He reread each skill and made a mental list of pros and cons. This was such a difficult decision to make. He had to start narrowing down his choices. The first blessing to join the list of discarded choices was [Blessing of the Caracal]. It was just too big of a risk to invest in this blessing and then realize that he couldn't make cargo weightless.

There were also other ways of moving cargo, and he was gaining more and more weight-carry capacity.

The next skill he discarded was [Blessing of the Cat]. He already had a little thief in the making and didn't think he needed to become his partner in crime. As it were, something told him that Lin would get him into plenty of trouble already.

Finally, Roth had to choose between [Blessing of the Panther] and [Blessing of the Lion]. He looked at the two and finally made his choice. The fact that [Blessing of the Lion] related to the ruler of the cats had to mean something, right? Besides, voice skills were some of the only active skills he could use. Even though there were plenty of ways to improve one's weight-carry capacity and invisibility, there were few ways to improve vocal power.

"I choose [Blessing of the Lion]," he told Oli.

"So be it."

You've learned [Blessing of the Lion].

[Blessing of the Lion] resonates with your nature affinity.

[Blessing of the Lion] has become [Blessing of the Lion King].

Roth had completely forgotten about this new affinity and how it upgraded nature-related skills! He had never imagined that he would be upgrading a legendary skill.

Blessing of the Lion King (Legendary)

Description: Zion, the lion, has taught you how to roar and rule.

Effects:

Passive. Voice skills are empowered;

+50 charisma

+2 skill slot.

Not only had he received an extra skill slot, but he received an incredible boost to his charisma. What kind of skill granted 50 charisma? It was enough to gain one new stat bonus! Roth couldn't believe it. He had just won the jackpot. From now on, vocal skills would become unstoppable. On top of that, this bonus to charisma

would make gaining friendships with others easier and help him improve in his broker profession.

Shortly after Roth chose his reward, an announcement rang across AstroTerra.

Region Announcement: The interregional event [The Rise of the Hive King] has ended.

Collect all your rewards from the event store in the next 48 hours; after that, all event tickets will be rendered obsolete.

Roth hadn't received a single event ticket, but looking at his incredible new skill, he didn't feel he needed any. He had come on the winning side. Not only did he now have a dual affinity, but he had also gotten a legendary skill. When he received [Lion's Breath], he was so happy, even though it was a skill that could only be used once. This skill, however, was a permanent, legendary passive skill. He was over the moon.

Legendary passive skills were among the most coveted treasures in New Earth. Roth couldn't believe he had received one at level 31... well, level 39 after turning this quest. Roth looked northward. With this, he felt confident in moving on to the next adventure.

He debated whether he should return to Antioch to try to purchase some items from the reputation store. He had planned to do so, but when he saw the Ogelords, he freaked out. He decided against it. He had already delayed his trip to Rock Canyon many times. He would keep his trade routes going and earn reputation points. Once he reached [Adored] status with more factions, he would return and see if there was any new flag or other exciting things to buy.

He turned to say goodbye to Oli and then remembered something. "Oli, do you mind if Lin visits your incredible collection?"

Oli squinted at him and then looked at Lin. Roth wondered whether he was afraid of bringing another thief into his lair. After all, if Lin kept growing this fast, he would probably become Oli's rival one day.

"That's an excellent idea. I can show my disciple how incredible a life of adventure can be!"

Roth choked. *Disciple?* When had Lin become this thief's *disciple*? And a *life of adventure*? Seriously? What he was calling a *life of adventure* was a life of crime!

"Sure, let's show him how incredible your life choices are," he said sarcastically.

Oli appreciates your commendation.

+2 reputation with Oli.

Roth's jaw dropped. Had he just talked his way into getting reputation points from Oli? Was this already the effect of the [Blessing of the Lion King]? If so, even legendary NPCs couldn't resist his charm anymore. He rubbed his hands happily.

"Let's go in. I can't wait to show Lin all the incredible objects that you've... That you've..." Roth found himself at a loss of words. That you've stolen? Robbed? Appropriated? Ripped off? He couldn't say that, could he?

Oli stepped in to help. "Collected?"

"Yes, collected."

"Of course! Wait till you see what I've got here, little kitten! It will blow your socks off! Let's go in!"

The seamless trunk of the tree revealed a door through which Oli walked comfortably. Roth had to hunch over to get in while Lin, being so small, made the small door look like a gate to a luxurious palace by comparison.

The only light inside the hollow tree emanated from the object that brought Roth here. The painting featuring Oli and his old master looked brighter than the last time he saw it. However, for some reason, today, the painting wasn't moving. Even though the light wasn't intense by any means, thanks to his perception stat and all his training in Antioch, it was enough for Roth to see bright as day.

"Very well, my disciple. Prepare for the tour of your life. Pay close attention to everything I say because it's gold," Oli started enthusiastically. Usually, Oli was passionless and cold in every interaction. This was the first time that Roth saw him so excited about something. Seeing that the cat was distracted, Roth turned toward the painting.

Before he even took a step, Oli had appeared and stood between him and the painting. "Martyr? What are you doing?"

“Uh... I just wanted to take a closer look at the painting.”

Oli looked over his shoulder toward his long-gone master, even though Roth knew that Oli couldn't see anything in it but black. “Is there anything different about it?”

“No...”

He seemed to consider Roth's request. “I suppose it's OK,” he answered magnanimously, “but that's not how I planned the tour,” he whined.

“Plan? It was my suggestion. I made it not one minute ago.”

“One minute is plenty to do planning. I have already planned the whole tour. I don't want you to get ahead of yourself. That'll ruin my disciple's experience.”

Why was Roth getting similar vibes to when Aramis had given him a tour of the tapestry room in the Throne Room of the Rat Cave? Seeing all the treasures around him, now that Roth thought about it, what did he have to lose? There was probably some interesting stuff lying around here. Maybe there were even hidden clues to legendary treasures and quests.

“Count me in! I want to have the full tour, too. I'll let you show us the ropes in the order you intended.”

+3 reputation with Oli, the Cat.

“Splendid. Follow me then.” Even though Oli made it sound like they were about to cross a great distance, it was only three steps until they reached the case Oli had chosen to start the tour. There was an ancient-looking scroll made of papyrus encased in glass. There was a sharp black stroke in it, which, at first glance, looked like a simple, mindless stroke made by a careless painter. The more he looked at it, the more it captivated him. Something about this shape evoked awe and fear in Roth's heart. What kind of item was this?

“Shall we begin, then?” asked Oli.

Chapter 53

“Listen to me, little Lin. It’s not just about stealing because you can. You want to steal things the fun way.”

Roth wondered why he was lecturing in the human tongue rather than Felinian. Was this presentation just for Lin, or was he using the chance to brag?

“There are three ways to make stealing fun. I’ve only discovered this after much experimentation. Are you ready to learn them?”

Lin’s tail was wagging back and forth in interest.

“Way number one is to steal something without people realizing you ever stole it. This way of stealing doesn’t give you much immediate joy, but the more time passes without your target realizing it, the funnier it gets. For example, look at this.”

He called the attention to the papyrus with the black, mysterious stroke in it. It had to be a treasure belonging to a master painter or something.

“It wasn’t easy to pull this job off. This is one of my most proud achievements. This is a stripe from a tiger’s butt.”

Roth choked. What? A stripe from a tiger’s butt? Did he mean Maudib? The scary-looking tiger?

“Not to brag, but stealing this was some of my best work. I used something called bleach papyrus. I sprayed it with some special compounds, and boom! The tiger’s stripe was sucked into the paper, and even his DNA was altered so that it doesn’t grow back. To this day, he doesn’t know I’ve stolen it. Next time you see Maudib at the next Table gathering, keep a close eye on his butt. Not even his buddies, Nira and Shadow, have the guts to tell him about this. As far

as he suspects, he has all his stripes. But now you know that there's one missing," he said, winking.

Lin's eyes are opened to how fun stealing can be!

+3 mischief.

Lil' Lin was soaking in every word that Oli said, listening attentively to the teachings of his master. Seeing the look of adoration in his pet and the increase in mischief, Roth was starting to regret bringing Lin here.

"Second most enjoyable way of stealing someone: You steal something that, no matter how they try to hide it, EVERYONE, including the target, will know they were robbed. Here. Check this out."

There was a bone circle with sharp, pointy edges. "What is this? Some kind of fossil?" tried Roth.

"No. This is the denture of the Shark King!" he announced in a grandiose wave of his paw.

Roth was speechless. "A denture? Of the Shark King?"

"Well... previous Shark King, to be accurate. He had to step out of the throne because he became toothless. His son is king now. I stole this from him once I found he was leading all his clansmen on, making them believe he could still grow his teeth. It's a big disgrace for a shark when they stop growing teeth. Long story short, I stole it the day before he had a big speech in the Ocean Assembly. He couldn't hide he had become an old toothless shark and had to step out of the throne. Nyahaha!"

Lin learns how crime can pay!

+2 mischief.

Little Lin giggled, hearing Oli's bravado, while Roth shook his head. This cat was evil!

"Last but not least, this is the most challenging and fun method. It also only works with very wealthy targets. Are you ready, my disciple?"

Lin nodded vigorously, his tail completely up.

"Here it goes: You warn your target you're coming to steal them. Then, you only take one thing. But here is where it gets fun. You return multiple times, always telling them what you're stealing next.

It's hilarious seeing them try to protect their treasures! Here. Look at this."

Lin's eyes twinkled with anticipation while Roth dreaded hearing what would follow. Oli directed their attention to one of the biggest items on display. There was a large dummy covered in beautifully crafted armor. Spikes covered almost every surface of the items, but Roth could tell the ensemble was incomplete. A shoulder pauldron and a boot were missing.

"This is a relic which used to belong to the Rhino General. It was in his family for generations. Every year, on the same day, I go to his castle and steal a piece. Poor rhinos. They only have three or four pieces left in their armory. I've already sent them a letter telling them I'm coming for the shield next week. It's going to be hilarious." Turning to Roth in a less friendly tone, he added, "Don't you dare take any of these away. These aren't like the knick-knacks you took from me last time."

"Meow, trill, meow?" Lin asked.

"No! He didn't steal from me. I let him take some garbage I didn't need anymore."

"Meow! Meow!"

"Fine, fine. Your human is great! I won't talk smack about your pet anymore."

Lin looked toward Roth and signaled how he had defended him from Oli's critics.

His pet?! Roth smiled awkwardly. Did Lin really believe that he was his pet and not the other way around?

"Meow, meow?"

"Yes. A long time ago. Come, I'll show you."

Finally, Oli led them to the painting of his master. "Can you see anything, disciple?"

"Chirp, trill."

"Just blurry, uh? Once your affinity with darkness deepens, you won't be able to see even that."

"Trill, cuff, meow?"

You are making more sense of the sounds around you.

Progress in learning Felinian: 12%.

“Master was a kind soul. He was an incredible craftsman, too. People all over used to come, begging him to craft for them. Despite being so busy, he always took time to play with me and pet me.”

“Meow, meow!” Lin said, gesturing with his little paw toward Roth.

“What? He? A craftsman? Yeah, right!”

“Meow, meow!”

“Fine!”

Unlike the two bickering cats, Roth could clearly see the painting. The image was as lifelike as last time; however, today, the portrait was motionless. He had thought that coming here after gaining a new tier of light affinity would unlock a new cinematic, but his guess was proven wrong. He stretched his hand and touched the plaque at the bottom, appreciating the craftsmanship.

Roth gasped. He was in a different place. His mind was transported to the same rustic house workshop he had seen in his last vision of Bergelmir. A man wearing an apron hunched over his workstation. His face was buried into a device similar to a microscope, and he shot bursts of red light from a tube in his hand. What was he doing?

Roth found he could walk inside this cinematic. It reminded him of when he started playing the game and was hovering in space. He walked over to the workstation to get a better view of the man’s work. He was working on a brick dark as coal. It was volcanic stone, if Roth wasn’t mistaken. The little bursts of red light he had seen were a laser burning the rock’s surface and forming a pattern.

Bergelmir steadily engraved on the brick, carving an intricate, beautiful symbol. Was he signing the brick? Why would anyone want to leave a mark on a brick?

The man then grabbed what looked like a glue gun, and, with his eyes leaning on the microscope-like machine, he pulled the trigger. Were it not for the [Farsight] skill that enhanced his vision, Roth would have missed the little beads of glass the gun was shooting. The man patiently left one bead at each intersection of the pattern. The degree of minutia required was incredible. Despite being delicate work, the man moved his hand steadily, never hesitating, never doubting his next move. In a matter of minutes, he was done.

“So, from how far in the future do you come?” the man asked as he inspected his work. His eyes were intelligent yet small, and he had a big nose, a long forehead, and silver hair.

Roth jolted backward. Who was he talking to?

As if to answer his question, Bergelmir looked straight at Roth. “I’m talking to you,” the man said. Bergelmir aimed the laser at one of the glass beads and activated it. The red light followed the carved pattern in the brick, bouncing off each glass bead. *Not glass*, Roth realized. *Those are mirrors!* The light made the pattern come to life and slowly faded.

“Good. It turned out OK. Time to put it into a vacuum.”

The man stood up, leaving a speechless Roth behind. “Aren’t you coming, son?”

“Right. Of course,” Roth yammered as he followed the artisan across the workshop. Bergelmir stopped next to a table with a tall machine. The craftsman pushed a button, causing the machine to open, and carefully deposited the brick in it. He then pulled a lever, closing it again. “This machine will seal the trap into a vacuum. Then all we need to do is choose the right light,” he explained.

“What kind of craftsman are you?” Roth asked. He still hadn’t figured out what this man did, exactly.

“A light trapper.”

“What does a light trapper do?”

“A light trapper traps light,” the man explained, smiling.

Roth still didn’t get it. “Fine. Next question. You can talk, but you’re just a painting.”

“I’m light,” corrected Bergelmir as he walked back toward the workstation and got started on another brick.

What did that even mean? This had to be a special NPC, and Roth had to find out more about him. He played along, trying to unlock the correct dialogue. “How did you become light?”

“I trapped it, and then I trapped myself in it. I mean. I will. At some point,” he said matter-of-factly. “For us to interact, I trust you’re somehow connected to Oliver,” he said, sparing a look at his gray and white cat, yawning at the corner of the cushion. “Shame that Rain of Fire business. Who knew that Oli would live so long, hey?”

“You’re from the past,” said Roth, looking at the younger version of Oli, “How are you talking to someone like me, from the future?”

“To a light beam, everything else stops.”

“You’re a time traveler, then?”

The man shrugged.

“Can you talk to everyone who looks at this painting?” tried Roth.

“Sadly, no. Just those with special sensitivity to light. You’re the first in many years or the last. I don’t know. This time thing is so confusing once you become light,” he said good-humoredly as he completed another carving on a brick. “Too bad, though. I wish I had more people to talk to. That way, I could somehow prevent this mess.”

He kept working for several seconds and then stopped. “That, of course, if you believe that time is in a closed loop and you can alter events,” he added, correcting his earlier statement. “It’s unfortunate really. Light trapping has many applications, and the Rain of Fire kills most of us.”

Finally discerning where this was leading, Roth gulped and bit the bait.

“Can I become a light trapper?”

“Yes. You have the gift to see the light. That means you can trap it.”

“How?”

The man wiped his brow as he finished another brick. He walked over to the same machine as before and, returning to his workstation, opened a drawer. Roth was expecting to receive a manual, but instead, the man grabbed a stick with different colorful feathers tied at the end of a string. Seeing Bergelmir picking it up, Oli was already up, his eyes glued to his owner.

“I could use a break. Oliver! Wanna play?” The cat jumped from his perch at once and rushed toward his owner, who was shaking the pole while laughing at Oli’s attempts to catch the feathers.

“You’ll become a light trapper then. Tell Oliver to give my legacy to you,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Oli. He’s kept my tools and a manual. You can get it from him.”

“Will he give them to me?” Roth asked in disbelief.

The man raised the cat toy, waving it while Oli jumped, trying to get it. “He will. Just tell him I miss playing with him. Tell him I named him Oliver because I found him under an olive tree.”

The cinematic was gone, and he was back at Oli's hideout.

Chapter 54

The image of a rustic, warm workshop dissolved into a world of dingy darkness and flashing pain. Roth was back at Oli's hideout, and his face and arms were on fire. Even though his perception should have allowed him to see well enough in Oli's hideout, he couldn't see anything. He couldn't breathe either.

"Us goin un?" he asked, but the words came out muffled.

"Wake up, martyr! WAKE UP! Nyah!"

Roth pulled at the cat, who was digging his claws into his skin and scratching his face. "Ouch! Argh. Gut uf." He finally managed to pry Oli off his face. "Get off, Oli! I'm back. Please stop!"

"Oh? You're finally paying attention. It's OK, disciple. You can stop."

Roth glanced over at his arm, where his little kitten had been busily leaving bite marks, which now scarred his whole arm. "Lin? Why?"

Oli answered before Lin could. "You see, my disciple? This strategy is good for capturing your pet's attention."

"Meow, nyah, trill."

"Hmmm. It's not the first time he spaces out, uh? Here's a little hint. Look at the marks you left. Can you see your mistake?"

"Meow?"

"No! There isn't any blood in it! You have to bite harder. Look at his face. See how my scratches pierced the skin. That's how you want to do it."

"Nyah! Meow!"

Roth clicked his tongue at the realization that Oli was turning his naive, cute kitten into a demon. His arms were hurting, but his face felt like it was melting. Unfortunately, the Ogres hadn't been able to

turn off the pain settings on his pod, and he couldn't do anything about the pain.

As the cats stopped attacking him and his hp regeneration kicked in, the pain receded, and the little bite marks Lin had left on him started closing. Turns out that nature affinity's enhanced hp regeneration did have its uses. Oli's scratches would take longer to go away, though.

"Why did you have to do that?!" protested Roth. "Lin, this is a bad lesson. Don't listen to this crazy cat. That's no way of treating your friends!"

"That's what you get for ignoring us. Lin, listen to the first commandment of the cats: You shan't be ignored!"

Lin took in the words of wisdom and seemed to get lost in thought, pondering the deep truths hidden in the commandment.

"Why did you space out, martyr? What did you see?" Oli demanded.

"Calm down, Oli. I was talking to your master."

Oli's lion-like fury melted away. His pupils dilated, and his ears drooped. "Master? You were talking to Master?" He asked, frailty in his voice.

"Yes, I was. I saw him playing with you."

"It can't be. How can you have spoken to Master? He's been dead for centuries."

"I'm telling you. I saw him operating some sort of machine in his workshop. There was a laser and a tall machine that sealed engravings in a vacuum. He was carving symbols on black bricks. We talked briefly, and he invited me to become a light trapper."

"How? N-No. It can't be," mumbled Oli. "Master is gone. Even if you had talked to him, he never found a worthy disciple. Why would he trust you?"

Roth shrugged. "I know. It's hard to believe. However, he did speak to me and told me to ask you for his stuff. Something about his legacy."

Oli's hair stood up, and he drew his sharp claws again. "The gall you have, human. This is all a ruse, isn't it? You've been planning to take away the mementos of my late master!"

"No, Oli. Of course not."

“Over my dead body,” he roared. The room became darker, disappearing in a thick gloom emanating from Oli. “I cannot see his painting. I cannot see his face. All I have is the scent he left on his tools. Master’s tools were his most precious treasure. How could I give them to you, human? Even though you’re my disciple’s pet, I can’t just part with my master’s legacy. I won’t. It’s MINE!”

Oli’s display of fury took Roth aback. He had suspected that Oli wouldn’t be happy to part with the souvenirs of his master, but he never expected this much resistance.

“Oliver,” he said calmly. The cat froze, and all the darkness disappeared.

“What? How...?”

“Your master told me that he found you under an olive tree. That’s why he called you Oliver. He trusted that you would give me his legacy after hearing this.” The cat’s brave front collapsed, making him look as small as little Lin. He wrapped his tail around himself, his shoulders slumped.

“Master... meow...” The sound was so sad and painful that Roth couldn’t help but walk toward the cat.

“Oh, Oli,” spoke Roth reassuringly. “I know you miss your master. He misses you, too. I could see how happy you two were when you played together. And you’re right, even though he was so busy, he took the time to play with you, didn’t he?”

Oli nodded sadly. He had gone from being a towering giant to a fragile child. Roth felt the urge to reach out toward him, and remembering the cat’s reaction the last time he tried to pet him, he stopped. Seeing how sad the cat was, he couldn’t help but reach out again and place his hand on Oli’s head. “It’s okay. It’s okay.” He said while the cat whimpered.

You’ve shown affection to a sad cat.

+2 reputation with Oli.

“I promise you that whenever you want to see your master’s stuff, you just have to come see me, and I’ll share it with you. Your master wanted light trapping to continue. Isn’t that the best way of preserving your master’s memory? By honoring his work?”

“Okay, martyr. I cannot disobey Master,” he said, looking toward the painting longingly as if he could see the picture of the two of them

together. Oli was slowly coming to terms with parting with his master's old tools. "What about that?" he said, turning to Lin, his voice sounding a little perkier. "Who would have known, disciple? My master became your pet's master. We do have a lot in common, don't we?"

"Chirp, nyah."

Progress in learning Felinian: 15%.

Roth couldn't help but laugh at the notion that he was Lin's pet. Whatever. Let him believe it.

"Okay, Martyr. I'll now pass on my master's legacy to you." Oli moved toward the bookshelf and pulled a few volumes, causing a vault to emerge from the ground. He moved the dials on the vault's door a few times, and the lid clicked. He started pulling out items from the safe.

"Here is the manual," said Oli as he handed over a leather tome. There were so many notes and loose pieces of paper inside the book that it seemed about to burst, but the book somehow stayed together.

"Thank you. I'll treasure this."

Light Trappers Manual (Unique)

A book containing the thoughts and insights of the late Master Bergelmir. It can guide a light trapper throughout his entire career.

Effects: Teaches the [Light Trapper] profession. Bound to Pax.

The second item was the same tube he had seen Bergelmir use in the cinematic earlier. It looked older and more used.

"This is Master's laser."

Bergelmir's Laser (Legendary)

Description: A fundamental tool of any respectable light trapper. This laser can fit any gem.

Gem: [White Quartz]

Effects:

Used to carve and activate light traps;

It can use any gem.

Roth gulped. This pen-sized item was a legendary piece of equipment!

“Depending on the crystal you insert into it, the light changes. Inside the laser is a white quartz, the most basic crystal you can use. Rubies and other precious stones work much better, but Master would want it this way.”

Roth squinted, eyeing Oli suspiciously.

“Are you sure that’s what your master wanted?” he tried. “Wouldn’t he prefer I get a proper ruby right from the start?”

“Of course not! He would want you to start from the bottom. Build some character!”

Was this cat looking out for his best interests, or was he unwilling to part with any of his precious gemstones? Roth couldn’t know, but he supposed he could buy better gemstones later.

“Finally, here is a glass gun.”

Bergelmir’s Glass Gun (Rare)

A device used by light trappers to form beads of reflective glass.

Effects:

Requires sand and energy to work;

Creates a reflective bead of glass.

“The quality of the reflective glass depends on the sand you put in. You also need to feed energy to your gun,” Oli explained, referring to Roth’s energy bar. “This will melt the sand and generate little pieces of reflective glass. The better the glass, the better the light trap.”

Roth accepted the second device without knowing what a light trap was or what it was used for. But he sure was glad to receive all this free stuff. He wasn’t even sure where to begin if he had to find these tools alone. So he would take everything Oli gave him and read the manual. It looked rife with information.

“Finally, you will want a vacuum maker. Where was it?” Oli started pulling different objects from the vault and throwing them everywhere. There was a gemstone the size of a basketball that he threw so carelessly that it bumped into the armored mannequin, making the armor treasured by the rhinos fall with a bang like a bunch of kitchen pots.

“Aha! Here it is. This was something that Master kept from his early days as a light trapper. It’s a little broken, but it still works somewhat. I guess it’s suitable for you, too.”

This cat... He really is being cheap! thought Roth. He was only parting with the essential items that would allow him to start his career.

“Fine”, he said begrudgingly.

Vacuum maker (Common)

This machine applies an adhesive over an engraving and sucks the air out of it, creating a vacuum. This machine is broken and needs to be fixed to regain some of its functionalities.

Effects:

Can seal light traps level 10 or lower.

“That’s it. The most precious,” Oli said, pointing toward the ledger now in Roth’s hands, “is that ledger. It contains all of Master’s insights. He wrote it with light. So, the more sensitive you become to light, the more information you will unlock.”

“Very well. Thank you.” Roth opened the manual.

Do you want to become a light trapper? [Y/N]

Roth was already a broker and an ecotailor. This would have been it for the average player, but he could have more professions thanks to his unique class. He still had three profession slots left to fill. He had no idea what a light trapper did, but to be guarded by one of the strongest NPCs in the game, it had to be something special

“Yes.”

Congratulations. You’ve become a [Light Trapper].

+10 dexterity;

+10 intelligence;

+10 light affinity.

The stats granted by gaining the profession were incredibly generous. They were far higher than what he had gained for becoming a broker and an ecotailor. Curious about what light trappers did, he opened the manual. The penmanship was simple but flawless. After seeing Bergelmir’s work earlier, he could recognize his steady hand and imagine him writing this book, hunched over the desk where he worked.

“Dear protégé,

If Oli gave you this manual, that means I have seen potential in you. You are the one who will bring light trapping back to life. To understand this fine art, first, you must master light. What is light?

There is no simple way of explaining this to you. Light is the opposite of darkness. It’s energy. It’s particles. It’s waves. Light is many things. As you understand each feature of this incredible form of energy, you can tap into its power.

As a trapper, you will create mazes: labyrinths of mirrors. Light will bounce off the walls of your trap indefinitely, distorting the space-time continuum and generating incredible phenomena. By setting a light trap in an object, you can enhance it and empower it.

Step one: Carve a pattern.

What I called a maze earlier is a pattern or a carving. It can be etched in metal, rock, sand, fibers, or anything where you can set mirrors at the proper angles. The angles must be just right so the photons bounce off the mirrors in an infinite loop. Precision and mastery of the glass gun are key here.

Step two: Vacuuming.

If air is in between the mirrors, light will gradually lose its strength, causing light to leak some of its energy over time. That’s the opposite of what you want. You want light to build up strength. Therefore all air has to be sucked from the inside of your trap so that there is nothing in between the mirrors. The more complex the pattern, the better your vacuum maker has to be.

Step three: Light imbuement.

Once you are satisfied with the trap and it is well isolated in a vacuum, you shoot a laser into it. The trap will have different properties depending on the wavelength and frequency of light.

Here is the simplest pattern you can make.”

Roth turned over the page and saw the illustration of the most basic light trap he could make.

Chapter 55

Turning the page, Roth found one simple triangle. Was this it? He had unlocked this incredible profession, and the pattern was only this? In the cutscene, Bergelmir had carved convoluted, intricate patterns. This looked like a child's drawing in comparison.

He kept reading the manual.

"This is the triangle frame, a beginner-level trap. It's one of the simplest shapes you can make, making light bounce twice before returning to its original position.

The more reflection points your light trap has, the more power it will hold. With time, you will create incredible labyrinthine patterns that will make light dance within. Recreate this trap using the tools I left with Oli, and you will begin your journey as a light trapper."

Roth was tempted to try it immediately. He already had the tools, but where should he etch a light trap? The manual did mention fibers, metal, and wood. He had seen Master Bergelmir craft a trap in a brick. Just as he picked up the laser and started looking around for something to etch a pattern in, Oli quickly burst his bubble.

"Hey, you're not going to start crafting here, are you?"

"Uh. Why not?"

"I've already taken enough time from my morning nap to accommodate you. I don't want the noise pollution on my turf. Lin," he said, turning toward the kitten, "by the way, here's the second commandment: Sleep. Sleep. Sleep."

"Meow meow?"

"Yes, it's just that."

Again, the little kitten became lost in thought, hit with inspiration. Applying the lesson right away, it started yawning.

"Who wrote the cat commandments?" asked Roth curiously.

“All cats came together to decide.”

“The Table, you mean?”

“No, just the civilized cats,” he said, gesturing toward him and Lin. He remembered Maudib calling Oli *domesticated*, but Oli preferred the term *civilized*.

“Wait a minute... You’re the only *cat*. I mean, there are two now, but you’re the only adult domes- I mean, adult civilized cat.”

“I am,” he confirmed.

“So when you say that all the cats came together to write these commandments, you’re referring to you sitting down and thinking of these on your own, right?”

The cat grinned.

Congratulations on seeing through Oli’s play on words.

+1 insight.

This little cat burglar! He was a handful, wasn’t he?

Anyway, if he didn’t want him to craft here, he would do his experiments once he reached the city. Disappointed for not being able to create his first light trap yet, Roth closed the book and put it away in his inventory.

Even if he wasn’t going to start making light traps right away, he was pretty sure he had a good grasp on what his new profession did. It was similar to the imbuer profession in New Earth, which became increasingly popular as the game progressed.

Once players reached the top levels, they kept the same equipment for months. Imbuers, using various methods, could enhance items and give them powerful stats. It involved playing a mini-game of skill and luck. The more imbuelements an item received, the harder it was to give it a new one. He remembered how he had once spent a fortune trying to bring his sword from +6 to +7, and the imbuer had still failed!

Once the imbuelements reached +8, there was a chance the item would shatter after a failed imbuelement. Many weren’t able to avoid the addiction of trying to imbue their items just once more. A crazy guild leader back then had almost bankrupted his guild to bring his staff up to +12. The Staff of Heavens, despite being of an epic grade, rivaled the might of even mythic-graded items! The famed staff owner had used the powerful weapon to trample over other guilds and

quickly got his money back with interest. Of course, he was extremely lucky and had broken many staffs and precious items in the process. Most weren't so fortunate.

Still, the first imbuelements were fairly cheap and simple, and any respectable player brought their equipment up to at least +2. So far in Astro Terra, he had heard about chip slots, but it looked like light traps were a second way of making items stronger. The possibility of strengthening an item, regardless of whether it had chip slots, was very appealing.

Roth was sitting on a gold mine! Who wouldn't like to have their items enhanced? He had to invest some time in this profession. Roth's to-do list, which had recently become a little shorter, was on its way to growing again. He opened the notes app to check all that was pending.

Getting out!

Find a place for treeants to forage

Help Lua find her herd

Find the Crow Emperor

Free the camel slaves

Locate Mario's mom

Exonerate the dwarf exiles

Become a card master?

Become a herbalist?

He added two:

Teach Lin some manners

Level light trapper profession

Looking at the to-do list awakened a sense of urgency in Roth. It was time to get going.

"Oli, thank you for having us. Lin, say goodbye to Oli."

"Nyah. Trill?"

"Soon, disciple," said Oli. "Your pet has to come to the Table. Otherwise, Zion told me he would rip him to shreds."

Just as he thought Oli was warming up to him, he said something aggressive. Hearing the violent threat, Roth hurriedly opened his note app again and added a new item to his list.

Be at the Table!!!

"Of course! I'll be there. Just you wait and see, Oli. Next time we meet, I'll be the finest light trapper in the world."

“You already are. You’re the only one.” Roth’s shoulders slumped. Oli had been petty enough to throw his earlier accusation back at him.

“Well, anyway, we have to get going.”

Yawning, Oli replied, “Yes, you have. Oli needs to run a quick errand and then needs his nap.”

Grimacing at how Oli had addressed himself using the third person, Roth left Oli’s lair, and the entrance to the tree disappeared behind him. That had been a productive visit, leading him to gain several levels and obtain nature affinity, a new tier of light affinity, a legendary skill, and a new profession!

Lin called out to him, and he understood one of the sounds for the first time.

“Meow. Climb.”

Roth kneeled, letting Lin climb aboard. He climbed his pants, disappearing into his shabby jacket, then resurfaced at Roth’s collar, only his head popping out. Roth petted him a little and started walking northeast. It was time to start fresh in a new world region.

*

Meteor punch!

The mob blocking the gate was sent flying, and Jaw-Long stepped triumphantly into Core. Spotting a tall young man with a crimson sleeveless shirt sitting under a crystal tree, he walked toward him. He had a sharp nose and posture almost as impeccable as his.

“Hello, sir. How was the hunt?” he greeted.

“Interesting, to say the least.”

“Just got the notification that the event is over? Did you manage to stop Loki?”

“He’s been stopped,” spoke Jaw-Long with a tone of finality. “Although Zin will be a headache in the future.”

“Have you heard about his new guild?”

“The Horizon Networks Usurpers,” said Jaw-Long mockingly. “And such a powerful sponsor, too.” Shaking his head, Jaw-Long started walking. “Come, son. I could use some stretching. What are the Dragons up to?”

“We were about to go hunt the Jade Giant.”

“Very well. Show me the way.” They started walking east toward the Glass Grasslands.

“How are the other guilds doing?” asked Wei-Liang as they crossed the Crystal Forest, the first map at the entrance of Core.

“Oh, they’re doing well. They’ve become more powerful. I’ve had a few surprises. ColdHand is scary, as always. And Ogre... well, in a drawn-out battle, he’s bad news. But that wasn’t the biggest surprise.”

“No?”

“Remember what I told you about this Roth Taylor character?”

“Oh yes, the Slayer. A scary berserker.”

Jaw-Long sighed. He really was getting old. His son had told him that he had fought the Slayer in New Earth. A few years ago, he wouldn’t have forgotten something this meaningful. “He’s interesting.”

“Interesting, as in, let’s bring him into the fold?”

“No. He’s unpredictable.”

Wei-Liang let out a whistle. “Wow.”

“What?” asked Jaw-Long.

“That’s very generous praise.”

“I wasn’t praising him,” countered Jaw-Long.

“That’s how you praise people, sir.”

Jaw-Long grinned. “You know me well.”

A gust of wind blew, and Jaw-Long felt danger. His son was already back-to-back with him. He’d felt it, too. The instincts they had honed in so many battles told them that there was a powerful presence lurking nearby. There was another gust of wind, and the sense of danger disappeared.

After a few long moments, Wei-Liang finally broke the silence. “What was that?”

“I don’t know. But there was something here. Are you OK?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s go. Tell the Dragons to come here and meet us halfway. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Sir! Where are your pants?!”

“Uh? Excuse me?” The old man looked down and saw that the bottom part of his equipment was missing, revealing only the undershorts that poor beginners used. Jaw-Long’s face flushed. “But how... I was wearing...”

His son was trying to hold his laughter. It didn’t work. Wei-Liang couldn’t control himself and burst out laughing.

“This is not funny. Those were part of my legendary set.”

“What can I tell you? It’s just too funny.”

“Where are my pants?!”

“Relax, sir. They have to be here somewhere. Let’s go look.”

They separated, trying to look for any signs of the missing pants. Then Jaw-Long finally found something. It was a piece of paper nailed to a tree. The handwriting on it seemed to belong to a child.

“Coming for the jacket next week, same time.” Then, it was signed with a small paw mark.

“What kind of animal leaves this mark?” asked Wei-Liang. “It almost looks like....”

Jaw-Long remembered how he had grabbed Roth’s pet, thrown it at Loki, and grimaced. “A cat.”

*

“The safe specifically says that players can not break into it. How on earth were my treasures taken?” Loki demanded furiously.

“Sir, I’ve checked, and there’s no problem with the game’s programming. A player didn’t break into your safe. There is no contradiction here.”

“Then who? An NPC?”

“I can’t say, sir,” the GM answered amicably. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Loki waved the GM off, and he disappeared from view. He opened the menu and logged out of the game. He waited for his surveillance to check if the coast was clear and let the building’s mechanisms bring him out of the pod.

As he was deposited into his wheelchair, Loki glanced at the window. It was dark outside, but the horizon was starting to gain some color. He rolled his wheelchair over to his desk and used the computer to dial one of his contacts in Nexus.

“Sir?” the man answered in a sleepy voice.

“Marius, someone stole items from my guild’s safe. I need your help figuring out who it was,” said Loki, ignoring all pleasantries.

“Sir, your account is under surveillance. They already suspect you of foul play. If my superior finds out....”

“Do it!” barked Loki.

The man cursed under his breath but did as he was told. After a few moments, he responded. “An NPC used a special skill.”

“What NPC?”

“Let me try...” After a few moments, the man typed a few commands into his computer and cursed, sounding flustered, “They locked me out.”

“Are you compromised?”

“No, I used a dummy account. It wasn’t easy to set up,” he said sadly. “Oh, man.”

“That’s it?! You can’t tell me anything else?”

“Sir, it’s one thing to get you the coordinates of the occasional wild boss. However, Nexus has strict security protocols and compartmentalizes access. Game content tagged as valuable is monitored and...”

“Enough. I’ll be in touch.”

Loki sunk into his chair, disappointed. He had hoped to gain a clue, but it looked like this was a dead end. Why would an NPC steal from him? Was it the Slayer’s cat? When he spotted him, he was coming from the direction of the safe. Could it be? As he thought of the Slayer, all the pain and humiliation of the last few days returned to haunt him.

Loki made himself look out over the city. The sun was rising, but his mood was still dark. The windows of the skyscrapers twinkled in the hues of the morning light, a crude attempt to emulate how the lake’s surface did the same with seeming ease and a better visual impact.

Loki’s grip around the arms of his wheelchair tightened. So much of his meticulous plan had been compromised. Loki sighed. He had to change all his plans and rebuild his strength. Zin had to be eliminated, and so did Roth.

###

The End of Book 4

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