SETH RING

NOVA TERRA: LIBERATOR

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Who believed I could do this before I did

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CHAPTER ONE

Thorn could hear the yells before the village came into sight. Flickers of the cultists' red robes could be seen through the trees like dancing flames, the acrid smell of smoke promising chaos. Gripping his tetsubo tightly, Thorn broke through the trees into the clearing around Treefell village, his blood beginning to boil as he took in the devastation.

“Phobos Squad, sweep left. Deimos, sweep right!”

As his deep voice cut through the din of battle, Thorn charged forward into the village, the Titan Squad rushing in behind him. Treefell village was a total mess. Everywhere Thorn looked he could see players and Freemen fighting against red-robed Wolfkin cultists who were armed with scythes and sickles.

[Shadow Dash]

His body blurring, Thorn sped up, arriving next to a red-robed cultist who was looming over a prone Freemen Ranger. A backhand strike sent the cultist flying into a wall, ending its life instantly. Leaving the Ranger to his teammates, Thorn surged forward again, knocking an incoming slash to the side and ending another cultist’s life with a stab of the spiked end of his metal tetsubo.

A stream of razor-sharp shards of ice flew past Thorn’s head, ripping into a group of three cultists who had just stepped out of an alleyway. Slowed down by the freezing effect, the cultists attempted to retreat only to find themselves jumping into a nest of barbed vines that Seven Twisted Leaves summoned behind them. The whipping vines wrapped around their limbs, sharp thorns binding them in place long enough for Mina’s [Ice Spikes] to finish the job.

“Tanks to the front! Let’s do a clean sweep, but watch out for the cursed blades.”

“Thorn, there are a group of loggers down by the water to the west!”

“I’m on it!”

Activating [Predator’s Leap], Thorn vanished from where he stood with a hiss of steam. Launched through the air, he kicked off from the roof of one of the buildings that lined the street, sending himself flying over it into a large open space. His maneuver came at the cost of a hole in the tiles, but he paid the damage he caused no mind and charged toward the lake that was southwest of Treefell.

By the edge of the water he could see a large group of players and natives trapped by a big crowd of the red-robed cultists. Storming forward, Thorn threw back his head and howled, the eerie sound rapidly spreading across the village and giving everyone pause. The cultists in front of the lake were close enough that the stunning effect of his ability caused them to fall into a stupor just long enough for Thorn to barrel into them.

Swinging his tetsubo around him, Thorn began to crush cultists left and right. Almost all of the cultists were unarmored and carried only basic monk weapons, the equivalent of the Temple of the Moon’s disciples. However, Thorn had spotted a few who seemed to have advanced classes, carrying both armor and scythe-like blades.

“Slay the false ruler!” one of the large Wolfkin cultists cried out, raising a strange looking skull up in the air. Pointing it at Thorn who was swiftly carving his way through the crowd, the cultist began to shout unintelligibly, his saliva spraying. Soon those around him picked up his frenzied chant and rushed toward Thorn with wild abandon. Beset on all sides, Thorn realized that there were more cultists than he had thought.

Abruptly stopping his charge, Thorn jumped backward, sweeping his weapon behind his back to ensure that he was not being surrounded. More and more cultists streamed together as they heard the skull-wielding

Wolfkin’s chant, forming a field of crimson as they gathered by the lake. Taking another step back, Thorn could sense that he was soon going to be back up against a building. Just as he was about to take a chance to rush to one side, a large ball of ice dropped in front of him, quickly ripping apart any cultists that tried to approach.

“Sheesh, can’t you wait for us?” Mina grumbled as she cast her spell from the roof behind Thorn.

“You made it, didn’t you?”

“This time I did. What have I told you about thinking you are invincible?”

“Ha, if I thought I was invincible I would be in the middle of the crowd, wouldn’t I?” Grinning under his helmet, Thorn felt a spectral force wrap around his body, turning aside the attacks of the few cultists who were still able to reach him. “Thanks, Delmore. How is the rest of the village?”

The Titan Squad’s Tigerkin Spirit Guide paused his mumbling to check his messages.

“Deimos Squad is reporting all clear. Phobos has run into some trouble. Some sort of giant Werewolf. I’ll send the rest of the Titan Squad to help them contain it.”

“Thanks. Alright folks, let's get these small fry cleaned up.”

With the help of his teammates, it did not take Thorn long to clear the large crowd of cultists, causing the loggers who had been saved to break out into cheers. After taking quick stock of the situation, Thorn led everyone to meet up with the other two squads and headed for the next spot where Peregrine had spotted groups of cultists.

It was not until nearly six hours later that Thorn and his friends finally made it back to Treefell. They had cleared a large portion of the center of the valley out, paying careful attention to the logging camps that surrounded the town. Accepting a bowl of stew from one of the guild’s cooks, Thorn plopped down next to a crackling campfire.

Close to a thousand fires dotted the area near the lake, all surrounded by players from Nova Luna. The entire guild had mobilized to try and deal with the threat of the cultists who were overrunning the valley. Thankfully, the swift response seemed to be helping to stabilize the situation. Nova Luna was well organized, largely due to Corvo’s administration, the benefits of which were starting to manifest themselves.

As an earl of the first class, Thorn was allowed to employ an army of 25,000 soldiers. Ten thousand of those soldiers formed the core fighting force

of the army. These professional players who were under contract with Nova Luna had been formed into battalions, with each battalion holding a thousand players. The battalions were divided further into companies of one hundred, and then units of ten.

The remaining fifteen thousand soldiers were not players at all, but were native Wolfkin who had been recruited to protect the valley. At first, Thorn wanted to recruit a full army of players since players tended to be stronger than natives, but Corvo had quickly reminded him that players carried an inherent risk. Additionally, if he was going to leave Captain Del'har in charge, he needed an army that would properly take orders from the native Wolfkin.

True to her promise, Athena had sent over a whole team of bodyguards with military backgrounds who helped create a solid structure for the development of Thorn's army. While there were other player organizations that had military style structures, the Greymane Valley army was the first official player army in Nova Terra.

"Everyone has reported back, my lord. The operation can be considered a success."

Putting the last bit of a loaf of bread in his mouth, Thorn looked up and saw Captain Del'har saluting. Next to him stood Henry and a few other bodyguards that his aunt had sent to him. The military players had taken to the game like fish to water, but it was obvious from how their eyes were roaming that they were still somewhat shocked by all of it.

"Good. Let's talk about our next move."

Standing up, Thorn brushed off his pants and headed into a large tent that had been erected nearby. Even though the town of Treefell was nearby, both Corvo and Captain Del'har had requested that they use this opportunity to train the players in proper camp discipline. They only had a few weeks until they deployed to Rasyn where they would be sleeping in tents so it was a great time to whip all of their soldiers into shape. Ducking through the tent flap, Thorn approached the large map that was suspended in the center of the room. Once everyone had entered, Captain Del'har cleared his throat and began to speak.

"My lord, the threat of the cultists has been largely contained, though it would take very little for another major outbreak to happen. We have cleared all the major towns and have started the process of sweeping the surrounding forest. Without any clear understanding of the numbers of the cultists it is

very hard to determine what sort of impact we've had, but I'm confident that, at the very least, we've prevented mass outbreaks.

"Our casualties are fairly significant however, with six hundred and thirty-three dead and nearly a thousand wounded by the corrupting attacks. Thankfully the corruption is easy to spot so we shouldn't have any major trouble with infections once we've cleared out an area. The teams at the farthest end of the valley are doing a sweep to ensure that we are able to keep the threat contained around the old temple."

"What are we doing with the wounded? Have we been able to figure out a way to heal them?" Frowning, Thorn rubbed his forehead. Thankfully the sixteen hundred wounded soldiers were all players who could respawn, but the number of dead and wounded still gave Thorn a headache.

"No, but we are putting them to good use." This time it was Henry who spoke up. Dressed in armor that looked like a cross between a knight and a roman legionnaire, Henry was Thorn's former bodyguard, who had taken the name Hasta in-game and seemed to be having the time of his life. "We transferred everyone who was wounded to the front lines and gave them a bounty of one gold per cultist they kill. Since they are going to die from the corruption we might as well get our money's worth out of them."

The thought of a thousand money hungry players with nothing to lose gave Thorn the chills. A bounty was a great motivator for players, and many soldiers who were not wounded had immediately volunteered to rush forward with their companions.

"When do we think the sweep will be done?"

"It should be done by tomorrow night, my lord. Queen Akira's people have proved to be an invaluable asset in hunting down the cultists hiding in the forests, and the teams are making good time. Once we've finished the sweep, we will establish our perimeter here." Captain Del'har traced a claw across the map, drawing a line around the abandoned Temple of the Moon.

"Excellent. We don't have very long before we're going to get the summons from the duke, so we need to clean this up quickly. We need to scout out what we are going to be facing when we go after Mayari, but we also can't afford to throw players away. I have a feeling that we're in for a multi-stage engagement here."

"Yes, my lord. I'll have the New Moon Walkers begin their scouting."

Continuing to discuss their options, Thorn's sharp ears heard footsteps outside of the tent and looked toward the entrance.

“Come in.”

The tent flap lifted and a Wolfkin soldier stepped inside, pounding his chest in salute.

“My lord, there is an exceptionally large wolf calling himself Maugrim at the edge of the camp. He is asking to speak with you.”

“Excellent, please lead the way.” Smiling broadly, Thorn looked at his officers. “Maugrim is an ally, hopefully. Come, let's go meet with him.”

Following the soldier, Thorn and the others weaved their way through the camp. As they walked, Hasta explained how they had organized the units. Each campfire was assigned to a pair of units, with fifty campfires belonging to each company. The campfires were set out in neat squares with clear space to walk between them.

While it had been a challenge to get the players into the military mindset, the fact that this was quite literally their job had made it much easier to keep them organized. A small army of support personnel was assigned to cooking and assisting the ten battalions, though many of the support roles that an army would have in the real world were made unnecessary by the system. As it was, each campfire was assigned a cook, an alchemist, and a porter.

Seeing a porter packing away item after item into their inventory as they cleaned up after the cook, a flash of nostalgia shot through Thorn. It really had not been that long since he had taken on that role for Ouroboros’ team. At the same time it felt like an entire lifetime ago.

“Greetings, Lord Greymane.”

“Hello, Maugrim.” Brought back to the present by the giant wolf’s raspy voice, Thorn grinned.

“My master has brought us to assist you in your fight against the red-robed ones.” Maugrim gave a scornful glance at the army arrayed behind Thorn. “Judging from the quality of your soldiers, you need all the help you can get.

“And here I assumed from your greeting that you were here to ask for a favor.”

“Heh, only that you would complete the quest quickly. The longer you wait the more dangerous it will be for the whole valley. Still, you seem to have recovered much of your strength.”

Thorn was not sure if it was his imagination or not, but the huge wolf seemed to be maintaining a clear seven feet between them. Every time Thorn moved forward Maugrim took a corresponding step backwards or to the side. Given how much the Children of the Moon valued strength, Thorn could ask

for no better indication that he had been improving.

“Do you have any defenses against the corruption that the cult is spreading? If not, I’m not sure that I’m comfortable with you fighting.”

“We fear no corruption,” growled another deep voice as more giant wolves stalked out of the darkness.

“Sure, but there is no reason for you to die because of it. I’m not interested in telling your mom that I got a bunch of you killed.”

“Worry not, Lord Greymane, the corruption will not harm us. Our connection with the master will protect us.”

“Huh, convenient. Oh, that reminds me.” His eyes brightening, Thorn gestured for Captain Del’har and Hasta to step forward. “I have something to do back at the temple. While the sweep is being completed, you two are in charge. Make sure to keep our casualties down as much as possible. Oh, and talk to Maugrim here to figure out the best way to coordinate containing the cultists. I’ll be back by tomorrow afternoon.”

Without waiting for a response, Thorn glanced up at the sky and then took off running for the citadel.

CHAPTER TWO

The moon was high in the sky when Thorn finally reached the gate. Due to the cultist threat, the gates had been closed at dusk and a squad of guards had been posted to guard the small door. When they saw Thorn's massive figure, they grasped their weapons tightly and lowered them across his path, forcing him to stop.

"Hold! Who goes there!"

"Earl Greymane, Lord of Moon Wolf Citadel, Avatar of the Moon Wolf, Inheritor of the Temple of the Moon, Wolfsbane, Kingbreaker, Hero, Gladiator, Friend of Earth, and Bearer of the Stone Heart." Rapidly listing off his titles, Thorn pounded his fist against his chest in a warrior's salute.

"Uh, e...excuse me your lordship." The guard who had spoken stuttered, nearly dropping his spear as he returned the salute.

Chuckling, Thorn patted him gently on the shoulder.

"Haha, sorry, sorry. You are doing great. Great tone, very stern. Keep up the good work."

Entering the citadel, Thorn made his way into the temple quarter, greeting the disciples guarding the gate. Just like the rest of the citadel, the Temple of

the Moon had grown exponentially and was now larger than the whole citadel had been when Thorn first bought it. From a simple complex it had grown into a whole series of interconnected neighborhoods and sub-temples.

Walking up the large stone stairs to the main temple, Thorn’s thoughts drifted back to Hati's Ascent, the corrupted temple that had been turned into a dungeon where he had first met Hati. Much of the stonework of the current Temple of the Moon was the same, once again proving to him how interconnected the game was. Though people had been playing the game for years, it was obvious that they had only just begun to scratch the surface.

The large temple had a wide set of doors that opened up into an ingeniously designed room that held the main statue of Hati. The roof of the building rotated throughout the day, blocking the sunlight but allowing the moon to shine down on the statue. Stepping into the light of the moon, Thorn felt his spirit relax, the stress and pressure of the day melting away.

Letting out a deep breath, Thorn buckled on his helmet and settled into his first stance. For his whole life, his martial arts had been a form of meditation for him, and nothing had changed when he came to Nova Terra. Pushing his palms out in front of his chest slowly, he slid his right foot forward and gently rotated, his arms floating through the air.

Slowly, calmly, Thorn completed his first set of forms and continued into his second set. After running through all of his forms, he came to a rest and breathed out one final time. Taking a seat with his legs crossed, he rested his hands in his lap, his thumbs maintaining the barest amount of contact. Deep breaths filled his abdomen, filling his body with energy. Holding each breath for a moment, he exhaled, sending the turbid air in his lungs whooshing out like an arrow. The rhythm of his breathing filled him, driving any other thoughts out of his mind.

At one point, the temple caretaker arrived to light some incense in the temple but stopped when he saw Thorn’s huge figure seated before the statue of Hati. Lost in his meditation, Thorn felt something shift inside of him and opened his eyes, only to find his surroundings changed. The temple was gone, and in its place was a smooth, silvery surface that stretched into the distance.

Standing up, Thorn spotted something in the distance and began walking toward it. The dark shape was blurry at first, but the closer Thorn got, the sharper his vision became, until he felt like he could see every detail of the dark fur that covered the wolf’s body. Instinctively, Thorn understood that

the wolf was Hati, despite the fact that the wolf barely came up to his shoulder.

Stopping next to Hati, Thorn looked down. In front of him an endless abyss stretched, containing a darkness so deep that it threatened to suck him in. Frowning slightly as he felt his mind wavering, Thorn felt like staring into the darkness any longer would be terribly dangerous. Still, he could not help himself and his strength continued to drain away.

[That is not safe, child.]

Hati's warm voice wrapped around Thorn, pulling him back from the edge. Feeling warm fur at his side, Thorn's hand reached up to caress the fur on Hati's shoulder.

[The Abyss is not a place that anyone can face alone. No matter how strong you become, the darkness there will swallow your light and turn it to darkness.]

"Then how do we beat it?"

[By standing together. Together our light is amplified. When we reflect off of others, our light grows. But enough of this. You did not come here to hear my sermon. Tell me, avatar of mine, how are you?]

"I'm good." Letting out a deep breath, Thorn turned away from the endless abyss and faced Hati. "I'm really good. Life is full, and complicated, and tiring, and I have a feeling that things are going to get pretty crazy soon, maybe in a bad way. But I'm good."

Though a wolf could not really smile, Thorn got the distinct impression that Hati was laughing at him.

[You are quite perceptive, Titan of Earth. Though I guess I should not call you by that name yet. First, you must unveil the power of your heart.]

"Yeah, about that. Can you explain what is going on? This game is awesome, but the complete lack of explanations is seriously irritating. I've already embarrassed myself countless times and I don't fancy doing it again."

[What do you mean? What do you need an explanation about?]

"This! All of...this. Sure, okay, my heart has been replaced with this Stone Heart. And that makes me the Titan of Earth. Or it will once I've unlocked the heart. How do I do that? What does it mean to be the Titan of Earth? Are there other Titans? How come all of this stuff is happening to me? Why do I keep getting all these quests? What do I do with a whole valley full of people?"

As a torrent of questions poured from Thorn's lips, Hati sat down on his

haunches and cocked his head to the side. Eventually Thorn had to pause to take a deep breath. About to launch into more questions, his eyes met Hati's and the words caught in his throat. After a moment of silence he lowered his head, his gaze falling onto his hands, and sighed.

"You are not going to answer my questions, are you?"

[Heh, no, no I'm not. I'm sorry, Thorn, but I cannot reveal the secrets of heaven. All of these questions are things you will have to discover for yourself. Without the journey to discover the answers, the questions would lose all value. What I can say is that you and your companions have and will continue to change the world. Since you stepped foot in Nova Terra, it has never been the same. What could be better?]

"I guess that's true." Still looking at his hands, Thorn slowly made a fist.

[Thorn, our time grows short and I must return to my task. But do not fear what the future brings, you would not have been chosen if you were not up to the task.]

Hati finished speaking, his form growing larger until he filled Thorn's vision. A gentle, hot breath caressed his face as Hati breathed out. As Thorn's vision faded, he saw Hati turn toward the darkness and throw back his head like he was howling before launching himself into the endless abyss.

Opening his eyes, Thorn was back in the temple, sitting in front of the statue of Hati. The first light of dawn was beginning to peek over the mountains and spill into the valley. As he was about to stand up, a silver light flickered in the statue's eyes and T

horn's armor changed before his eyes. The thick, bronze plates were gone, replaced by subtle fur-like silver scales. Grinning, Thorn opened up his menu and selected his armor.

Wolf Lord's Heavy Armor - Blessed by Hati
Crafted for Lord Greymane, The Moon Wolf, by the Master Smith Varroh Belshir, this set of masterwork armor was commissioned by the heroes who defeated Courdum the Stone King. Made from a Fire Iron and Darksteel alloy, the Wolf Lord's heavy armor is marked with the holy symbol of Hati, the god of the night. Having completed the Moon Vigil, this armor has been blessed by Hati. To transfer this blessing to another set of armor, complete a Moon Vigil at one of Hati's temples while wearing that armor.

Armor Bonuses:
+Speed
[Quicksilver Claws]
+Strength
[Predator's Leap]
+Constitution
[Moon’s Reflection]

Set Bonus:
[2 pieces]: +Agility for every piece worn
[3 pieces]: +Duration of [Wolf's Rage] for every piece worn
[4 pieces]: +Defense of [Wolf Hide] for every piece worn
[5 pieces]: +Increased area of effect of [Wolf Helm] for every piece worn
[6 pieces]: +Faster transformation into [Wolf Form] for every piece worn

Flexing the razor sharp claws on his gauntlets, Thorn jumped to his feet. The motion was smooth and simple due to the increase in his agility granted by Hati’s Blessing. An unprecedented feeling of strength filled him as the bonuses from his [Wolf Hide] and [Wolf Helm] abilities took effect.

Settling into his martial stance once more, Thorn began to run through his forms, this time holding nothing back. His fists ripped the air, blurring as he tore imaginary enemies apart. Laughing out loud, he cupped his fists and bowed to the statue of Hati before leaving the temple and heading for the kitchen.

Once breakfast was over, Thorn rushed back toward Treefell Village, his silver armor gleaming in the morning light. The camp seemed exactly the same as when he had left it, and as he walked toward his tent his shining silver armor caught many of the soldiers' attention.

“Greetings, my lord.” Captain Del’har saluted with his hand over his chest when he saw Thorn walk up, the rest of the officers following suit.

“How is everything proceeding?”

Hasta stepped forward and gave Thorn’s new outfit an appraising look and then glanced down at his own armor before replying.

“It is going well so far. There have been some problems with groups of assassins, but we’ve reinforced the sweeping teams which has helped. Still, it is a rough fight. Casualties have gone up by about fifteen percent as of dawn, which was less than I anticipated.”

“Hmm. Assassins? Are they part of Devil’s Blood?”

“We have not been able to make a positive identification, but based on the descriptions of the Freemen who have encountered them previously, I think so.”

“Tell everyone to be careful, if they are part of Devil’s Blood, they’re strong. I’ve tangled with them myself. Be especially careful if you see any with different color masks. The leader wears a red mask if I remember right.”

“I’ll relay that, sir.”

“What about the professional teams?” Thorn turned his head to ask Captain Del’har. The day before the three dungeon diving squads had split up to reinforce the other towns in the valley while Thorn held the base at Treefell.

“The Titan Squad is holding the ruins of Greymane Keep, Deimos is holding the Southern Stockade, and Phobos is clearing the forest south of the road between here and Greymane Town. Once the sweep has caught up to them, we’re going to make a concentrated push toward Greyfield village. We’re pretty sure that is where Gelish is right now. If we can take Greyfield and hold the Southern Stockade, we can set up a strong blockade of the abandoned Temple of the Moon where Mayari is sealed. But before that, I think it would be appropriate for you to address the troops, sir. Especially since you have regained your proper, uh, form.”

“You mean this armor?”

“Yes, my lord. Many of our soldiers joined us because they saw your fight against the Stone King, Courdum. Seeing you in that form will be quite inspiring.”

“Good thing I got my voice back, huh. Otherwise this would be really awkward.”

“That is true, my lord.”

“Alright, Corvo warned me that this would have to happen at some point. Go ahead and set it up. I’ll think of something to say.”

Saluting, Captain Del’har hurried off to organize the gathering, leaving Thorn facing Hasta.

“Hello, Henry. You seem to be enjoying Nova Terra.”

“Yes, sir.” Hasta smiled widely, resting his hand on the short sword at his waist. “A world where I can fight freely and often is a welcome change from normal life.”

“Good, I’m glad you are settling in. Do let me know if you need

anything.”

“Thank you, sir. As long as you let me and the boys whip this army into shape I should be good. Speaking of which, I should go assist the captain. Some of the players are not so fond of listening to an NPC.”

“Sure,” Thorn waved his hand. “Just send me a message when you are ready.”

After watching Hasta salute and leave, Thorn sat down and cupped his chin in his hands. Before he had entered the game he had no experience with public speaking, though the thought of it had never troubled him. Athena had given countless talks and presentations that he had watched so he was quite familiar with the basic principles of public speaking, but his experience was quite limited overall.

Thankfully, the training he had done for his [Dawn Form] had included some public speaking. In fact, his whole class path revolved around speaking to other people. And this was not much different from speaking to one or two people. Mulling over what to speak about, Thorn began to think about the whole questline he was on.

His encounter with Mayari had been quite brief, but she carried the stench of the devils and every indication was that there was a greater devil behind the change in the quest. While Thorn had encountered Karrandras a number of times and even defeated his pawns, there was something unsettling about how everything was ramping up. The changes on Rasyn that preceded the Orc invasion, the strange smell on the third prince, the reports about the changes on the southern continent.

Everything seemed to indicate that the devils were planning a major move, and Thorn was quickly getting swept up in the building maelstrom. With a sigh, Thorn pushed his thoughts aside when he saw Captain Del’har approaching. Standing up, he buckled on his helmet and rolled his head around his shoulders. It was time to give a speech.

CHAPTER THREE

The bright flags that ringed the parade ground snapped in the morning breeze, creating a lively atmosphere. Rows of players stood in their units as they waited for Thorn to arrive, their mixed armor and weapons presenting a stunning sight. Each of the units of ten had three tanks, three dedicated DPS, two healers, and two support classes, creating a roughly uniform fighting force.

Most of the players who had been recruited for the Greymane Army were accomplished, though not quite at the level of an Elite player. When the valley had opened up paid recruitment, they had flocked for the chance to step into the ranks of the professional gamers. After fighting fiercely for the 10,000 slots, they were full of high spirits. Not even the abrupt deployment to the valley had been able to dampen their excitement.

As Thorn walked up onto a small platform that the Captain had set up, he could see thousands of pairs of eyes looking back at him. Reading many things in those gazes, Thorn was stunned to see how intensely they focused on him. Lifting his hands, Thorn removed his helmet and clipped it to his belt. Summoning his tetsubo from his inventory, he planted his feet in the

center of the stage and rested the tip of his metal weapon next to his foot.

Seven of the ten battalions that made up the Greymane Army special troops were lined up in front of him, but despite the pressure, Thorn suddenly felt really good. The familiar excitement of a dangerous situation coursed through him, causing a slight smile to slip onto his face. A thick silence hung over the field as the soldiers waited for Thorn to speak.

“Greetings, soldiers.” Thorn paused slightly, his gaze sweeping across the field. “Soldiers. Heh. What a strange way to refer to you. After all, some of you might still think of yourselves as gamers. Professional gamers at that. Feels good, doesn’t it? Well, I’m sorry to shatter your dreams, but we are not offering professional gaming careers here. If that is your goal, you have come to the wrong place. If your goal is to be the greatest warrior, the greatest mage, the greatest tracker, or the greatest scullery maid in Nova Terra, you are in the wrong place.”

Confused, one of the officers next to Hasta turned to him to ask what was going on, only to be silenced by a look. On the stage, Thorn scratched his chin, his deep voice continuing to roll out over the field.

“No, what we offer here is something else entirely. Something new, something that has never been done before in this world. Something that will never be replicated. Something that will cement your name in legend. You have committed yourselves to becoming, not the greatest of warriors, but the greatest of soldiers. Before today, you were all individuals, with your own stories, your own concerns, but from this point on, you will become something more.

“Today is just a beginning. The beginning of a story that will be told in eras to come. A story that will leave our enemies cowering. A story that will grant hope to our allies. Today is the beginning of the Iron Wolf Army. Though the process will be long, though it will be hard, though you will find yourself sorely tested, know that today marks a moment in time that will never be forgotten.”

Lifting his tetsubo to his shoulder, Thorn’s presence dominated the field. Wherever his gaze landed the soldiers stood straighter, passion burning in their eyes. A wide smile spread across Thorn’s face as he continued.

“We have much to learn, much to improve upon, but already we face our first threat. The traitor Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has spread the corruption of an ancient evil and seeks to overthrow the valley. Yesterday we spilled our blood to prevent them from destroying our

homes. Even now, our brothers and sisters fight against the Devil's Blood cult throughout the valley. But we will not be defeated. Soon we will take the fight to them, and rid our land of this blight.

"Today, you are not adventures any longer. You have a new identity. Today you are soldiers. Soldiers who will be forged into the finest fighting force that this world has ever seen. Today, you are the Iron Wolf Army!"

Completely caught up in the moment, an armored cleric stepped forward and raised her morningstar into the air.

"Iron Wolves!"

Her cry echoed across the field like an electric shock. Hundreds of other players stepped forward, their weapons rising.

"Iron Wolves!"

The cry was taken up by the rest of the soldiers, who stepped forward with an earthshaking crash, their weapons held high. Throwing back their heads, they yelled out.

"Iron Wolves!"

On the stage, Thorn's small smile grew into a great grin. Lifting his tetsubo into the air, he raised his voice in a long wolf's howl that echoed eerily above the thunderous chant. The howl radiated out, filling the seven battalions with energy and causing their fervor to reach its peak. Once the chant had ended, thorn put his tetsubo back down and held up his hand for quiet.

"Let this moment be ingrained in your minds, for today you have witnessed history being made. Soon we will join our brothers and sisters who are containing the Devil's Blood cult. The fight will be fierce, and some of us may fall. But know that we will prevail."

With a wave, Thorn turned and walked off the platform, heading back to the command tent in the center of camp with Captain Del'har as Hasta took his place to begin issuing orders. As he walked away, Thorn could feel a change taking place in him, and before he could say anything his intuition was proven accurate.

ding

Class - [Dawn Walker]
You have grown in your abilities as a disciple of the Temple of the Moon, exhibiting particular talents as an orator. Unlike ordinary monastic orders,

the disciples of the Temple of the Moon are warrior monks who serve Hati, the god of night. Tasked with destroying evil and holding back those who seek to disrupt the balance of the world, they work in the shadows as the counterpart to the Paladins of Skoll, the Sun God.
Your journey to martial mastery is on its way. Dawn Walkers practice the [Dawn Form] of the Temple of the Moon and can use any basic monk weapon and any basic armor.

Dawn Walker Abilities:
[Martial Form: Dawn]
[Basic Weapons Mastery]
[Improved Pack Travel]
[Pack Leader]

Mastery Ability:
[Form Mastery: Persuasive Aura]

While his [Basic Weapons Mastery] ability had not changed on the surface, Thorn had reached a journeyman level of proficiency with all of the basic weapons. Combined with an improvement in his [Oration Proficiency], he had finally mastered the Disciple class and advanced to a Dawn Walker. Mastering a class gave him a mastery ability as well, a special passive that granted him a bonus.

Ability: Persuasive Aura
Your presence radiates charm and warm friendliness. Those who listen to your words find themselves swayed as much by the way you speak as the words you say. You gain a permanent aura that makes your leadership more natural as people know you care about their wellbeing. Anyone who hears the sound of your voice is more likely to agree with your opinion and follow your directions.

The Dawn Walker mastery was one that built on the abilities that he already had, improving them and making them harder to resist. Already granted bonuses to his ability to sway others, Thorn almost burst out laughing when he saw [Persuasive Aura]. He had never intended to develop a silver

tongue, but since it had happened he would gladly take advantage of it.

As he moved on to check the other changes that his newly advanced class brought him, Thorn paused and reopened his [Persuasive Aura], his smile slowly leaving his face. There was something in the wording that reminded him of his last interactions with Ouroboros and the manipulative sound that his words carried. Resolving to talk to Velin about it, Thorn shook his head and closed the window.

He was not Ouroboros and he could not let the potential for abuse prevent him from using his skills. Still, the idea of manipulating others through his voice left a sour taste in his mouth.

Dawn Form - Leadership
Disciples who learn the Dawn Form pursue the path of the commander. Inspiring their allies with speeches and issuing commands on the battlefield are only two of the many ways that Disciples of the Dawn lead their fellow disciples to victory. Disciples of the Dawn make the best diplomats, leaders, traders, and strategists. Abilities gained: [Journeyman Oration Proficiency] [Improved Rallying Cry] Mastery Path: None

The martial form that the Dawn Walker class practiced had improved as well, giving him better versions of his two skills. His eyes drawn to the bottom of the notification window, Thorn frowned slightly. The Disciple class had led naturally into the dual category Night Walker class, Dawn Walker. Sadly, the Dawn Walker class was the end of that chain which meant that he would have to wait and see what his options were for advancing past Dawn Walker to a triple category class. With no Destiny Points to gain an Ancient Inheritance, Thorn was stuck grinding his class out.

Ability: Journeyman Oration Proficiency
The tongue has power beyond even the sharpest of swords if applied properly. A single word can calm a turbulent wind or ignite a firestorm.

Empires have risen and fallen through the words of their rulers.

You are an Orator, a practiced, experienced speaker. You know how to parry the strongest of strikes, to turn aside the most dangerous attacks, to avoid the tightest traps, and to steer through the strongest verbal storms. Others are more likely to take what you say seriously and to agree with you. At the same time, you gain increased resistance to verbal persuasion.

Though the description for [Oration Proficiency] had not changed when it became [Journeyman Oration Proficiency], Thorn knew with certainty that he had improved considerably in his ability to speak. The constant practice had done wonders for him, allowing him to integrate the examples he had from his aunt throughout his life.

Ability: Improved Rallying Cry

Power and speed are the hallmark of the wolf, yet physical prowess is not the wolf's greatest asset. The true strength of the wolf lies in its companions.

You gain the ability to rally your allies, granting them increased stamina, strength, and health regeneration and allowing for the use of the [Pack Travel] ability in combat. This ability can only be used when at least one ally is present.

The improved version of Thorn's [Rallying Cry] ability was also not that different from the basic version, though the change was surprisingly significant. In addition to increased stamina and health regeneration, it now granted additional strength to those affected, making it both offensive and defensive. Rather than using it to help the group when they were losing, it was better suited as an opener for the moment of engagement.

Ability: Improved Pack Travel

Wolves can travel extraordinary distances with little energy. When you travel with other members of your order, you only spend a tenth of the energy and can travel 50% faster, regardless of the terrain.

Due to your ability [Journeyman Orator], [Pack Travel] can be used on

your party, even if you are not the leader.

Similarly, the change in wording to [Improved Pack Travel] was not that large, but the effect and use of the skill was improved. Not needing to be the leader of a group to use [Improved Pack Travel] meant that Thorn could play a supporting role, allowing other Leadership classes to use their abilities to the fullest.

Ability: Pack Leader
Given your status as a Dawn Walker, you have been recognized by your comrades as a leader, increasing the likelihood of them listening to you when you present plans. Additionally, you can activate any of the following abilities at the same time: [Call the Pack], [Rallying Cry], [Wolf Lord's Howl]

The last new ability granted by the Dawn Walker class was more of a convenience than anything else, allowing Thorn to activate his buffs and stun at the same moment, giving the potential for a huge swing in momentum. Quite happy with his upgraded class, Thorn opened up his menu.

Status

Name: [Thorn]	Race: [Titan]
Health: [100%]	Mana: [100%]
Titles: [Battle Mad], [Wolfsbane], [Lord Greymane, the Moon Wolf (First Rank)], [Friend of the Earth], [Inheritor], [Commissioned Knight (Order of the Flame)], [Kingbreaker], [Hero], [Bearer of the Stone Heart], [Gladiator]	Class: [Dawn Walker] Mastery: [None] Allegiance: [Temple of the Moon]
Abilities: [Wolf Lord's Howl], [Avatar of the Wolf], [Call the Pack],	

[Blessing of the Moon], [Presence of the Wolf Lord], [Martial Form: Dawn], [Basic Weapons Mastery], [Journeyman Orator], [Improved Rallying Cry], [Improved Pack Travel], [Pack Leader], [Persuasive Aura], [Earth Sense], [The Devil is in the Details], [Shadow Dash], [Language Proficiency: Abyssal], [Intercepting Strike (lvl 1)], [Armor of the Earth], [Heart of the Earth], [Call the Stone Legion]

His playstyle had finally come into full focus and he was excited to try it out in the coming war. First, however, he had a few things to take care of. Sitting down on the large chair he had arranged in the command tent, Thorn opened up the last ability on his status.

Call the Stone Legion
The Stone King, Courdum, forged his underground empire with the power of his Stone Legion. Though only a shadow of their former self, what remains of the undying army possesses powerful might. In his madness, Courdum bound the legion to the power of the Stone Heart, the same power that now courses through your veins. You have gained preliminary control over the remnants of the Stone Legion. The first time you activate this ability, the remaining members of the Stone Legion will make their way to your side within twenty-four hours. It is recommended that you activate this ability somewhere safe. To unlock full control of the Stone Legion, you must adapt to the Stone Heart completely.

Though he had the beginnings of a strong army already, Thorn could feel in his gut that his days of adventuring with a small group were fading and he wanted all the help he could get for the coming wars. Sitting up, Thorn activated [Call the Stone Legion] for the first time.

THUMP

A low hum radiated from his body as his heart squeezed tightly in his chest. The hum vibrated through his feet and down into the dirt. Thanks to the [Heart of the Earth] ability, Thorn could feel the hum as it traveled through the earth, echoing far and wide. A faint clock showing twenty-four

hours popped up at the corner of his vision, starting to count down. Within twenty-four hours, Thorn would have a new force under his command and he was quite excited to see what it looked like.

CHAPTER FOUR

“My lord, it is time to begin.”

Thorn glanced at Captain Del’har who stood in the entrance to the tent, saluting respectfully, and then looked beyond him to lengthening shadows. The valley was quickly being consumed by the shadows of night as the sun set. The teams sweeping the valley had arrived less than ten minutes ago and were quickly combined with the army camping outside of Treefell.

Standing, Thorn stretched and grabbed his tetsubo from where it was leaning against the table. With a flick of his wrist it was stored in his inventory. Walking out of the tent, he could see the last tent being stored. What had been a full camp an hour ago was now an empty stretch of grass, clearly showing the advantage of having a player army. The real advantage, however, lay in what they were about to do.

Opening up the channel that had been set up for all the players who were part of the Iron Wolf Army, Thorn muted it and sent a notification, instantly getting the attention of all 10,000 players spread out in a line across the valley. Turning on his video, he spun it so it could see his face and grinned.

“Evening, soldiers! Those of you who were assigned to assist the Moon

Guardians and the Freemen have done a great job with the sweep. Thanks to your fine work we can push forward without worrying about an outbreak at our back. So, the question is, are you tired? Do you need a rest?"

[N]

[N]

[No!]

[N]

It had taken Thorn a while to get used to the way that players spoke in Nova Terra's chat feature, but thankfully, Mina was there to explain it to him. As he watched the stream of 'N' flow down the chat window at the side of his stream, his grin grew wider, his face taking on a slightly wolfish look.

"That's right. We are the Iron Wolves. We need no rest, we know no fatigue. And we will see our enemies torn under our fangs. Captains, you have your orders. Move on Commander Hasta's commands."

Hearing howls rising up from the players listening, Thorn closed the chat window and turned command over to Hasta, who he had made temporary commander of the Iron Wolves. Truthfully, Thorn felt slightly silly with all the roleplaying, but he felt like it was the right thing to do. Since the natives treated the world of Nova Terra as real, he had no excuse not to do the same. Turning to the Wolfkin captain who stood behind him respectfully, Thorn patted him on the shoulder.

"Captain, you've been with me for a while now. From before all of this was, well, anything. And you've always done exceptional work."

Touched, Captain Del'har bowed low.

"It is my honor to work for you, my lord."

"Well, such hard work should not be without reward."

Opening up his [RMS], Thorn made some adjustments.

"I'm promoting you to Commander of the Valley. You are now in charge of the Moon Guardians, the Freemen, and the Defenders of the Citadel. It is a big job but I'm sure that you are more than up for it."

"T...this…" Stunned, the newly titled Commander Del'har had no idea what to say.

"I recognize that in some ways, this is just piling more work on you, so I have granted you permission to promote internally. I don't care who you elevate, or why, so long as the valley has a watertight defense. Your place on the council can be filled by someone you pick as well, just try to keep the balance as much as possible."

“Y...yes, my lord!” Quickly kneeling, Commander Del’har bowed his head as he saluted.

Thorn’s words radiated a casual indifference that Del’har had not heard before, but while the words were extremely pleasant to the commander’s ear, they also managed to carry a warning with them.

“I will not disappoint you!”

“I look forward to your excellent work, commander.” Grasping Del’har’s arms, Thorn helped him up. “Now, I’m going to go see how our Iron Wolves are doing.”

Jogging after the team that was getting further and further away, Thorn quickly caught up. Mina shot him a funny look and rolled her eyes when she saw him.

“What’s up?” Curious what was bothering the Ice Witch, Thorn flicked the tip of her witches’ hat, sending it tumbling through the air.

“Hey!” Blinking to the side, Mina caught her hat and perched it back on her curls. With a sigh she fell in beside him, taking four steps for every one of his. “I’m just thinking about how different everything is. You’re so… official. It is hard to believe that you are the giant noob that I ran into back in Berum.”

“We’ve all changed. Living in Nova Terra has forced all of us to grow.”

“That is true. Though for some of us, Earl Greymane, it has been more pronounced than for others. It's just that so much has happened since we ran into you, and in such a short period of time. And everything seems complicated now. I mean, look.” Mina gestured to her right where a line of players was jogging forward. “The guild has thousands of people in it. Hundreds of thousands even. Do you remember when it was just me, you, and Velin? Oh, and Oberlin too?”

“Speaking of, where is Oberlin? It has been a while since I’ve seen him. Jorge too.”

“Last I heard Oberlin was still on Rasyn, helping out with the slaves. Jorge was leading teams to mess around with Ragnarok though he should be back soon. Ever since you set him loose he has been going to town. From what I hear it is brutal.”

“Huh, I forgot about that. I should probably check and see how much I owe them for the bounty.”

“Oh, it is way past that point. It has turned into a real grudge match. One of the sub-leaders who used to fight with Jorge a lot counter-ambushed them

and now they're going back and forth, trying to wipe each other out."

"Haha, that's pretty funny. Speaking of, have you talked to Velin recently? I sent her a message but I have not gotten a response yet. Do you know when she'll be back?"

Unable to meet Thorn's gaze, Mina stared straight ahead.

"I got to talk to her a bit right after we got back to the valley, but we both entered full dive this week so I have not talked to her since. I'm sure she'll respond as soon as she is able. In the meantime, you need to focus as much as possible on keeping up with the valley. She'll be really disappointed if all her hard work goes down the drain."

"Good point."

Thorn fell silent and they continued on toward Greyfield village. Greyfield and Treefell were connected by a road cut through the forest. Wide enough for two carts to pass side by side, the road was made from hard packed dirt and stone. Normally, it would be patrolled by a member of the Moon Guardians, but currently it was occupied by Thorn and his team.

Making sure that they were going slow enough that the teams to the left and right of them could keep up, Thorn and Mina continued to chat. It had been some time since Thorn had time for casual conversation and he could only imagine that it would not last.

It did not take long for them to arrive outside Greyfield village and, lifting his hand, Thorn called for a halt. Sending a message to Hasta to let him know that they were in position, Thorn scanned the hastily built defenses that the cultists had erected. The village had only been in their grasp for a few days, but already there were walls built from thick logs from the surrounding forest completely surrounding the village. Thick wooden stakes jutted from the earthen embankments at the wall's base to deter attackers.

What Thorn was more interested in was the four towers that stood at the corners of the village, providing a clear line of sight to the edge of the forest. Because they came down the road, Thorn knew that they had been spotted, but that was fine because this maneuver was not relying on stealth as much as pure offensive power. A flurry of activity could be seen from the top of the wall as the defenders rushed to get into their positions.

With a gesture, Thorn commanded his team to get ready for an assault. Night had fallen, but players were generally able to operate in the dark without any issue so Thorn was not concerned about a night attack.

ding

Opening up his messaging system, Thorn saw Hasta saluting.

“You are good to attack any time, my lord.”

“Oh, not you too.” Thorn groaned, his hand covering his eyes.

“Haha, sorry, Master Xavier, the boss said that we had to take this seriously.”

Sighing, Thorn nodded that he understood and shut the screen. One of the major downsides of his position was the automatic distance that everyone he came into contact with took from him. Lifting his eyes to look at Greyfield Village, Thorn’s eyes caught a flash of Mina’s red hair. Well, not everyone. He still had his friends.

Suddenly energized, Thorn took out his tetsubo and buckled on his helmet. The Titan Squad had become the Titan Battalion and had been expanded to a full one thousand members. The battalion was further broken down into ten companies of one hundred soldiers, each organized in ten units of ten. Just like the other units, Thorn’s contained three tanks, three dedicated DPS, two healers, and two support classes.

Thorn filled one of the tank roles, supported by Heidi, the Elemental Warrior that Thorn had met in the tomb on Rasyn. Though the Society of Roses had tried their best to recruit her, she had settled on Nova Luna instead. The third tank in the unit was a Crimson Dragon Knight named SoulSeeker.

The three dedicated DPS players on the team were Mina, Alabaster, and Sivir. Alabaster was a Wolfkin New Moon Walker and Sivir was a Human Frost Priest who specialized in DPS and Control like Mina. At first, Jorge had been part of the team as a DPS player, but he was having so much fun playing with Oberlin that Thorn transferred him to Corvo’s team to assist with the spy network.

Seven Twisted Leaves had upgraded his Fae Druid class to Master Fae Botanist and occupied one of the utility positions. He was partnered with an Elven Pathfinder named XdvilX who went by X. Together they took care of scouting and miscellaneous mobs that got too close. They also helped with crowd control and pulling when the team engaged. The support positions were normally filled by Delmore, the Tigerkin Spirit Guide and Velin, but with Velin gone they had recruited a half-Fae named Blossom who was a Flower Tender.

Though they did not have the greatest raw damage or the tankiest front line of the units, Thorn’s squad was possibly the most well rounded due to

their ability to shift roles and the sheer amount of crowd control they possessed. To say nothing of the fact that Thorn often played both tank and DPS at the same time.

Making sure that the rest of his unit was ready to go, Thorn stepped forward and lifted his tetsubo to point toward the wall in front of them. Silence spread rapidly through the battalion as all of the players stopped chatting and focused on the village they were about to assault. Red-robed cultists swarmed on top of the walls surrounding the village and the towers were packed with archers waiting to rain death on anyone who got close.

“Company Two through Four, take down the towers on the right. Five through Seven, you’re on the left towers. Eight through Ten, you’re with Company One. We are taking down that poor excuse for a gate. Remember not to get bogged down. If you need to fall back, fall back toward the gate. Attack!”

Thorn had no idea who started it, but as he began to lead the charge toward the village an eerie wolf howl started to grow in volume behind him until it rang through the valley. In the distance he could hear other members of the Iron Wolves picking it up and joining in. The echoing howl spun around them, making it impossible to tell how many attackers there actually were and striking a note of fear in the hearts of the defenders.

When the charging army got within fifty feet of the gate, the squads split up with three going to the right and three going to the left. Before they got too far apart Thorn lifted his head and activated his [Pack Leader] ability, chaining [Call the Pack] and [Rallying Cry], which also activated [Pack Travel]. The change was immediately noticeable and the whole battalion sped up drastically, causing the arrows that the towers shot out to miss. Lowering his shoulder, Thorn cleared the remaining fifty feet in a few seconds, smashing his shoulder into the hastily constructed wooden gate.

BOOM

The gate splintered into a thousand pieces, shards of wood flying through the air and peppering the cultists clumped up in the village’s entrance. Without stopping, Thorn took a big step forward and landed in the center of the crowd, smashing two cultists to the side with a swing of his tetsubo. As he squared up to hold the entrance, two burning figures appeared next to him as Heidi and SoulSeeker used their charge abilities to close the distance.

[Wolf Lord’s Howl]

Throwing back his head, Thorn joined in the Iron Wolves’ war cry, though

his carried a strange subtone that shook all the cultists who heard it, causing them to pause what they were doing for a brief second. That second was all it took and all of the companies closed into combat. Each company had thirty tanks who formed a solid line as they assaulted the cultists on the wall. Once the cultists were tied up with the tanks, the DPS began to cut them down.

Standing in the middle of the village's entrance, Thorn did his best to keep an eye on what was happening with the other teams while helping to stem the flow of cultists rushing from the center of the village.

"Heidi, Soul, let's push forward. All tanks with me!"

Gathering the thirty tanks who were part of the First battalion, Thorn, Heidi, and SoulSeeker led the way as they began to slowly shove their way forward. Thorn could see a spot about a block ahead where the cultist reinforcements were splitting to reinforce the left and right sides of the wall.

"Our goal is between those two buildings." Thorn's voice carried easily over the battlefield as he blocked two strange looking blades on his arm guard. "If we can hold there we'll have a natural choke point. DPS, clear us a path!"

CHAPTER FIVE

“On it!” Mina nodded at Sivir and both of them began chanting. Behind them, the other DPS players took their cue from Mina and began to prep their major AoE attacks. Less than a minute later a hellstorm of ice, lightning, arcane energy, magma, and wind ripped through the cultists ten feet in front of the tanks. As the spells cleared up the players were greeted by thirty feet of completely empty street.

“Advance!”

Crushing through the few red-robed cultists that had been close enough to the tank line to survive, the tanks sprinted forward, filling the space before the cultists could. Thorn activated his [Predator’s Leap] ability, easily clearing the empty space and landing with a boom, sending both dust and cultists flying through the air.

The tightly packed and now furious enemies began to hammer against him and he nearly drowned in the deluge of attacks before he felt the world shift and a spirit appeared in his place. Watching from next to Delmore where he had been moved, Thorn gulped as he watched the spirit get ripped apart almost instantly.

[Dancing Petals]

Blossom held up her staff, summoning a shower of brightly colored petals to cover Thorn, rapidly refilling his health.

“Thorn, you’ve got to keep a tighter formation. Without Velin we don’t have the same support range,” Delmore said, casting a healing spell on Heidi. “Both Blossom and my spells heal over time rather than doing spiked healing so we can’t deal with you rushing in like that.”

“My [Dancing Petals] has a four minute cool down,” Blossom chimed in, waving her staff as she cast another spell. “So you’ll need to wait till then for another quick heal.”

“Good to know, I’ll stay a bit more defensive.”

Grinning under his helmet, Thorn gave Blossom a thumbs up and then charged forward to rejoin the tank line. Though they had only made it halfway toward their goal, Thorn was not concerned as the DPS cooldowns would be ready in a few minutes and they could just repeat it. Stepping into the line in between Heidi and SoulSeeker, Thorn blocked an attack aimed at SoulSeeker and snapped a kick out, sending the attacking cultist flying.

The red-robed cultists were streaming forward in an endless stream, but the pressure on the tank line was not that bad. Individually, the cultists were not very strong, and as long as the tanks avoided being wounded they were able to deal with the attacks without any major issues. The real danger lay in being surrounded and mobbed, so Thorn had the DPS players focus on keeping the sides of the formation clear of enemies.

“We’re ready to go, Thorn.” Mina called out.

“Great. DPS, clear space on Mina’s mark!”

Behind the tank line the ranged DPS players began their casting again. This time, however, the red-robed cultists were wary and began to scatter to try and lessen the impact of the attack. At the sight of the running cultists, the edges of Thorn’s lips curled slightly and he lifted his head.

[Wolf Lord’s Howl]

The Iron Wolves’ war cry poured out of his throat, echoing off of the buildings on either side of the street, growing in volume as it was picked up by the tanks next to him. The stunning effect rippled through the fleeing cultists, stopping them in place just long enough for the storm of spells to erupt in their midst. Bolts of lightning danced through the crowd, jumping from cultist to cultist, leaving charred figures behind.

Fireballs, arcane bolts, and globs of poison quickly cleaned up the few

cultists who survived the storm of ice and flying stone that landed on the tightly packed mob. Seeing that the spells were beginning to peter out, Thorn took a big step forward.

“Press forward!”

Making sure that he was not outpacing his team mates, Thorn led the charge forward, smashing past the few cultists who were still alive. Rather than wasting time finishing them off, the tanks left them to the melee DPS players who had just rushed past them into the empty space created by the spells.

Thorn saw Alabaster, the Wolfkin New Moon Walker in his unit, appear behind a struggling cultist, using a long, curved dagger to finish him off. The slim Wolfkin quickly finished off two more cultists before allowing the tank line to sweep past him. Pushing forward, the tank line soon arrived at the gap between the two buildings that Thorn had pointed to earlier, effectively stemming the endless tide of cultists.

The spot that Thorn had picked was just beyond an intersection whose cross street led to the towers on the front wall. Pushing through the intersection, the ninth and tenth companies each took one of the streets, preventing any of the cultists who had already rushed toward the towers from returning. Two large buildings on either side of the street leading further into the town gave the eighth and first companies solid anchors on either end of their tank line, freeing them from having to worry about flanking enemies.

“Heidi, Soul, I’m stepping out for a second.”

Once the defensive lines were firmly established, Thorn stepped back, joining the DPS players who were peppering the tightly clumped Wolfkin cultists with attacks. Opening up his messaging system, he checked on the progress of the two groups that had gone after the towers. The three companies who had attacked the right tower were already in possession of the wall and were breaking down the door to the tower, but the three companies who went to the left had not made nearly as much progress.

“All Companies, report.”

“Company One. Holding position in Greyfield at Main and Vesper.”

“Company Two, assaulting the northern tower.”

“Company Three, holding the northern wall.”

“Company Four, also holding the northern wall.”

“Company Five, assaulting the southern wall.”

“Company Six, same.”

“Company Seven. We’re also assaulting the southern wall.”

“Company Eight. Holding position with Company One.”

“Company Nine, holding on the southern branch of Vesper.”

“Company Ten, holding position on the northern branch of Vesper.”

Listening to each of the companies, Thorn made notes until his display held an updated map of the battlefield. This way of playing was new, but so far, Thorn was enjoying it. It reminded him of the turn-based strategy games that he had played when he was younger and stuck in his chair.

“Company Five, what is the holdup?”

With the northern wall taken, Company Two was making progress on the northern tower, but the progress on the southern wall had been completely stopped.

“Uh, we had a bit of a, uh, problem. We ran into a commander who is throwing large scale earth walls. We’re still working on pushing through. Every time we try to take down the wooden wall he summons thick stone blocks to stop us.”

“Got it.” Thorn examined the map for a moment. “Company Four, rotate south. Company Three, the pressure on the wall should slow down in a moment so push forward to protect the Second and Fourth Companies. Once the southern wall is taken I want Company Six and Seven on the tower. We need to take them down as soon as possible.”

“Affirmative.”

Continuing to monitor the situation, Thorn got out his arbalest and joined the ranged DPS in picking off cultists who were climbing the buildings on either side of the street. So far they had only faced one type of cultist so hearing that there was a magic-using cultist on the southern wall set off warning bells in Thorn’s head.

The tide of red-robed cultists made it obvious that they were spawning in endless numbers, but it was soon clear that Thorn’s guess was correct. Once the Iron Wolves took up a position at the crossroads, the numbers of Wolfkin on the walls began to drop as they received no more reinforcements. Individually, the cultists were no match for the players, so once they lost their overwhelming numbers advantage they were quickly cleaned up.

The Fourth Company, who had been holding the wall on the northern side of the gate, began to charge down to the south, catching the cultists defending the southern wall on the flank. The cultists were soon routed by the combined attack of four companies, and the tower followed shortly after.

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Dungeon: Liberation of Greyfield
The Devil's Blood Cult has seized the village of Greyfield, turning it into a stronghold for their corrupted cause. Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has made his home in the mayoral mansion at the center of town while his minions prowl the streets. To clear the corruption from Greyfield you must bring down Gelish and his two lieutenants. Max Players: 50

Hearing a noise behind him, Thorn turned his head and saw the air fifteen feet away in the center of the intersection shimmer. With a ripping sound a portal opened up, sending streaks of energy crackling through the air.

"Huh, interesting."

As soon as Thorn got close to the portal a notification popped up, asking him if he wanted to enter the dungeon. Selecting no, Thorn stepped back, his eyes drifting to the tank line that was still facing a horde of red-robed cultists.

"Do you think they'll slow down now that the dungeon is opened?" Mina paused between [Ice Spikes] to ask.

"No, I have a feeling that they will just keep coming." Shaking his head, Thorn contacted the other companies. "All Companies, report."

"Company One. Still, holding our position at Main and Vesper. The cultists are not increasing in strength, but they have added ranged attackers."

"Company Two, the northern tower is down and we are pushing into the center of town. We're facing stiff resistance and more cultists attacking along the northern side of the village."

"Company Three here, we've pushed forward toward the center of the village along Vesper and are about two fights away from the intersection."

"Company Four. The southern wall is clear so we took Main street and will arrive in sixty seconds."

"Company Five, we are pushing up the southern branch of Vesper toward the intersection. We are still three blocks away, so about six fights till we arrive."

"Company Six. The southern tower is down and we are pushing along the south side of the village. There are a lot of cultists swarming our way."

"Company Seven. We're assisting Company Six with the cultists on the

southern side of the village."

"Company Eight. We are holding position with Company One."

"Company Nine, holding the southern branch of Vesper at the intersection."

"Company Ten, holding position at the intersection on the northern branch of Vesper."

"Thank you." Updating his map, Thorn began to give commands. "Company Two, do your best to hold on, we'll get relief for you soon. Company Three, as soon as you are done with your two fights, move north to assist Company Two. Company Ten, push out toward Company Three and join up with Company Two as soon as the northern branch of Vesper is clear. Company Four, replace Company One as soon as you get here. Company One, you're resting for ten minutes, and then I want you to rotate with Company Eight. Company Five, once you clear your road you'll be resting for twenty minutes and then rotating with Company One. Company Six and Seven, keep up a solid defense, we can't let the cultists through. Company Eight, once Company One swaps with you, rest for thirty minutes. Company Nine, once south Vesper is clear, go reinforce Companies Six and Seven. We need to get a firm grip on Greyfield Village, any questions?"

"Nope."

"No, sir."

"Got it."

Listening as the Company commanders acknowledged his orders, Thorn selected Hasta's name and called him.

"Hello, my lord. How goes the subjugation of Greyfield?"

"So far so good, but I think we are going to run into an issue soon."

"Oh? Do you need reinforcements?"

"Yes. I'd like two battalions stationed here at all times. We're facing endlessly spawning cultists so we are going to need reinforcements eventually. The more immediate need is to free up some of the dungeon teams because in order to take down Gelish, we have to clear a 50 player dungeon."

"Uh, Thorn?"

Mina's voice interrupted Thorn's explanation. Turning his head, Thorn could see her standing on the top of an [Ice Pillar], staring over the heads of the tank line and the tightly packed cultists. Following her pointing finger, a group of ten cultists who stood head and shoulders above their comrades

came into view. Shaggier than the other Wolfkin, they were significantly more muscular and carried with them a barely suppressed aura of savagery.

“Hasta, I have to go. We have greater werewolves on route. Get a few more battalions here as soon as possible. I have a feeling we’re going to need them.”

“You got it, sir.” Throwing a snappy salute, Hasta ended the call and Thorn swapped out his arbalest for his tetsubo as he strode back to the tank line.

“Tanks, listen up! Greater werewolves hit like a truck, but the real danger is their speed. Do your best to keep yourself alive, and rely on the DPS to hurt them. Support, we need as much crowd control as we can get to keep the greater werewolves from getting past the tank line. Melee DPS, now is your time to shine, but be especially careful of counter attacks. I’d bet my left arm that these things have way stronger corruption than the regular cultists so be on your guard.”

Arriving next to Heidi and SoulSeeker, Thorn kept his eyes fixed on the ten greater werewolves pushing their way through the tightly packed cultists. As they strode forward, the cultists who noticed them fell back, barely concealed fear staining their faces. Each greater werewolf stood close to eight and a half feet tall, reminding Thorn of the foe he had faced in Greymane Keep when he first arrived at the valley.

Even with the support of Mina, Velin, and Akira, Thorn had nearly died in that fight. Still, the player who had faced down the greater werewolf for the Wolf Lord’s Throne was long gone. Thorn had grown, not only in his abilities and combat skill, but in his mentality. He was more than confident that if he were to face that greater werewolf today he would need no help to put him down. Plus, today, Thorn was not fighting alone.

CHAPTER SIX

Stepping forward, Thorn swept his gaze over the cultists in front of him. The smell of corruption that each of the normal cultists carried was extra strong on these greater werewolves, adding to the dangerous air they projected, making Thorn worry about the damage they would do to his teammates. Without an antidote as powerful as the sap of the World Tree, getting wounded was a death sentence.

Even though the Iron Wolf soldiers were effectively immortal due to being players, not being able to log in for twenty four hours would drastically cut down on the army's strength, to say nothing of the loss of proficiency and items that death brought with it. As much as possible, Thorn wanted to mitigate the damage caused by the greater werewolves, which meant throwing the people who had ingested the sap of the World Tree into the front.

"Heidi, you and I are going to tank all of them. I want all extra healers focused on the two of us! Mina, we'll need some really tight CC, you'll be fighting with us. DPS, focus on burning them down one at a time if you can, otherwise their health regeneration is going to be a problem."

Thorn’s voice carried his commands to all of the players on the battlefield, causing looks between many of the players. While Wolfkin were a common sight in the valley, none of the players except Mina had ever seen a greater werewolf.

“He sounds really serious? Are they really that dangerous?”

“I dunno, but if he is taking them seriously, we probably should too.”

“Hah, this whole fight has been a piece of cake. We’re gonna eat these things for breakfast.”

Hearing the whispering around him, Delmore’s brow furrowed.

“Hey! Focus up. If you have time to chat, spend it on what you are supposed to be doing!”

Standing just in front of the tank line, Thorn adjusted his grip on his massive metal club, keeping his eyes on the greater werewolves. Abruptly, all ten of them stopped where they were and the cultists around them burst into a frenzy of action, throwing themselves forward with wild abandon.

“Steady! Focus on blocking them!”

“A few slipped through on the left! Quick!”

“We got them!”

“Don’t let them push you back!”

Despite the shouts raging around him, Thorn’s focus never wavered. The cultists rushing forward avoided him, doing their best to stay outside of his reach. By splitting to each side they inadvertently created a clear path, connecting Thorn and the ten greater werewolves who had ignited the frenzy.

“They’re coming.”

Thorn’s voice was calm and he spoke just before the greater werewolves began their charge, triggered by some sort of instinct. The greater werewolves leapt forward, landing on their forelegs as they bound toward Thorn with fangs glistening in the torchlight. Covering the distance rapidly, they bulldozed past a few unlucky cultists who found themselves in their way.

“Haah.” Breathing out, Heidi stepped up next to Thorn.

“You’ll take the four on the left. Let me know if you need assistance.”

Before Heidi could reply the first of the greater werewolves was on them, leaping up, its claws drawn back to deliver a punishing slash. Without waiting, Thorn took another step forward, his arm shooting out like a piston. The werewolf had been confident in the speed of its attack, but it suddenly felt as if it was moving in slow motion when Thorn made his move. A

massive hand grew even bigger in its vision, the thick fingers of the silver gauntlet ending in razor sharp claws.

Instinctively, the greater werewolf opened its mouth, making the worst mistake of its life. Under his helmet, Thorn's eyes had already drifted past the first attacker and landed on the two greater werewolves who were about to attack from right behind. A glint of light drew Thorn's attention back and he saw the greater werewolf's razor sharp teeth in its opening maw.

A small smile tugged the corners of Thorn's lips up and he increased the speed of his hand, jamming it into the incoming mouth. Wrapping his fingers around the greater werewolf's head, Thorn shoved, destroying his enemy's forward momentum and nearly breaking its neck with the whiplash. Desperately, the creature tried to claw at him, but he bobbed his head, letting its claws slip past.

Another step forward put him closer to the next two greater werewolves, forcing them into an awkward position. Because of how close Thorn was, the two werewolves launched their attacks early, trying to create some space. Swinging the unfortunate werewolf in his hand to ward off one of the attacks, Thorn used his tetsubo to block the other, before spinning to the side and unleashing a brutal sidekick.

Trapped between Thorn's leg and its companion, the greater werewolf was unable to dodge and was forced to take the kick head on. Drawing its legs up to block and bracing itself as best it could, the last thing it saw was the terrified look in the eyes of the werewolf that Thorn was using as a shield. When Thorn's foot impacted its arms, they were blasted apart with a disturbing crunch.

Not sparing another glance for the greater werewolf he had just sent flying, Thorn ducked, three sets of claws whistling through the air where his head had just been. He had been hoping to finish off the greater werewolf that he had just kicked, but even though he had felt the monster's chest cave in, he was not convinced that the creature had died. The healing ability of the greater werewolves was no joke, and Thorn could see the wounds on the werewolf he was using as a shield closing before his eyes.

Jumping back to avoid the next round of attacks, Thorn dropped his tetsubo on the ground and gripped the struggling werewolf with both hands. With a growl that echoed around the battlefield, he heaved. Under the horrified eyes of the surrounding cultists and the incredulous eyes of the players behind him, Thorn ripped the greater werewolf in half.

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Your ability [Wolf Helm] has been activated, applying a fear debuff to everyone within forty feet of you. Allies are not affected. Your ability [Wolf Lord's Howl] will have increased duration when targeting enemies affected by the [Wolf Helm] ability. Enemies who are under the [Rage] condition are not affected.

"Holy…"

Thorn's acute hearing could hear the collective gasp from the players behind him as they watched him in shock. So used to treating Nova Terra as a game, many of them had never considered what he had just done possible. The idea of ripping an enemy to pieces was something reserved for the monsters that they fought against, not for players like themselves. This distinction was even clearer when Thorn was held up against Heidi who battled next to him. Every one of her moves was textbook, relying on the abilities that the game had granted her rather than the brute force that Thorn was wielding.

As focused as he was on blocking the four remaining greater werewolves, a part of Thorn's heart sank. He could pick out the murmurs behind him and knew that if something was not done quickly the gulf between him and the other players would grow wider yet. Thankfully, Mina saw the slight shift in attitude among the crowd of players and launched herself forward.

Sprinting toward the fight, she jumped, using Thorn as a springboard to fling herself into the air over the heads of the greater werewolves. Spinning in the air, the swirling currents of frozen air glittered in the night, drawing all eyes toward her. Thrusting her wand down toward the ground where the unfortunate werewolf that Thorn had kicked landed, she muttered a word and the frozen currents gathered in front of her, forming a shining mirror of ice that showed the image of her target. Just as she reached the highest point of her jump she roared out with as much force as she could.

"Iron Wolves, kill!"

Whether it was their training, or the passion that Mina injected into the moment, or a way to unload the uneasiness that they felt, Thorn did not know, but as soon as Mina's cry ended, the entire crowd echoed the last word she spoke and surged into action.

“KILL!”

The cry shook the whole town, rattling off of the wooden buildings as it rose to the sky. Together, the ranged DPS players under Mina unleashed a wave of attacks, but instead of targeting the Wolfkin Cultists in front of them, they aimed directly at Mina. Or more precisely, at the [Ice Mirror] she had formed in front of her.

Spells, arrows, throwing axes, and countless other attacks hurled unerringly toward the [Ice Mirror], disappearing as soon as they got within a foot of it. With a sound like the shattering of icicles, the attacks that vanished burst back into sight, directly above the wounded greater werewolf, destroying any chance it had at recovering.

Buried under the storm of attacks, the greater werewolf gave a howl of pain that was abruptly choked off as a burning throwing star clipped its throat. By this time Mina was beginning to fall back to the earth and could feel the enraged eyes of the greater werewolves fixed on her. Sneering, she activated [Blink] just as they started to jump for her, vanishing from where she was and appearing over the heads of the DPS players who had just unleashed the wave of attacks.

Seizing the shift in momentum, Thorn’s voice thundered as he and Heidi pushed the greater werewolves back.

“Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

Though most of the Iron Wolf soldiers had joined in when Mina started the chant, their voices were not completely in sync. As Thorn took it over, the bonuses from his Dawn Walker class kicked in, unifying the First and Eighth companies into a single unit.

“Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

The pure aggression radiating from the greater werewolves could not help but falter in the face of the player’s chant, giving Heidi and Thorn a moment to breathe. With two greater werewolves down, and everyone acting together, the remaining eight monsters stood no chance. One by one they were cut down as Thorn and Heidi alternated using their invulnerability abilities to tank the greater werewolves’ attacks while Mina and the others kept them contained. When the last werewolf fell, Thorn crouched down and scooped up his tetsubo, thrusting it into the air and leading the players in a howl of victory.

“SoulSeeker, we’ll leave it to you.” Thorn patted the Crimson Dragon Knight on the shoulder as he and Heidi made their way behind the tank line.

“Haha, you got it!” Fired up from what he had just witnessed, SoulSeeker stepped forward, calling for the other tanks to join him. “Tanks! Form up. Let’s keep these cultists off our turf!”

With a deep sigh, Thorn took off his helmet and stretched his neck. Feeling a pat on his side, he looked down and saw Mina’s bright red hair.

“Whew, that was a close one, huh?”

Based on the tone of her voice, Thorn knew exactly what she was talking about. Mina was right. If they had not managed to turn the shock and unease that the players felt at the sight of Thorn’s destructive fighting style into unified aggression, they would have been in trouble.

“Yeah, thanks. That was some quick thinking on your part.

“Heh, I may not be as smart as Velin and Corvo, but I know how to read a crowd.”

“I’ll remember that.” Smiling, Thorn patted Mina on the head.

“Only if I get a raise,” said the Ice Witch as she swiped his hand away with an expression of annoyance.

“Sir, Company Four reporting, we’re ready to swap with Company One.”

Hearing a new voice, Thorn looked up and saw a woman dressed as a cleric saluting him. Behind her were 99 other players, all wearing the Company Four symbol.

“Great, go ahead and swap with Company One. Company One! Swap out and take ten minutes of rest!”

Opening up his map as the two companies switched positions, Thorn updated his map and checked his messages. Seeing no pressing issues, he retreated to where Company One was resting and sat down to think about the next move.

According to the notification he had gotten, killing Gelish could only be done in the dungeon, which meant that he would have to send teams to clear it. However, based on the endless waves of Wolfkin cultists, Thorn was pretty sure that they would have to defend the intersection while they cleared the dungeon.

On top of that, Thorn had a sneaking suspicion that the cultist magic user that the Fifth Company had run into and the 10 greater werewolves that had appeared here were not flukes. Sure enough, about twenty minutes later, another group of greater werewolves appeared, this time in a group of twelve.

“I was afraid of this.” Thorn muttered under his breath as he looked over the approaching enemies. “Mina, we’re probably going to get increasingly stronger waves of enemies the longer we stay here.”

“Ugh, that means we need to send a team to kill Gelish as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, and we’ll need more battalions here if we want to hold this place. I’ll tell Hasta to send another battalion so we can rotate our defenders. We have three companies on the northern side of town, three on the southern side, and four here, so if we had another battalion, we could rotate regularly while we send teams in to try and clear the dungeon.”

“We may need more than that. Every time someone gets wounded it is only a matter of time before they’re forced to log out for 24 hours.”

“Mmhmm. That is true.” Flicking open his messaging system, Thorn sent out a casualty request to the First Battalion and watched the numbers scroll down his screen. “Oof. We are down 74 players, with 105 wounded. That is nearly two companies. Looks like fighting has been fierce at the towers. I’ll request two battalions.”

“What we really need is to figure out a way to clear this corruption.” Mina scratched her head, sending a glance at Thorn from the corner of her eye.

“I mean, we have a way, but it isn’t sustainable. I only have enough sap from the World Tree for 1000 people and then it's gone. We need a permanent solution, or one that is easier to get. For now, let's concentrate on clearing this dungeon as fast as possible and hoping that helps.

“Alright, sounds good. Should I put the Titan Squad together?

“Not yet. First, we need to take care of them.” Pointing at the greater werewolves approaching the tank line, Thorn heaved himself to his feet and buckled on his helmet before walking out to meet them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A damp darkness hung over the town, casting a chill that cut through Thorn’s armor. Even the buildings that lined the streets took on a faded quality as if Thorn was viewing them through a thin cloth. Not even the light from the flickering torches was able to cut the mist as they sputtered in their sconces. The feeble burn created small pockets of light that only served to highlight the creepy scene.

Looking back, Thorn saw the final few members of the Titan Squad materializing in the gloomy street. Despite the heavy air that hung about the town, the members of the Titan Squad were professionals through and through, and after ascertaining that they were not in danger, they set about doing a final check of their gear and got into formation.

“We all set?”

“Yeah, I think so. Ugh, this place gives me the shivers.” Mina nodded in reply to Thorn’s question as she looked around.

One of the major advantages of a virtual reality world was that the game

did not have to rely on music to set the mood, it could simply inject it directly into the player, an advantage on full effect in the Greyfield Dungeon.

“Alright folks, I’ll keep this short.” Despite the fact that his helmet covered his mouth completely, Thorn’s warm voice was not obstructed in the least. “Our goal for this run is figuring out how this dungeon works. Scouting if you will. We have to clear Gelish from the mansion in the middle of town and take down his two lieutenants. Based on the description of the dungeon it is likely that his lieutenants are roaming, so we’ll want to figure out their patterns as well. While we are not going to rush this, we do need to remember that we’re only here because our teammates are keeping a whole pile of cultists off our backs. Let’s keep on our toes and get to work.”

Letting the scouts take the lead, the Titan Squad began to move out. Thorn stood near the front of the group, behind Heidi and SoulSeeker and next to Mina and Savir. The last time that Thorn had gone into a dungeon, he had not been part of the initial exploration so this time he let Seven Twisted Leaves take charge so he could learn how it was different from a normal dungeon run.

At first Thorn thought that they would move very slowly, but he was surprised to see that the main team was actually moving very quickly. When he asked about it, Seven Twisted Leaves explained that because they were going to have to do this multiple times, speed was the most important thing. Even if everyone died, the goal was to gain as much information in as short a time as possible to allow for future runs to be smoother.

“Commander, we spotted a group of mobs ahead. Looks to be fifteen mobs. Something we haven’t seen before. They’re wearing the red robes but are bigger than the normal cultists and more, uh, ragged? They look like smaller versions of the specialist units that attacked us above.”

Standing at the side listening intently, Thorn leaned down to Mina.

“What does he mean ‘above’?”

“Ah, in the normal town.” Mina whispered back. “We ‘dive’ dungeons, so we always call the normal world ‘above’, even if we are going up in a tower dungeon.”

“Got it, thanks.”

Seven Twisted Leaves’ brow furrowed as he looked at the picture that the scout passed to him. Tapping it with his twig-like finger, he sent it to the rest of the group.

“Anyone know what these are? They don’t look like the big guys we

fought earlier."

"Yeah, those are regular werewolves," Thorn said. "They are not quite as tough or dangerous as the greater werewolves, but they are still pretty dangerous in a group."

"Okay, then we'll deal with them like we would a normal melee mob. Tanks, you're in charge of keeping them contained, so I want a 'U' wrap. SoulSeeker, you are taking point, everyone else engages after the pull. DPS, make sure you are not splashing our tanks, we want to make this run last as long as possible."

As familiar with the game as he had become, Thorn still had a bit of trouble keeping up with the conversation. It was one thing to talk to the natives who believed the world of Nova Terra to be the real world. It was entirely another to listen to the professional gamers who lived between the real world and Nova Terra. About to lean down and ask Mina what they were talking about, Thorn paused when he saw her organizing the DPS players. Giving a small shrug, he took out his arbalest and prepared to join the fight from a distance.

"Good, Thorn, please pay special attention to the tank engagement. You're probably going to be our main force against the bosses so while we want you fresh, I really need you to understand how the engagements work." Leaves patted Thorn on the arm and then walked to SoulSeeker's side to give a few last minute commands.

The team continued to walk for a few minutes until they came to a small building that looked like a general store. The werewolves were milling around in the street in front of the store, but as soon as they saw the players, they began to rush over with reckless abandon.

"Primary tank, engage!"

Tapping his sword and shield together, SoulSeeker took six quick steps forward and planted his feet. For a moment, Thorn thought he was going to plant his kite shield into the ground like Ouroboros had done when he was still a Holy Guardian, but instead, SoulSeeker pounded his sword and shield together, creating a loud ringing sound. As the wave of sound radiated outward, the heads of all of the werewolves turned toward him, their burning eyes fixed on the crimson dragon symbol on his shield.

[Dragon's Tongue: Taunt]

The furious charge toward the Titan Squad turned into a charge toward SoulSeeker, but just before they were about to reach him, the Crimson

Dragon Knight spun his sword in a circle and thrust his head forward.

[Dragon's Tongue: Flame]

A gout of dragonfire burst from the red dragon on SoulSeeker's helmet, rolling over the werewolves who shrieked in pain.

"All tanks! Engage!"

At Seven Twisted Leaves' command the rest of the tanks rushed forward, allowing Thorn to see what Leaves had been talking about. The tanks on the ends of the line used their charge abilities, pushing past the werewolves in the front until they were on either side of the werewolf who was furthest from SoulSeeker. Using those tanks as anchors, the rest of the tanks surged forward, quickly filling in the line in a 'U' shape, with Heidi joining SoulSeeker at the bottom of the 'U'.

Under Mina's direction, the DPS players began to pepper the space inside the 'U' shape where the werewolves all stood with attacks, quickly wearing them down. With the support players keeping the tanks at full health and the tanks focusing on defending, the fifteen werewolves quickly fell and the loot that they dropped was picked up.

Carefully filing away what he had just seen in his mind, Thorn turned his excited gaze to Seven Twisted Leaves, wondering what else he would learn on this run. Apparently, his gaze was a little too intense as Leaves started edging away from him. The next few fights were largely the same, though against different numbers of werewolves, so Thorn was not able to see anything new, but that only lasted till the fourth fight, when the scouts spotted two of the red-robed Wolfkin standing amidst the werewolves milling about.

"Any idea what they do?" Thorn looked carefully at the image the scouts brought back, searching for anything that would indicate what made these two Wolkin special.

"We won't know for sure until we attack, but I'm guessing that they cast some sort of magic."

"You mean like that skull-waving guy we fought in Treefell Village?"

"No, that was a shaman, or maybe a higher level cultist. I think these guys are more like the one who was casting earth walls at the southern wall. It looks like that might be a wand in the closer one's belt."

"Hmmm, good catch." Thorn flicked on his messaging system and posted a message to the lead scout. "Hopefully we can get a clearer picture of it. I've asked them to check for any identifying weapons. Ah, here we go."

The scouts had done a great job getting a better picture, and in it Thorn could clearly see the black crystal-tipped wand that the red-robed Wolfkin carried in its belt. The crystal was long and thin, and the picture was clear enough that Thorn could see sickly green lines running the length of the crystal. Unsure if the color meant anything, he looked at Seven Twisted Leaves.

“Don’t look at me. I won't have any idea until we fight, but if I had to make a guess I would say either darkness or poison. More likely poison.”

“Awesome. So on top of the corruption that the werewolves’ claws spread, we need to be worried about poison.”

“Eh, there are only two of them. Our melee combatants will clean them up quickly. We should not be in too bad a shape.”

Trusting in Seven Twisted Leaves’ ability, Thorn watched as the Fae Druid organized the team for the upcoming fight. Rather than the ‘U’ shape that they had been using, Leaves organized them into a wedge, with SoulSeeker at the front. The support and ranged DPS players were placed in the middle of the wedge, protected by the tanks and melee fighters. Seeing Thorn’s curious gaze, Leaves chuckled and explained.

“The last formation was for containing the enemy, but now, because we want to get to their backline as fast as possible we need to spread them out. This formation will force them to come to us and spread themselves thinner, which in turn will allow our melee DPS to bypass their frontline and get to the squishies at the back.” Seven Twisted Leaves paused to swap two players before continuing. “Squishies are players or mobs that don’t have strong armor. If those two Wolfkin are actually mages, their armor is not going to be great. Squishies normally rely on their frontline to protect them.”

Thinking over the coming engagement, Thorn looked at the way the Titan Squad had been set up. His brow furrowing, he pointed to the melee DPS who were at the tail ends of the wedge.

“But with them standing there, won’t they have to go through even more enemies? If it was a straight line of tanks they would only have to fight through one or two, but like this they’ll need to fight through all of the enemies.”

“What do you mean?” It was Leaves’ turn to look confused.

“Well, we’re set up like this.” Thorn traced an upside down ‘V’ in the air, the point facing the dark sky. “They are all at the bottom of the formation. If they want to get to the point they will have to fight their way up the edges of

the formation, dealing with all of the werewolves who have spread out to surround the formation."

"Oh, I got it. I understand the confusion. Those players are going to do what you just described, but their job is cleaning up the werewolves attacking the formation. The melee DPS going after the mages are our scouts and assassins. We'll hit them from both sides." Leaves waved his hand to a support player and Thorn was astonished to see a dark figure detach itself from the support player's shadow.

"What can I do for you, commander?"

"Thorn, this is EphemeralWhisper. She and Alabaster will be responsible for leading the charge against the mages."

"Nice to meet you EphemeralWhisper."

"The pleasure is all mine, my lord." Saluting, the woman dipped her head. "You may call me Whisper, my lord."

"Mmm. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do."

"You will not be disappointed, my lord!" Her voice quivering with excitement, Whisper vanished back into the shadows after seeing Seven Twisted Leaves wave her away.

Looking at Seven Twisted Leaves' grimace, Thorn's eyebrows rose. From what he could tell, Whisper was not a Wolfkin player so her attitude was slightly strange to him.

"Another roleplayer?"

"Uh, no. Just weird. But really good at her job." Leaves' grimace deepened. "But honestly, you should probably get used to it. There will only be more of them as time goes on. After all, you're just about the closest thing to a real noble that most players will ever meet.

Suppressing a shudder at the thought of players starting to address him the way his native subordinates did, Thorn quickly changed the subject.

"Are two players going to be enough to take down the mages?"

"I've asked the other scouts to support them, but Whisper and Alabaster are excellent mage hunters, so it should be okay. The only real danger will be if the mages have really strong area attack spells."

"That is AoE, right?" Seeing Seven Twisted Leaves nod, Thorn grinned. "Hah, I'm learning."

"Technically, 'AoE' stands for 'Area of Effect', but it is essentially the same thing."

"And you're saying that is the danger because we're all bunched up in this

formation, right?”

“Hah, you are learning.” Responding to Thorn’s happy smile with a smile of his own, Leaves ordered the team to move into position.

With SoulSeeker at the front again, the Titan Squad stepped out into the open to face the enemy mobs. Just as before, as soon as the werewolves saw the players they howled and began to charge. This time, instead of SoulSeeker running out to get their attention, the whole formation surged forward at Leaves’ command. Instead of stopping and planting themselves to receive the werewolves’ charge, they continued to push forward, meeting the oncoming foes with a charge of their own.

Sparks flew as the two sides crashed together. SoulSeeker met the first werewolf with his shield, blocking the attack and shifting slightly to deflect the werewolf’s momentum to the side. Ignoring the enemy that he had just shrugged off, SoulSeeker stabbed his sword forward to engage the second werewolf. At the same moment, Heidi jabbed her sword at the werewolf that SoulSeeker had deflected toward her, grabbing its attention.

As the wave of enemies broke over them, the tanks skillfully attacked and blocked, pushing them down the two lines that made up the formation. Within forty seconds, the werewolves were spread thin across the outside of the formation, allowing the melee fighters to begin pushing forward, focusing on one werewolf at a time.

“Cloud incoming!”

Tearing his eyes from the fights that raged on either side of him, Thorn looked up in time to see one of the red-robed Wolfkin mages gesture with his wand. Thick, oily smoke began to billow from the green veined crystal, gathering into a thick cloud of pollution in the air in front of him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Don’t let him finish the spell!” Though it did not have the carrying quality of Thorn’s voice, Seven Twisted Leaves’ voice still carried well over the din of battle.

As if the Fae Druid had cast a spell, two figures appeared next to the mage, launching deadly attacks. Alabaster held long, curved daggers that he slashed across each other as he aimed at the mage’s neck, like a pair of deadly scissors. Whisper held a different sort of weapon that Thorn had never seen before. Two small blades shaped like little claws were attached to a thin wire that connected to a rod in Whisper’s hands.

The strange weapon looked like a short fishing rod with line attached to both sides, or a pair of kama connected to each other with detachable blades. Distracted by the strangeness of the weapon, Thorn almost missed the way that Whisper used it. With a twist of her wrist the wires wrapped around the mage’s arm, causing him to shriek as the bladed ends stabbed through his skin.

Another twist and a loop was thrown up and over the Wolfkin mage’s head, jerking it to the side at the perfect moment for Alabaster’s curved

blades to land on his exposed neck. As blood spurted, Whisper slipped under the mage's outstretched arm, using the momentum of her movement to shift the wand's direction from pointing toward the player's formation to aiming directly at the other Wolfkin mage.

pop

Detaching itself from the end of the now deceased mage's wand, the bubble of noxious gas began to float unsteadily toward the other mage. With a horrified yell, the Wolfkin mage abandoned the spell he was casting and conjured a small wind, trying to blow away the trembling cloud of poisonous gas that was tumbling toward him. Unfortunately for him, Whisper was one step faster, and with a flick of her rod one of the lines snaked out and tangled itself around his feet.

Jerking the line, Whisper tugged the mage off balance, ruining his concentration and breaking his spell. The wind that had started to stir settled back down and the small cloud of poison settled on the unfortunate mage. Coughing and hacking as he was choked by the cloud, the mage tried to crawl out of it, only to feel the sharp points of Alabaster's daggers sliding into his back and side.

"See, I told you she was good." Smiling happily, Leaves commented to Thorn who was watching the two assassins cut down the mages.

With the long range threat gone, it did not take long for the Titan Squad to cut down the rest of the werewolves. After clearing up the battlefield, they were about to continue searching the town when a loud roar shook the street. Hearing feet pounding, Thorn looked up in time to see a few scouts running down the street as if their lives depended on it. And judging by the massive werewolf behind them, it probably did.

ding

Dungeon: Liberation of Greyfield
The Devil's Blood Cult has seized the village of Greyfield, turning it into a stronghold for their corrupted cause. Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has made his home in the mayoral mansion at the center of town while his minions prowl the streets. To clear the corruption from Greyfield you must bring down Gelish and his two lieutenants. You have been found by Korma'hel the Mad. Defeat him to gain the gate key to the mayor's mansion.

Max Players: 50

"Uh, Thorn!"

"Yup, I got it."

His expression serious, Thorn crouched down, the pistons in his leg armor hissing as they compressed. The scouts were doing their best to stay ahead of Korma'hel but the giant werewolf was closing the distance quickly. Standing nearly ten and a half feet tall, the werewolf boss was covered in thick, scarred muscle and dark fur. A pair of ripped pants was the only clothing that he wore, but despite that, Thorn was positive that they were in for a tough fight.

[Predator's Leap]

Shooting forward, Thorn drew his arbalest from his inventory and fired off a shot at Korma'hel's head. The thick bolt ripped through the air, the whine from the arbalest's string alerting the boss that something was coming his direction. Reaching up, Korma'hel casually swatted the bolt out of the air, eliciting a gasp from the watching players.

"Get into formation! Heidi, you are the most flexible tank, so I want you to off-tank for Thorn. All other tanks, you're on ranged DPS unless there are adds. Pick a spot on the outside of the fight to guard in case they come from the surrounding buildings or streets. DPS, we have to burn this guy down as fast as possible, but don't exhaust yourself!"

With Seven Twisted Leaves snapping out commands, the Titan Squad quickly organized and ran forward to join Thorn who had just passed over the heads of the scouts. With Korma'hel's attention on him, Thorn put away his arbalest and took out his tetsubo, drawing it back over his head to deliver a powerful attack. The boss in his path snarled in disdain and drew back its fist to deliver a powerful attack of its own.

The force of Korma'hel's attack cracked the air, and the watching players could only suck in their breath as they imagined Thorn going flying. Only Mina and Heidi, who had played with Thorn a lot, did not seem worried. As for Thorn himself, just before their weapons connected, his serious expression cracked into a smile.

[Moon's Reflection]

Thorn's body blurred as Korma'hel's fist slammed into the place where Thorn's form should have been. With a ripple, the monster's fist continued straight through Thorn's body, throwing him off balance. Canceling his skill, Thorn whipped his tetsubo down over his head, smashing it into Korma'hel's

skull. Already off balance, even the prodigious agility of the massive werewolf was not enough to keep him on his feet, and Korma'hel stumbled forward, planting his face into the cobblestone street.

"Iron Wolves!" Whooping with excitement at the shocking sight of Thorn knocking over a boss, Mina led the chant as she sent her ice orbs spinning into the air.

"KILL!"

Energized by Thorn's first small victory, the rest of the Titan Squad rushed forward to take their positions. Seven Twisted Leaves had assigned Heidi to help Thorn tank the monstrous boss so she advanced until she was on the opposite side of the boss from Thorn. By standing on opposite sides, they were able to bait him back and forth, preventing either of them from having to face his full power.

Though SoulSeeker had a stronger defense than Heidi did, the Elemental Warrior was significantly more flexible and her kit allowed her to kite back from Korma'hel's attacks when necessary. An absolute defense like SoulSeeker's was the best for facing large groups of enemies, but against a single powerful target, flexibility was the order of the day.

Dancing back and forth as he and Heidi took turns pulling Korma'hel's attention, Thorn could see the boss beginning to slow down. As the minutes ticked by, deep wounds began to accumulate on the boss' body. Patches of burned or frozen skin were starting to appear as he used his incredible physique to block the ice, fire, and lightning attacks being thrown at him.

"Careful! He is about to hit half health! Tanks, be on the lookout for adds and get them under control as soon as possible. Mina, you're responsible for calling targets."

Under Seven Twisted Leaves' experienced leadership the Titan Squad was ready when Korma'hel threw back his head and howled his frustration into the gloomy sky. Answering howls popped up from a number of the nearby side streets, and within a minute there were twenty werewolves rushing at the team from all sides. Unswayed, the tanks quickly gathered them in small groups, and Mina started calling out targets to focus the DPS' attacks.

Left to deal with Korma'hel on their own, Thorn and Heidi stepped up their aggression, doing their best to make sure that the werewolf boss could not escape to assist the mobs he had summoned. Ducking under Korma'hel's swipe, Heidi saw a faint redness seeping from the ground underneath Korma'hel's feet and furrowed her brow.

“Thorn! I think he’s gathering energy for something!”

Following Heidi’s pointing finger, Thorn saw strands of red mist gathering around Korma’hel. As he watched, it began to trace out a disturbing pattern on the ground. Following the mist with his eyes, Thorn saw that it was originating from the werewolves that Mina was directing the DPS to cut down.

“That doesn’t look good.” Thorn muttered under his breath, his mind whirling. While he had no idea what the magical symbol being carved on the ground under Korma’hel’s feet would do, he was quite positive that he did not want to find out. “I think we need to move him!”

“Move him? How on earth are we going to do that?”

“Lets try to lure him back the way he came.”

“Alright!”

Gritting her teeth, Heidi rotated around Korma’hel until she and Thorn were on the same side. Once they were side by side, the two tanks began to retreat, trying to pull Korma’hel away. As if he understood what they were trying to do, the werewolf boss simply smirked and did not chase them. Instead, he raised his hands and howled, causing the other werewolves to begin raging.

“Well, that didn’t work.”

Shaking his head, Thorn activated [Shadow Dash] and rocketed back toward Korma’hel. Next to him, Heidi used her [Burning Charge], leaving a trail of fire behind her as she sprinted toward Korma’hel’s legs. Seeing both tanks coming back in, the sneer on Korma’hel’s face grew more pronounced and he got ready to meet them. Remembering Thorn’s ability to phase, the boss aimed a casual blow at Thorn’s flickering figure while simultaneously sending a savage kick at Heidi.

This time it was Heidi’s turn to avoid the attack while Thorn decided to power through. Normally, Thorn would have used [Armor of the Earth] to make himself invulnerable, but he was not confident it would work while he was in the air since it relied on dispersing the force that struck him into the ground so instead, he jumped and twisted his body in the air, reaching out for Korma’hel’s fist. Latching on to it, Thorn pulled himself over the large werewolf boss’ arm and tried to knee the monster in the face.

The move looked spectacular, but did not carry very much force behind it. Still, it forced Korma’hel to lean back which was good enough for Thorn. Landing in front of the boss, Thorn and Heidi began to attack him again,

forcing him back into a defensive position. Despite the fact that they had taken control of the fight, neither was happy as they watched the red mist continue to solidify into the strange, arcane symbols on the street.

“Thorn! We’re almost done with the adds! Get ready!”

Gritting his teeth, Thorn sidestepped a punch and slammed his tetsubo into Korma’hel’s ribs. Despite the force of the blow, Korma’hel didn’t shift more than an inch. It was obvious that the boss was intentionally keeping his feet firmly planted on the magical symbol forming under him. Despite Heidi and Thorn’s best efforts, Korma’hel refused to be shifted. As the final few werewolves were targeted by the team’s DPS players, a sense of dread crept up Thorn’s back, causing the hair on the back of his neck to stand straight up.

With a growl, Thorn dropped his tetsubo and lunged forward, his claws burying themselves in Korma’hel’s sides. The werewolf boss was enraged and began raining blows down on Thorn’s back, but Thorn simply shrugged them off. Planting his feet firmly on the cobblestones, Thorn began to heave with all his might. As strong as Korma’hel was, he was not that heavy so he began to rise up into the air.

Feeling his feet leaving the ground, Korma’hel went absolutely ballistic, nearly ripping himself free from Thorn’s grasp.

[Wolf’s Rage]

It had been a long time since Thorn had used his rage ability as he generally disliked the way it made him feel, but in this moment it felt as natural as breathing. Burning energy filled Thorn’s limbs and his claws clamped down on the struggling werewolf boss. Squatting slightly, Thorn heaved once again and activated [Predator's Leap] which had come off cooldown. The pistons in Thorn’s legs groaned in protest, but they still fired, sending Thorn and Korma’hel straight up into the air just as the last werewolf fell to one of Savir’s [Freezing Ray] spells.

Red mist burst from the werewolf’s body and snaked toward the magical symbols on the ground. Settling in the remaining empty space on the cobblestones, the magic circle was complete. A brilliant bloody light burst upward, cutting through the fog and shining up into the sky. Thorn and Korma’hel had been in the air above the circle, but with a wrench Thorn twisted his body, pulling Korma’hel out of the way of the light.

The players of the Titan Squad watched with bated breath as the red glow landed on Thorn’s back, lighting up the glistening silver with crimson rays. Without warning, the light began to pour into Thorn, who jerked and twisted,

his body seeming to grow even larger than it already was. A burst of strength slammed through Thorn, and with a push, he sent Korma'hel flying into one of the buildings along the side of the street.

The light still pouring into him, Thorn fell out of the air, sending splinters of stone flying as the cobblestones shattered under his weight. A cloud of dirt and stone lifted into the air, blocking him from his teammates' sight. The bloody light that had been flowing from the red magic circle on the ground into his body began to flicker unsteadily.

As Thorn's body fell, he had landed on the edge of the magical circle, ruining it. Eyes narrowing, Mina looked between the partially ruined magical circle and the spot where Thorn had landed. Inside the cloud of settling dust, Thorn groaned and pulled himself up, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

"Thorn! Are you okay?" Heidi rushed over to Thorn to check on him, only to feel a strong tug as Mina appeared next to her and pulled her away.

CRUNCH

Gasping, Heidi looked at the fist that had just landed where she had been standing a moment earlier. Following the gleaming silver arm up to the wolf-shaped helmet, Heidi's eyes went wide as she stared into eyes consumed by madness. The flickering magical circle finally died, going dim as the red vanished into the cobblestones. A few last rays of the red light poured into Thorn's back and a reddish tint shrouded his armor as his hulking figure rose to his feet and roared at the sky!

CHAPTER NINE

“Everyone, back! Now!”

It was equal parts Seven Twisted Leaves’ command and the sound of pure rage that was flowing from Thorn’s throat that made the team move. As if their pants were on fire, the Titan squad turned and began to run, those who were closer to Thorn even using their abilities to move faster. Mina and Heidi were the closest to Thorn, and when his roar ended, they could see his glowing eyes turn toward them.

“Go, go!” Slapping Heidi on the back, Mina slid in front of Thorn on a trail of ice, hoping to grab his attention.

For a moment Heidi was frozen in place until she saw Thorn take a step toward Mina. Snapping out of her trance, she gritted her teeth and lifted her shield.

[Burning Charge]

Wreathed in flame, Heidi slammed into Thorn’s side.

“Oof!”

With a grunt, the air left Heidi’s lungs as she bounced off. Scrambling to her feet, she could feel her shield arm trembling. Just as she was getting her bearings, she was once again tugged off her feet by Mina just in time to avoid an earth splitting stomp from Thorn.

“We gotta go!” Without pausing, Mina continued on her way, pulling Heidi after her.

Behind them, Thorn crouched slightly, his eyes fixed on their retreating backs. Just as he was about to leap toward them, a roar behind him caused his head to turn. Still alive, Korma’hel the Mad stomped out of the massive hole Thorn had thrown him through, his teeth bared. What little reason remained in Thorn’s head immediately identified the werewolf boss as an enemy and his leap turned into a dash.

Leaving a crater where he had been standing, Thorn hurtled toward Korma’hel. From a distance, the players of the Titan Squad watched wide-eyed as Thorn threw himself at the boss. Korma’hel seemed equally surprised, and even slightly fearful as he met the Titan in combat. Throwing a wild strike to try and gain initiative, Korma’hel suddenly lost sight of Thorn. Jerking his body back in surprise, he felt a sudden pressure near his head.

Acting entirely on instinct, Thorn had ducked and jumped sideways, putting himself outside of Korma’hel’s field of view. Turning his shoulders, Thorn dipped his body down and spun, touching the ground with his palm as he whipped his leg around like a chopping axe.

CRACK

The power of the kick crushed through the arm that Korma’hel raised to block, driving the boss to the ground. Without waiting, Thorn immediately followed up with a flurry of punches and low kicks, keeping Korma’hel on the ground. Sweeping Korma’hel’s leg to prevent him from getting to his knees, Thorn grabbed the werewolf’s shoulder and began to punch him, smashing his fist down over and over, just as Devon had taught him when he first entered the game.

Despite being nearly two hundred feet away at the other end of the street, Thorn’s teammates could hear the steady thump, thump, thump, of Thorn’s punches as he hammered Korma’hel into the ground. Already spooked, they looked at each other, fear in their eyes.

“Uh, Leaves? Um, what do we do now?”

“Ah. Yes. Well, let's stay over here for now.” The Fae Druid took a deep breath and held it to try and calm himself down. “Hopefully, when he is done,

uh, with the boss, we're outside of his aggro range."

"But what if he comes over here?"

Shrugging, Seven Twisted Leaves looked at Mina.

"Don't look at me. I have no idea. Run? I mean, this isn't the first time he has soloed a boss, but I'm more concerned about how long this rage is going to last."

"Was it that magic circle thing that was sucked into him?"

"I guess. Honestly, I know just as little as you do. But if he was absorbing the rage from all of those werewolves, we might be here for a while."

Thorn had gotten on top of Korma'hel at some point and started pounding punches into the werewolf one after another until the monster stopped moving. Despite knowing that the unmoving body beneath him had lost its last breath, the rage boiling through Thorn's body had not abated in the least. He could feel the urge to rip and tear coursing through him, strengthening his senses and alerting him that there were creatures to destroy close by.

The red mist that had poured into his body had spread through him, energizing his muscles and pushing him to find a target to attack. It was as if the mist was a living spirit trying to consume him as it drove him into mindless rage. After filling his limbs, Thorn could feel the bloodlust storming into his head, battering away at his mental state. Little by little the red mist ate away at his reason, intent on turning him into the optimal killing machine.

click

A strange echoing sound rang out in Thorn's body and abruptly he found himself looking at his body as it straddled Korma'hel. It was as if he had been forced out of his body and was now looking at it from a camera positioned above and behind his head.

Startled, Thorn blinked and his view shifted again, overlapping the third person view that he was experiencing. This time, Thorn could see a glowing representation of his whole body laid out, as if it were lying on a table. Trying to wrap his head around what was going on, Thorn felt a piercing pain in his mind and saw a thick red mist coiling around his limbs. As he looked closer, the red mist jerked and turned toward him, giving him the impression that he was facing a bloodthirsty snake.

Recoiling from the red mist, Thorn saw that there were other, smaller snakes of mist trying to worm their way into his head. Each wriggle sent pain shooting through his mind. Surprised by the assault, Thorn did not know how

to react, and by the time he began trying to calm himself his mind had already been overrun by tendrils of the red mist. Taking a deep breath, Thorn tried to move his fingers, only to find that the red mist blocked his command from reaching his hand.

Another piercing pain shot through Thorn's mind as the large red mist snake smashed into his mind, trying to swallow it whole. Thorn could feel the edges of his mind starting to unravel as the red mist surrounded him and he knew that he had to do something or he would be lost. Taking a deep breath, Thorn reached deep into his core and relaxed his mind, letting the pain brought by the red mist flood in.

It felt like ages since Thorn had repeated the mantra he had learned to deal with his pain in the real world, but as the red mist invaded his mind and ripped away the trappings it was abruptly halted. At the center of his mind lay an impossibly dense core of pure will, forged through a lifetime of pain.

'I am more than my pain, I am more than my body. My body bends to my will, not I to it.'

Brought up short by the immovable will in front of it, the red mist hesitated for a moment before renewing its assault. Rampaging through Thorn's mind, it did its best to breach the wall it had come up against, only to find its attacks simply bouncing away. As it was gearing up for another attack, the dense will suddenly moved, exploding outward and pressing down on the red mist with the weight of a mountain.

With the red mist occupying his body, controlling his limbs was not an option, so Thorn focused his attention on fighting the mental battle against the overwhelming rage. Thorn's body had been acting on its own, following the red mist's direction to battle. Yet, despite the bloodlust that urged his body to action, a sliver of his reason had held on, dispassionately observing the mess he had just made of Korma'hel. As his instinct now tried to drive him toward the Titan Squad, that sliver of reason bloomed into an immovable weight, freezing Thorn where he sat. Having recovered from the surprise brought about by the invading red mist, Thorn split his attention, using his powerful will to lock his body in place while he began to fight back against the corroding influence of the bloodlust.

Little by little, Thorn used the weight of his mind to trap the bloodlust in place. Starting from the smallest of the red mist snakes, Thorn focused on seizing it to prevent it from escaping and severing it piece by piece. As the slivers of red mist were cut from the main body of rage they would struggle

against their restraints before dissipating. Incensed by his counter attack, the red mist that had invaded Thorn's body smashed itself against his will, trying to burn its way into the core of his mind through pure fury. Yet no matter how it fought, Thorn's mind was focused and unshakable.

Thorn's burning eyes suddenly snapped shut and his fists closed. The sliver of reason that had been acting as an impenetrable fortress began to show signs of movement. Despite the pain in his mind, Thorn's attention never wavered as his will began to flood through his body.

Slowly at first, but with ever increasing force, that small remnant of clarity began to expand, as if a liquid was pushing back the rage and blocking its attacks. First it grew to fill his head, driving the bloodlust sensation down into his chest and extremities. Once his head was cleared, Thorn began to mentally push down into the rest of his body, slowly forcing the bloodlust to retreat. As the two forces battled inside of him, Thorn's body shivered. Just as he finished clearing it from his chest, Thorn heard a voice booming out in his mind.

[NO! NOOO! HOW COULD A MORTAL LIKE YOU RESSISST MY BLOOD?]

A sense of disgust rose in Thorn's mind and he redoubled his efforts, clearing his right arm and then his waist and legs. Forcing all of the bloodlust into his left arm, Thorn began to push it down toward his hand. Gritting his teeth, he gave a massive mental push. With a ripping feeling, Thorn felt the bloodlust being forced through his palm, where the remnants of the red mist dissipated into the air. Though it was painful, it was followed by a sense of relief.

With the bloodlust expelled, a wave of fatigue swept over Thorn, causing his tightly clenched muscles to relax. A groan leaked from his mouth as he slumped over sideways, crashing to the cobblestone street. Too tired to even roll over, Thorn lay on his side, gasping.

"Thorn!"

Seeing that Mina was about to rush forward, Seven Twisted Leaves grabbed her shoulder.

"Hold up there, missy. We need to make sure that the rage monster is gone and that Thorn is back. Healers, see if you can help the boss. Tanks, make sure you are ready to stop him if he starts going wild. Crowd Control, you'll need to buy us some time if he is going crazy."

As frustrated as Mina was, she had to admit that Seven Twisted Leaves

was correct. Thorn had just soloed a boss, and even if the boss he killed had less than half its health left, getting close to him while he was enraged was a death sentence.

“Tanks, move us up. Slowly.”

Cautiously, the Titan Squad moved forward toward where Thorn lay. On full alert, the tanks maintained a forty foot distance from Thorn, readying themselves to move backwards if he so much as twitched.

“Let’s go with one heal for now. Blossom, give him something light. The last thing we need is a fully-healed Thorn if he is still juiced up.”

Nodding, Blossom stepped forward to the tank line, getting herself just in range. She lifted her staff and pointed it toward Thorn, drawing a flower in the air. Crackling with green energy, she blew on the flower, sending it flying through the air to where Thorn lay. The flower expanded until it was larger than his body and settled down. Bands of healing energy wrapped around Thorn’s armor and then vanished into him.

As the spell wrapped around him, Thorn could feel warmth pulsing through his body. Each pulse delivered a bit of health and eased a sliver of his fatigue. It was a slow process, but Thorn could feel himself improving.

“What is taking so long?” Frowning, Mina looked at Blossom. “Is it even working?”

“I can feel that the spell is active, but I think that his endurance pool is so big that most of the energy is getting sucked up trying to restore it,” Blossom replied before deflecting Mina’s attention to Seven Twisted Leaves. “Do you want me to try another cast?”

“No,” the Fae Druid shook his head. “Lets just take it slow. No point in risking a wipe because we’re rushing.”

It took nearly twenty minutes and five casts of Blossom’s healing spell for Thorn’s energy to get back to the point that he could sit up. Groaning, he lifted himself to a sitting position, only to feel the magical healing abruptly cut off. A glance behind him showed that the Titan Squad had backed off again and was watching him from a safe range.

Waving his hand to indicate that he was alright, Thorn felt his own regeneration kicking in. He had been so exhausted by the mental fight with the red mist that his body had no energy to spare for regenerating his health. Now that Blossom had gotten him back to a normal condition, his health began to regenerate properly.

“Whoa, Thorn, what on earth was that?”

cough cough

“Ugh, I’m not sure.”

Answering Mina, who had blinked next to him, Thorn heaved himself to his feet and turned to face the rest of the Titan Squad. The whole team, with the exception of Delmore, was watching him warily, just in case he decided to go crazy again. The Spirit Guide was studying the ground where the remnants of the red magical symbol lay. The majority of the symbols had vanished, but a rough outline had appeared in the dirt and Delmore was making sure that no one walked on it.

“Sorry about that.” Thorn said, scratching his head to hide his embarrassment. “I really did not intend to do that.”

“What are you apologizing for?” Seven Twisted Leaves grinned as he patted Thorn’s arm. “We cleared the boss in record time. But maybe next time let's not just go off on our own. We probably could have dealt with him as a group which would have been a safer, and from the looks of it, a less painful way of beating him.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Accepting the rebuke, Thorn smiled apologetically at the rest of the team.

“Hey, check this out. I found a key.” From the hole in the ground where Korma’hel’s body lay, Mina lifted a rusted key. “It says it is the gate key to the mayor’s manor.”

“Good, let's head that way. Healers, get Thorn’s health back to full. Scouts, we’re headed toward the center of town. Tanks, move on their command.”

CHAPTER TEN

Thorn’s head was still pounding, but he fell in line with the rest of the tanks and waited for the scouts to give the all clear. While they walked toward the center of the dungeon, Thorn looked over the descriptions of the gear that Mina sent to the chat. His armor was already outstanding so he was not overly interested in any of it.

After about thirty minutes of walking and another four fights, the Titan Squad had cleared the way to the front gate of the mayor’s mansion. A massive metal fence with ornate gargoyle sculptures set at regular intervals surrounded the building. Through the rusted metal rails, Thorn could see a robed figure standing in the center of the courtyard.

“Alright team, let's pause here.” Calling for everyone to stop, Seven Twisted Leaves had them gather. “This looks to be our next boss fight. This time, we’re going to plan it a bit better.”

Coughing into his fist, Thorn looked away as if Leaves’ comment had nothing to do with him.

“While we made it through the last fight unscathed due to Thorn’s, uh, unique traits, we can’t just throw him at every boss we come across. Our goal

is not only to clear the dungeon, but to do it in a repeatable way. That way, the next team that comes in here can clear it as well."

"We could just have Thorn bus." Mina said with a grin, causing the rest of the team to chuckle.

Smiling along, Thorn secretly sent a message to Corvo.

"Though that would probably work, it is not going to be very efficient, so let's focus on doing this in a sustainable way, please." Ever serious when he was working, Seven Twisted Leaves brought everyone's attention back. "Thorn, I know I said that we were going to unleash you on the bosses, but you were a bit too effective in the last fight. We are not doing a speed run, so I'm going to have you take a small step back this time. Hang out with the ranged DPS for now. I'll let you know if I want you to engage in melee."

"Got it."

"Great. Tanks, we're going to play this one a bit differently."

ding

As Thorn listened to Seven Twisted Leaves give directions, he opened up the message that had just arrived from Corvo.

> Haha, when you are in a dungeon, a bus is someone who brings others along without them having to do anything. The bus clears the dungeon and everyone else is just there for the free ride.

Sending back a quick thanks, Thorn closed out the message and tuned back in to what Leaves was saying.

"Alright, anyone with a stun, step out. I'm going to put you in groups, you'll be responsible to stop the charged spells. Make sure that you are organizing according to the length of your recharge. Shortest in group one, longest recharges in group two, everyone one else, pick a group starting from low to high."

"Why did you put them in that order?" Taking the opportunity while the players with stuns were getting themselves organized, Thorn asked Seven Twisted Leaves.

"The first group will be spamming their stun as much as possible, since it is the easiest. However, it also has the shortest duration or least effect. The faster the recharge, the shorter the stun lasts, especially on a boss. The opposite is true for group two. Longest stun, longest recharge. Stuns tend to make bosses angry, so it is likely that when we block the boss' first spell, the

spell that follows will be much more dangerous."

"Got it. It is crazy how intricate all this is."

"It has to be." Seven Twisted Leaves gave a mirthless smile and patted Thorn's arm. "Most of us are not bosses ourselves, so we have to use what advantages we have."

It did not take long for the Titan Squad to get itself organized and set up in front of the gate. Taking the key from Mina, Leaves gave it to EphemeralWhisper who inserted it into the gate and then vanished, reappearing behind Thorn. With a dreadful creak the gate opened up and the tanks led the way into the manor's courtyard.

As he walked through the gate, Thorn was able to see the robed figure better. Surprisingly, the robed figure was not a Wolfkin. Human looking hands stretched from the thick folds of the red robe to hold a tall bone staff set with a red gem. The figure had a hood that cast a deep shadow over its face, but when the players had all entered, the figure pulled the hood down, revealing a smooth silver mask with three triangles where the left eye should have been.

Dungeon: Liberation of Greyfield
The Devil's Blood Cult has seized the village of Greyfield, turning it into a stronghold for their corrupted cause. Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has made his home in the mayoral mansion at the center of town while his minions prowl the streets. To clear the corruption from Greyfield you must bring down Gelish and his two lieutenants. You have defeated Korma'hel the Mad and gained the key necessary to open the mayor's courtyard. You have discovered the Raging Beauty, Nellourous Belle. Defeat her to open the door to the mayor's mansion. Max Players: 50

"Watch out for assassins." Thorn's whisper echoed around the courtyard.

"What do you mean?" Curious, Seven Twisted Leaves glanced at Thorn before looking back at the mysterious looking boss.

"That mask is the symbol of the Devil's Blood Assassins. They're the

ones who have been trying to free Mayari."

"Hah, so you know of us?" The figure's voice was sickly sweet, reminding Thorn of Mayari. "I had not thought that the Devil's Blood were so famous? Well, since you're here, we should take some time to get to know each other."

Lifting her staff, she tapped the bottom on the flagstone beneath her feet and the heavy metal gate closed behind the team. Another tap rang out and Thorn saw some figures along the gate move. The gargoyle statues swung their heads toward the Titan Squad, fixing their glowing red eyes on the players.

"But where are my manners? Since you have arrived here, you must have met Korma'hel the Mad already, so now it is my time to shine. My name is Nellorous Belle, though you may know me by my other name, the Raging Beauty."

"Sorry, never heard of you." Thorn's voice carried clearly, causing Nellorous to choke on the words she was about to say.

"Ehm. Well, you certainly will never forget me after I cut open your stomachs and feed your entrails to my pets. Ahahahaha!"

Still sickly sweet, Nellorous' voice took on a brutal edge, the gap between her words and the way she delivered them making many of the players shiver.

"Way to go, Thorn. I think you made her mad." Unaffected by the boss' words, Mina prodded Thorn with her wand. "Bet you're first on her list."

"I'm probably the only one on her list. It would take the gargoyles a week to finish all this." Thorn remarked flippantly, slapping his stomach.

"Ha, if they even could. I bet Titan tastes terrible." Mina giggled.

"Enough!" Shouted Nellorous Belle, clearly annoyed by the banter. "Since you have been foolish enough to come here, you should stay. Ahahahaha! Take wing, my minions!"

At her command, the gargoyles spread their wings and shrieked, causing all of the players in the Titan Squad to feel faintly nauseous.

"Uh oh, looks like they have some sort of sonic attack." Mina muttered. "Leaves, we need to prioritize the gargoyles."

"Alright, I'll leave it to you." Nodding, Leaves began to snap out orders. "Ranged DPS, follow Mina's target. Control, try to keep the other mobs busy. Heidi, SoulSeeker, I'll leave the front line to you. All other tanks, protect your healer!"

Lifting his arbalest, Thorn waited for Mina to pick out a target. The desire to charge straight for the boss and pummel her into the ground was burning in his chest, but he forced it down, compressing it into a tiny ball with his will. Ever since the last boss fight, Thorn found his will easier to use. Something had changed in him, or in his perception, allowing him greater control over himself. It was almost as if his will was an independent force that he could move freely within his body.

He was curious whether there had been any changes in his status that would alert him to what was going on, but he had not had time to dig through his logs to see if he could find anything. Setting a reminder for after the battle, Thorn was brought back to the present by Mina's yell.

"On my mark!"

The Ice Witch thrust her wand at one of the gargoyles that was circling overhead, causing an [Ice Spike] to shoot out at it. Immediately, Thorn shifted his aim and pulled the trigger of his arbalest, the string thrumming as it fired. The arm sized bolt smashed into the gargoyle, ripping a chunk of stone from its chest. At the same time, a storm of other attacks landed, obliterating the monster.

"Talk about overkill." Mina surveyed the tiny shower of stones that was all that remained of the unfortunate gargoyle. "Everyone on my left is group one, everyone to my right is group two. Alternate firing on my mark, starting with group one. Ready? Lets go!"

[Ice Spike]

Even though it was only half of the number of attacks, it still broke the gargoyle into pieces, causing another shower of stone.

[Ice Spike]

Seeing the second sliver of ice targeting a gargoyle, Thorn fired his reloaded arbalest at the target that Mina had picked. This time, the gargoyle tried to dodge out of the way, but the attacks from group two were so tightly packed that it did not manage to escape in time. Seeing three of their number fall, the remaining ten gargoyles were furious and began to swoop down, trying to attack the players.

"Yes! Ahahaha! Feast upon them, my minions!" Cackling, Nellorous Belle waved her staff, sending a crimson mist through the air to surround the gargoyles.

Tucking their wings, they fell toward the players, claws outstretched. Yet, instead of the soft, squishy flesh that they imagined feeling, they were met

with buffeting wind, freezing cold, vines that rose up to wrap around them, and all sorts of other crowd control abilities. Their movement hindered by all of the different abilities, the gargoyles became easy targets for the ranged DPS, and four more quickly fell.

The six remaining gargoyles managed to break free of the abilities binding them, only to find themselves targeted by the swords and spears of the melee DPS players when they reached the ground. The last gargoyles were soon dealt with, leaving the Titan Squad facing Nellorous Belle again. Despite how quickly the team had dealt with her gargoyles, the boss did not seem worried at all.

Chuckling, she waved her hand and Thorn immediately understood the cause for her lack of concern. Under the player's gaze the broken remains of the gargoyles rose into the air and shot back to the fence. With a crackle, the rubble reformed and the pillars that had previously been empty were suddenly occupied by gargoyles again.

"Ahahaha! I must say, you did well against my flying pets. I had expected you to fall apart pathetically! But the real test is to come! Let's see how long you can keep it up?!"

With another scream, the gargoyles launched themselves from the fence again. This time, however, they did not circle over the party. Instead, they dove low to the ground, staying out of the sightlines of the ranged DPS who stood in the center of the group. All except Thorn, that is. Easily able to see over the heads of the tanks who stood on the outside of the formation, Thorn lifted his arbalest and fired, the thick bolt burying itself in one of the gargoyle's shoulders.

With a crack, the gargoyle lost its arm and a large portion of one wing. Screaming with pain and rage, it tumbled to the ground, skidding to a stop at the feet of one of the team's tanks. Three swift blows with the player's hammer, and the first gargoyle had fallen.

"Melee, move out! Ranged, get line of sight, but keep an eye on the sky!" Barking out orders, Seven Twisted Leaves began throwing out [Trapping Vines] to try and tie up the attacking gargoyles.

As Thorn was reloading his arbalest, he felt someone grab onto his armor. Turning his head, he saw Mina climbing up onto his shoulder. From her new vantage point she began flinging attacks at the now-visible gargoyles. With the tanks keeping the gargoyles occupied, the DPS began chipping away at them. As another enemy died, Seven Twisted Leaves frowned.

“Heidi, SoulSeeker, we need to engage the boss. If we don’t these gargoyles are probably just going to keep coming back. I want DPS group one to support Heidi and SoulSeeker. Alabaster, Whisper, you go with them too. Let's see if we can make some progress.”

Acknowledging the order, Heidi and SoulSeeker began to move forward toward Nellorous Belle, DPS group one following behind them. The two assassins were nowhere to be seen, but Thorn knew that they were making their way over toward the boss.

“How cute, you are going to try to attack me? Hah, what a pointless struggle.” Nellorous Belle’s sickly sweet voice called out when she spotted the team approaching. “Let me show you what true despair looks like! Rise my stone minions! Rise and fall on these foolish people!”

CREAK

From the flagstone in front of her, six large forms rose from the ground as she waved the staff, quickly forming into stone golems that stomped forward to attack the two tanks. Each golem was only seven feet tall, but their stone bodies were tougher than most armor and easily shrugged off the ranged attacks that targeted them.

“Melee, rotate to the front, group one ranged, rotate back to group two!”

Seeing the smooth switch happening, Thorn could not help but envy Seven Twisted Leaves’ commanding ability. The Fae Druid managed to keep an eye on the whole battlefield and was quick to react when the situation was not favorable. Even though Thorn had a better view of the battlefield because of his height, he often found himself completely focused on only a single aspect of the fight. Seven Twisted Leaves seemed to be able to avoid this tunnel vision and keep all of the different moving parts of the fight in mind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The tension in the courtyard rose as the players looked at the stone monsters facing them. While not particularly difficult to take down, the thought that Nellourous Belle was able to simply wave her hand and cause them to reform was quite frustrating. To make matters worse, the stupid boss simply would not shut up. A steady stream of insane laughter and irritating chatter flowed from her throat, setting everyone on edge.

“Ahahaha, you poor fools, you think that you will be able to win here? My stone creations are tireless and unbeatable! Ahahaha! The Devil’s Blood will be brought forth and will consume your pathetic souls! Ahahaha!”

“Thorn, join the tanks and see if you can take down the golems. Focus on stalling them but not killing them to keep them from being remade.”

Slipping his arbalest back into his inventory, Thorn pulled out a large war pick and rushed forward, leaving Mina hanging in the air as she stepped off of his shoulder. Of the many weapons in his inventory, this was one of the largest and was just the thing for going up against a stone enemy.

Thorn skidded to a halt in front of one of the golems before taking a quick step back as the monster swung its fist at him. Jumping forward, he brought

the war pick down on the golem's thigh, sinking the tip of his weapon deep into the golem's leg. Keeping his hold on the long handle of the war pick, Thorn delivered a heel kick to the golem's leg while pulling sharply on his weapon.

CRACK

With a shearing sound, fractures ran through the golem's thigh, splintering the stone and causing the monster to slump to the side as its leg came right off. With a roar of anger, the golem stabbed one fist into the ground to keep its tremendous bulk upright and swung its other fist at Thorn, only to find its attack deflected by one of the nearby tanks.

At the same moment, Nellorous Belle sneered, lifting her hand to gesture to the crippled golem. Thick yellowish brown energy started to gather under the golem's chopped off leg, but before it could heal, she gasped and arched her back in pain as a curved knife slashed across her back.

Behind Nellorous Belle, Alabaster shimmered into focus, his knives cutting the boss' cloak to shreds. Hissing in anger, the Raging Beauty spun around, her crimson robe swirling and forcing Alabaster to jump back. In front of her eyes, Alabaster shimmered again, this time fading into thin air. Before the robed boss could follow up, a thin wire settled around the top of her staff, jerking it to the side. Unconcerned, Nellorous Belle let go of her weapon and spoke an arcane command.

"Ahahaha! You want my staff? Ha, you can have it! See how that turns out for you! Be careful or it may prove too dangerous to handle!"

Her staff began to float in the air, resisting EphemeralWhisper's attempts to wrestle it away. Pulsing with yellow flame, a growing ball of energy at the top of the staff began to spin, causing Ephemeral Whisper's skin to prickle. The closer she got, the stronger the sensation became, forcing her to suppress the urge to run away.

Despite EphemeralWhisper's tugs, the staff remained fixed in the air, completely unmoving, as if it had been pinned to the air. Ignoring the assassin struggling with the staff, the Nellorous Belle withdrew two small maces from her robe, smacking them together with a clang that sent a small shockwave through the air in front of her.

As the sound shook the air, Alabaster was forced out of his invisible state. Stumbling back, he dove to the side as both maces smashed down where he had been standing, crushing the flagstones.

"Ahahahahaha! Don't run, little mouse! Come and let me crush you!"

Chasing after the constantly retreating assassin, Nellorous Belle proved true to her title as she smashed the ground apart with powerful strikes. Seeing that Alabaster was in trouble, Whisper abandoned her attempts to move the staff that Nellorous Belle had left hanging in mid air and launched her wire as she shouted over her shoulder to Seven Twisted Leaves.

“Leaves, keep an eye on this staff!”

Knowing full well that a single hit would spell his death, Alabaster had been doing his best to create space between him and the boss, but no matter where he ran or how he hid, she was always a step behind him, her maces swinging. Just as he jumped sideways to avoid a strike, a thin wire looped around his waist and pulled him away from Nellorous’ followup attack.

Giving Whisper a grateful nod, the two of them activated their stealth and vanished into the air to set up their next attack. Unfortunately, the boss was prepared and once again smashed her two maces together, producing that odd resonance that shook them out of their stealthed state. Watching from where he was fighting the golems, Thorn was about to rush forward to engage Nellorous Belle but Seven Twisted Leaves’ voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Thorn, stay on the golems and help Heidi and the second tank team keep the golems locked down! SoulSeeker, take team one and head toward the boss! Let's start the stun rotation. Support, get ready to bubble. I can feel that something is coming.”

A few seconds later, Seven Twisted Leaves’ words were proven to be true as the pulsing energy on the top of the staff that was hanging in the air abruptly split into two distinct balls that shot through the air towards different targets. Bubbles popped into existence around the targeted players, but the energy balls exploded into shards of energy that spread out around the target’s shields, wounding players nearby and leaving craters in the ground around them.

No sooner had the attack hit than the staff began to charge again. Laughing uproariously, Nellorous Belle rushed forward, her two maces swinging wildly as she approached the tanks who were moving past the crippled golems. Trusting that the other tanks had the boss well in hand, Thorn focused his attention on the six large golems that were struggling to move forward. Each of them was missing one or more limbs, severely impacting how fast they could move.

“Let’s get them into a group,” Heidi said to the group two tanks as she lifted her shield to deflect one of the golem’s attacks. “They’ll be easier to

control if we can clump them up."

"A group? You got it."

Putting away his huge war pick, Thorn dodged one of the golems' swings and kicked with his boot, sending the monster sliding back. Another of the golems that was missing both legs was pulling itself toward the ranged DPS players, so Thorn rushed over. Lowering his shoulder, he smashed into its chest, knocking it onto its back.

Another golem next to him slammed its fist toward his side so Thorn tucked his arm down to block the blow and borrowed the momentum of the attack to jump to the side. With the attention of three of the golems focused on him, Thorn rushed toward the next one and launched himself into the air, diving over the top of a golem that was reaching up for him. Grabbing its wrist, he rotated his body so he could plant his feet as he came down to the ground. As soon as his feet touched the stone he heaved, spinning the golem around his body and sending it tumbling across the courtyard to smash into the golem he had knocked over.

Completing his turn, Thorn took a quick step to the side to avoid a diving gargoyle and planted his foot in the face of the fifth golem, kicking it aside. A glimmer shone in the dim torchlight as he pulled his huge war pick out of his inventory and sank it into the sixth golem's shoulder. Pulling the metal handle of the war pick, he twisted his body and let go, sending both the golem and the war pick flying toward the cluster of golems that had been gathered.

The fifth golem that Thorn had knocked aside was the one with the most mobility, and after landing a stone-cracking punch on its face, Thorn jumped back. The golem lunged after him, its fingers barely missing as it tried to grab his armor. Running back to where Heidi was standing, Thorn jumped behind her as she picked up the golem's aggro with a neat shield bash.

Seven Twisted Leaves saw that the golems had been grouped up and sent a quick glance at the gargoyles circling overhead before turning his attention back to where SoulSeeker and the rest of the tanks in the first team were battling against Nellorous Belle.

"Mina, once you have the gargoyles handled, split as many people as you can to focus on the boss."

"Any chance you can spare some tanks? We could really use a couple taunts to tie them down."

"Sure," Seven Twisted Leaves called to the second tank team. "Heidi, I'm

going to grab a few tanks from you. Gem, Keller, and Z, support Mina. Thorn, take Z's spot. We need to rotate fast people! Support, get those bubbles ready!"

As the orders flowed from Seven Twisted Leaves' mouth, Thorn stepped forward to take over the golem's aggro from ZfiveZnineZhottieZ, one of the tanks in the second team. Z joined two other tanks in hurrying to Mina's side as the energy above the suspended staff began to split. This time, however, the energy split into four glowing yellow balls that shot out at four different players.

"Incoming!"

One of the balls of energy shot toward Heidi, whose body was instantly covered in a semi-transparent silver bubble by one of the healers. The energy ball splashed against the bubble, causing it to tremble violently. Seeing that one of the drops of destructive force was heading for the golem that he was fighting, Thorn reached for the monster's arm and, sinking his claws into its stone skin, pulled it out of the way.

His goal was to keep the golem occupied but alive so that Nellorous Belle would not be able to resummon them, so the last thing that he wanted was for the blasts of energy that she sent out to kill the golem. Blocking a thick fist aimed at his head, Thorn slammed the golem into the ground and jumped back out of its range. From the corner of his eye he could see SoulSeeker and the other tanks blocking the boss, and he had to suppress the urge to rush over and join them.

There was a strong desire in his heart to rush over and attack, but he forced it down. Thorn had handed control over the Titan Squad to Seven Twisted Leaves and he did not want to do anything to compromise the Fae Druid's ability to command. Still, he was chomping at the bit to get into the thick of things.

"Thorn! Watch your attacks!"

Jerked from his thoughts by Heidi's yell, Thorn looked down at the golem at his feet. While his thoughts wandered he had failed to control the strength of one of his kicks and had sent cracks radiating through the stone monster's chest. Afraid that if he touched it again the golem would simply fall apart, Thorn took a quick step back.

"Sorry, sorry."

"Keep your focus people!" Seven Twisted Leaves called out as he surveyed the courtyard. "We're on a clock so stay focused!"

Though Seven Twisted Leaves' words were addressed to the group, Thorn's face burned with embarrassment under his helmet as he knew that Leaves was specifically talking to him. Taking a deep breath, he centered himself and focused on his job, leaving the fight with the boss to the players who were engaged with her.

For the next fifteen minutes as the floating staff continued to spit out an increasing number of balls of energy, Thorn kept his attention on the struggling golem who continued to try and attack him. Finally the golem's stone body simply could not withstand the injuries that had been inflicted on it and with a gravelly roar it fell apart. Grimacing, Thorn looked at Nellorous Belle but did not see any change in the way she was fighting. Unsure if there was a threshold for the boss' resummoning, Thorn was hesitant to join any of the other fights and for a moment, he just stood where he was.

"Thorn, you can join the ranged DPS attacking the boss. Just take directions from SoulSeeker. But keep an eye out in case the second tank team needs more support."

"Sure."

Hiding his sigh of relief, Thorn got out his arbalest and began to fire thick bolts at the boss whenever he had an opening. With how small her figure was, he did not always hit, but enough of his bolts connected that he felt like he was at least contributing something.

The tanks of the first team had spread out around Nellorous Belle and were doing their best to keep her contained. Swinging her two maces, the boss was bouncing around the inside of the circle, being pulled this way and that as players used their taunts from across the circle before enduring a barrage of attacks. By chaining their stuns, they were able to keep her from switching her attention to the DPS players who were steadily chipping away at her health.

Slowly but steadily the boss' health fell until only a sliver remained. Spotting the lag in her movement with a practiced eye, Seven Twisted Leaves gave a quick command and all of the members of the Titan squad focused on burning the boss down as fast as possible. All of the tanks and melee players rushed forward to attack her while the ranged DPS focused their best single target attacks on her. Within less than sixty seconds the rest of her health burned away and she fell to her knees with a choking scream.

"Nooooo! Noooooooo! How could you defeat me?! Impossible! You are nothing but pebbles on my road to greatness! Noooooooo!"

During the next three minutes the team wiped out the remaining gargoyles and golems, all the while enduring Nellorous Belle's incredibly dramatic death throes. As the final gargoyle died, Nellorous Belle finally rose up on her tiptoes and held her mask with both hands as she writhed in pain. With a scream she seemed to collapse into herself as her robe suddenly fell into a heap and her empty mask bounced across the stone ground.

"Good job, everyone! Healers, get everyone back to full! We'll take five minutes here before we go into the next area."

"Looks like the door is magically locked." Alabaster appeared next to Leaves, pointing at the door that led to the mayor's mansion.

Rummaging around in the cloak that the boss had left behind, Mina found a variety of loot, but nothing that looked like a key to the next section of the dungeon. Frowning, she looked around but did not spot anything beside the silver mask. A quick examination showed it to be a piece of equipment, but it had no relation to the door.

"Hmmm. Thorn, Leaves? Any ideas? Did we miss something on the way here?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

The courtyard of the mayor's mansion was damp and dark. Flickering torchlight struggled against the gloom that shrouded the whole dungeon, but no matter how the torches burned they could do nothing to fight back the creepy feeling that emanated from the large stone building that lurked like a crouched beast in front of them. Running his eyes over the garish stone carvings that decorated the front of the mansion, Thorn noticed that there were a variety of gargoyles like the ones on the fence that had returned to their places.

Turning his gaze to the front door of the mansion, Thorn examined the thick wooden double doors. A faint layer of magic glimmered across them, locking them tight. Missing Oberlin and his nearly magical ability to unlock doors, Thorn shook his head as Leaves replied to Mina's question.

"I'm not sure. The description of the dungeon only mentioned two sub-bosses. We should have gotten another key out of this fight. Or something to dispel the magical lock." Leaves frowned, opening up the window with the dungeon description.

Dungeon: Liberation of Greyfield
The Devil's Blood Cult has seized the village of Greyfield, turning it into a stronghold for their corrupted cause. Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has made his home in the mayoral mansion at the center of town while his minions prowl the streets. To clear the corruption from Greyfield you must bring down Gelish and his two lieutenants. You have defeated Korma'hel the Mad and gained the key necessary to open the mayor's courtyard. You have banished the Raging Beauty, Nellourous Belle and gained the means to open the door to the mayor's mansion. Max Players: 50

"Dungeon quest says that we have 'gained the means to open the door' so there must be something around here. Everyone keep an eye out."

Seeing the magical staff that Nellorous Belle had left hanging in the air, Thorn reached out and grabbed it. As his fingers closed around the shaft a slight tremor ran through his body.

ding

You have gained control of [Death Rain], the legendary magical weapon of the Raging Beauty, Nellorous Belle. You currently possess the maximum number of legendary items that you can carry. If you would like to wield [Death Rain] you must give up your [Stone Heart]. Would you like to keep [Death Rain]?	
Yes	No

"Uh...Mina?"

"Hmm?" Wandering over from where she had been looking around, Mina's eyes paused when she saw the shock on Thorn's face. "Is something wrong?"

"What is special about a legendary item?"

The already quiet courtyard fell into complete silence at Thorn's questions as every single eye turned to the staff in his hand.

“Legendary items are artifacts with lots of power,” Mina explained as she read over the description that Thorn shared with the team. “They can be practically anything, but the most common is a weapon. They usually have a crazy effect, but they are either super hard to unlock or have a negative effect when they are used. Like this one.”

Death Rain - Legendary Staff
Widely considered to be a cursed item for the sheer destruction it brings, Death Rain was created by a twisted Earth Mage with a sliver of the magical gem, [The Rage of the World]. Death Rain is a legendary staff best known for the utter destruction it brings to the earth where it is used. By absorbing and expelling the energy of the earth in ever stronger blasts, it brings death to everyone around it, friend or foe. Once the [Death Rain] ability has been activated, the wielder of the staff cannot move it from its location due to its connection with the earth. The ability will only cease with the death of the wielder. Abilities: [Death Rain] [Animate Stone]

Death Rain
Draw upon the power of the earth to bring devastation to everything around the staff. When this ability is activated the wielder will lose control of the staff as it begins to gather and release progressively stronger attacks on targets in the area. While active, the staff cannot be moved. This ability will remain active until the wielder of the staff has died.

Animate Stone
By shaping the energy of the earth, the wielder of the staff can summon a variety of creatures made from stone. 0/15 Gargoyles Summoned

0/6 Stone Golems Summoned
0/1 Giant Flying Golem Summoned

Requires a source of earth.

"Wow. That is terrifying. But hold on," Thorn scratched his head as he read over the legendary weapon's description. "What a strange thing. You only get one use out of it. Am I reading that right?"

"Mmhmm." Mina nodded. "But don't underestimate it. You can use that [Animate Stone] ability all you want. I mean, imagine having an undying army of stone golems. And carrying around the threat of being able to exterminate everything around you? Can you imagine if someone dropped into the middle of a huge battle with this thing?"

"Or Moon Wolf Citadel." Thorn's tone was somber as he thought about the ways that a weapon like this could be used.

"Exactly."

As Thorn was focusing his attention on the staff he felt a ripple inside of it. A familiar energy seemed to be circling from the tip of the staff where the gem was set, down through the body until it reached the bottom and back up again. Curious, Thorn's will moved into his hand. As his will seeped into his fingers they grew more sensitive, granting him a clearer picture of what was happening inside the staff.

The energy that flowed through the staff vibrated faintly, giving Thorn a familiar, almost comforting feeling. A slight furrow creased Thorn's brows as he let the circulating energy continue to run past his hand, trying to figure out where he had felt the energy inside the staff before.

BZZT

Like a spark jumping from one piece of metal to another, the spot where Thorn's hand held the staff flashed with a yellowish brown light and then suddenly both the light and the staff disappeared as if they had never existed.

ding

Heart of the Earth - [25%]

The heart beating in your chest has merged with the Stone Heart and has become the living spirit of the earth. As you familiarize yourself with that spirit, your control over the powers of the Stone Heart will naturally increase.

By gaining mastery over your will and developing your Spiritual Sense, you have unlocked 10% of the Stone Heart.

By consuming the legendary magical staff [Death Rain], you have unlocked 15% of the Stone Heart.

To unlock more of the Stone Heart you must learn about and adopt the role of the Titan of Earth.

Thorn was so shocked by what the windows that popped up in front of him said that he forgot to be surprised that he had just absorbed a legendary staff.

Spiritual Sense [Earth] - [7%]
You have discovered the spirit that fills all things and learned to control the spirit that fills your body. Those who wield their spirit are masters without parallel, as unshakable as they are unstoppable. As you grow in your control over this spirit you will gain additional benefits and abilities. By controlling this spirit in your own body you can protect yourself from outside influences and negative states of mind. Due to your close connection with the earth your Spiritual Sense has gained an affinity with the earth element, becoming Spiritual Sense of Earth and allowing you to shape and control the earth element.

“Um, Thorn? What just happened to the legendary magical staff I was looking at?” Mina’s concerned voice brought Thorn back to the present.

Instead of answering, a strange feeling overtook Thorn and he crouched down, waving his hand over the flagstone under his feet. As his hand passed by, a bump formed in the stone. Slowly stretching up as Thorn lifted his palm, his fingers danced quickly, as if he was playing an instrument that no one could see.

“Thorn, is that..?”

Mina’s voice trailed off as two thin sections separated themselves from each side of the growing chunk of stone. After the thin sections were fully formed they reached down and stabilized the stone against the ground as two distinct legs were pulled from the flagstone, revealing the form of a small stone golem that stood slightly less than two feet tall. Two small eyes that

glowed yellow appeared on the little golem's head as it looked around for an enemy.

"Oh my…"

"Is that a golem?"

"Isn't it a bit small?"

"Yeah, but it's a golem."

Whispers began to swirl as the members of the Titan Squad watched the small stone golem stamp its little feet on the ground. With a flick of his fingers Thorn sent the golem to circle around Mina. The thick earth element that filled it called out to Thorn, giving him a sense of kinship that was similar to the feeling that Akira gave him. If anything, the little golem felt even more familiar, almost as if it carried a part of him in its body.

"That wasn't an ability, was it?" Mina's voice trembled slightly as she spoke, though Thorn could not tell if it was with frustration or excitement.

"Uh, no. It was more of a...feeling?" Thorn looked at his hand, slightly confused.

Mina snapped her fingers, causing ice to spread out under the stone golem's feet. Watching it slide around as it tried to complete Thorn's command, she giggled.

"Can you make a bigger one?"

"No, not right now. When I created it, it felt like I was channeling some sort of earth element energy into it. Once I used up all of that energy, it stopped growing."

"Hmm? Maybe it is earth attributed mana? How did you figure out how to do that? And without a chant? Magic without a chant is pretty advanced."

"I think I might have just absorbed the staff?"

"Haha, I knew you were a glutton, but legendary weapons? That is some heavy taste right there. So what you used was probably [Animate Stone], right? Don't tell me you absorbed [Death Rain] too?"

"No, it doesn't seem like it? At least, I can't feel that sort of power."

"Whew. For a second I was worried that we needed to be even more afraid of you. Haha."

Hearing Mina's giggle, Thorn knew that she was not upset which took a weight off of his shoulders. Standing, he waved his hand, releasing the golem which melted back into the flagstone. The members of the Titan Squad were still looking at him, so he removed his helmet and glanced around at the group.

“I’m sorry, I did not know that was going to happen. Leaves, what is the cost of a weapon like that?”

“Tough to know. It’ll depend on the drop rate of the normal version and what the normal version’s abilities are. Legends are single instance items. There is only one in the world. Next time someone runs this they’ll get something that is a toned down version of the staff. First clear is the only one that guarantees a drop, so we’ll have to wait and see.

“Assuming that it has both abilities, just a bit weaker, with a fairly standard 0.001 percent drop rate, that would put it at about two hundred thousand gold. However, with the drawbacks the staff has, I don’t think you could get more than one hundred and fifty thousand. Honestly, even that would be a stretch since its major offensive power is one use only.

“To get the full value out of it you’d need to find someone who has some strong summoning support abilities which is pretty rare. Besides,” Seven Twisted Leaves held up his hand to prevent Thorn from speaking, “you have the first gear pick so you are clear to take it. Just try not to absorb any more if we get another legendary after we beat Gelish.”

“Heh, I’ll try not to. Still, I think it would be appropriate for me to reimburse everyone since no one even had the chance to compete for it. Plus, it was really helpful for me. I’ll give a thousand gold bonus to everyone here, but only if you help me spread the word that I’ll be buying copies of Death Rain that drop for two hundred thousand gold.”

Pleasant surprise lit up the faces of all of the members of the Titan Squad at Thorn’s words. Though none of them had expected to get the legendary staff, even after Thorn shared its stats, the sight of Thorn making it disappear had tugged on more than a few heart strings.

“Can you, uh, eat more of them?” Mina asked. “What about other legendary weapons?”

“I’m not sure. I have a feeling that it had something to do with the type of energy that the staff used. Since I am pretty tightly bound to the earth element and the staff shared that element I am guessing that is why I could absorb it. But it is worth checking, so if we get another legendary I don’t mind giving it a shot.”

“Uh, maybe don’t. Though, it could be a really helpful ability if your enemy had one.” Mina tapped her chin in thought as her eyes gleamed. “Can you imagine that? Someone tries to attack you with their legendary sword and then you just make it vanish? Haha, that would be hilarious.”

“Only for us, I’m sure. Have you ever heard of someone doing this before?”

“No, I’ve never heard of someone who was able to absorb legends before, but I really haven’t seen that many. Again, most of them are pretty strange and most people don’t go around sharing the fact that they have one. Maybe Corvo knows something?”

“I’ll ask when we get back to the castle. I guess we should focus on the next fight for now.” Dismissing all of the screens, Thorn looked at Seven Twisted Leaves. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem. You seem to have inadvertently solved our next challenge when you took the staff, so that is good. The magical lock on the door is gone, and once we finish up our rest we’ll be moving into the building.” Clapping his hands to get everyone’s attention, Seven Twisted Leaves pointed to the mansion. “We’re going to be moving out in five minutes, so make sure you’re ready to go. I’m pretty sure that this is the last stage of the dungeon which means it will probably be the hardest as well. We have no idea what is beyond these doors so be prepared for anything.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Even though he was not missing any health, Thorn was feeling mentally fatigued from everything that had happened so he sat down on the ground with his legs crossed and rested his hands on his legs. Keeping his back straight, he closed his eyes and began to breathe in and out calmly. As he settled into his breathing pattern he quickly found that the [Spiritual Sense of Earth] in his body was slowly establishing a connection with the ground under him.

The feeling was elusive and fled as soon as he tried to grasp it. Startled out of his meditation, Thorn looked around at the flagstones he was sitting on but did not see anything out of the ordinary so he closed his eyes again and restarted his breathing pattern. After about a minute the strange connection began to form again, but this time Thorn left it alone and concentrated on his meditation.

Over the next few minutes the feeling did not get any stronger so Thorn reluctantly opened his eyes and joined the rest of the Titan Squad who had gathered by the mansion's front door. Setting everyone up in a tight formation, Seven Twisted Leaves gestured for Alabaster to open the double

doors that led into the mansion. The thick wooden doors opened with a creak as Alabaster stepped to the side. Looking down the dark, empty hall, Seven Twisted Leaves gave the command to move in and the tanks began to advance cautiously.

“Make sure you watch the corners and shadows. This whole place gives me a bad vibe.”

Like something out of a horror movie, the mayor’s mansion was a textbook haunted house. The gloomy air that hung over the dungeon seeped through the halls, causing Seven Twisted Leaves to shiver even as he warned the team to be careful.

The mansion entrance had led them into a large open foyer that split into three different hallways, each leading to a different area of the house. The main hall stretched straight back, leading to the kitchen and back garden while the left and right hallways led to the two wings of the mansion.

“Do we split the team and clear it all at once or do a single sweep with the whole team?” Glancing between the two hallways that went to the right and left, Mina asked Seven Twisted Leaves.

“Why don’t we just head straight through the back? I have a feeling that Gelish is in the back garden,” Thorn interjected, pointing to the large double doors at the end of the main hall.

“Uh, they’re probably locked. See the double key holes?” Leaves answered casually, his eyes still scanning the room.

“Sure, but can’t we just kick the door in?”

“Haha, I wish…”

An awkward silence fell over the party as Leaves’ voice trailed off. He had replied automatically, but as soon as the idea actually registered he had to pause. Looking at Thorn who had an entirely serious expression and then at the doors at the end of the short hallway, he gulped.

“Um. I mean. It’s probably worth a try? Right?”

“Yeah, totally worth a try,” Mina said, her eyes glowing. “Since we’re in a rush we should take whatever shortcuts we can. Plus, lots of dungeon teams bring thieves like Oberlin so it makes sense to try it. If we can cut the length of the dungeon down it’ll be good for everyone.”

“Exactly. Don’t forget that our guild mates are still fighting off the cultists around the dungeon. The faster we finish this up the better.” Nodding, Thorn began to walk down the hall toward the doorway.

“Hey, be careful. There may be traps!”

Just as Leaves finished speaking a low sound rang out, and Thorn felt a rush of air.

twang

[Armor of the Earth]

A thick yellow light sprang up from Thorn's feet, shrouding his body and lighting up the hallway. As his invulnerability took effect, a shadow flickered from the wall, plunging toward Thorn's waist only to shatter against his glowing armor. The bolt broke apart, pieces of black metal pinging off of him and peppering the area as he swayed slightly.

The trap had shot the bolt with enough force to pin a normal person to the opposite wall, but the combination of Thorn's weight and the 2 seconds of invulnerability granted by his [Armor of the Earth] ability allowed him to stay in place. Letting out the breath he had been holding, Thorn relaxed his tensed shoulders.

"Hey, how about you let the scouts clear the hall first?" Seven Twisted Leaves asked, waving Alabaster and the other scouts forward.

"Ahem. That sounds like a great idea." Coughing into his hand to hide his embarrassment, Thorn took a step back to let the scouts filter past him.

"Thorn, I know you're tough, but you've got to take it a bit slower. No use wasting your bubbles just because you're rushing."

"Yeah, sorry. I just get excited."

It took Alabaster, EphemeralWhisper, and the other scouts almost fifteen minutes to clear the hallway of traps. Looking at the growing number of traps being discovered and disabled, Thorn gulped. While he probably could have rushed past many of the traps, the sheer number was enough to threaten him, especially because he could not see a single trap in the hallway when he walked into it.

"Alright, that should be it."

"Thanks. Thorn," Seven Twisted Leaves gestured for Thorn to proceed, "please go ahead."

Walking gingerly down the hallway, Thorn reached the large double doors that led into the garden without further incident. Reaching down, he tested the door handle gently to make sure it was actually locked. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass himself further by trying to break open an already unlocked door. Carefully examining the doors, he did not see any runes or evidence of magic so he gripped the handle tightly and spoke over his shoulder.

“This might be loud, so get ready. I don’t know what is on the other side of the door. If I can even open it.”

“Hmm, that is a good point. Hold on.”

Lifting his hand for Thorn to wait, Leaves called the rest of the team together and split them up, leaving half of the team watching the right hallway while the rest were positioned in front of the left hallway.

“Okay, go ahead.”

Kneeling down on one leg, Thorn placed one hand flat against one of the doors and grasped the other door’s handle firmly. Breathing out, he began to pull the handle while pushing the other door, slowly increasing his strength. Almost immediately the door began to creak as the powerful force he exerted started twisting the lock. The doors were solid wood that held tight against Thorn’s persistent pressure until he gave a sharp tug, causing the twisted metal handle to deform in his fist as it popped off of the door.

Looking down in bemusement at the door handle that was bent around his hand, Thorn pulled it off and reexamined the door. Where the handle had been was now two large holes, but the door still did not open. Frowning, Thorn stood up and looked at the door carefully. Shrugging, he took two steps back and then a quick step forward, snapping out a quick front kick at the spot where the handle had been connected.

CRACK

The bottom of his foot slammed into the door and with a splintering crash it exploded open, showering the garden with shards of wood. The sound of the door opening echoed around the mansion, but the gloomy halls soon returned to their eerie silence. Grabbing the remains of the doors, Thorn ripped them from their hinges and tossed the scraps of wood to the side. After making sure the doorway was clear, Thorn was about to stride through the opening into the garden when he paused and glanced at Alabaster, who was standing close by. After getting the all clear, Thorn stepped into the garden.

Thick with overgrown plants, weeds, and dead trees, the garden was no less creepy than the mansion. As the team walked forward they soon arrived at the remains of a fountain covered in dark stains. From the stench that emanated from it, it was clear that whatever flowed in it had been corrupted. The further into the garden they got, the stronger the smell of corruption became.

Feeling something crunch under his feet, Thorn looked down, only to see the cracked remains of a skull staring back up at him. Kicking the bones

away, Thorn's eyes swept the dying bushes on either side of the wide path. As his gaze swung past a thorny bush, he noticed it shaking slightly.

"Watch out!"

Thorn's shout jerked everyone to attention as figures lept from the sides of the road, their dark robes making them look like nothing but white masks floating through the air.

"Assassins!"

Ten Devil Blood assassins dashed at the team from each side, their long knives flashing wildly as they closed in. Given enough time to prepare, the tanks met them squarely, blocking the assassins from being able to get among the DPS and support players. Thick shields and sturdy armor formed a solid wall that stopped the assassins in their tracks as attacks began to drop down on them from the ranged DPS players.

Without the element of surprise, the assassins were soon cleaned up and the team resumed their journey. With a better idea of what to watch for, the next few ambushes passed without incident, and the team soon arrived at a wide open courtyard. A raised platform had been erected at the other end of the courtyard, and sitting on a large, rough-hewn chair was a massive werewolf.

"Ha, if it isn't the pretender." The werewolf's booming voice shook the air, causing the bones scattered around the courtyard to tremble.

"Gelish."

The sight of the former Wolfkin caused fury to bubble up in Thorn's chest, but he ruthlessly suppressed it, tightening his grip on his weapon.

"Have you come to pledge your allegiance to the true leader of the Wolfkin? You can, you know. The master is generous and accepting, even of those who have deceived the Wolfkin and led them down the wrong path."

"Oh? And who is this master of yours? Mayari? A cursed High Priestess who betrayed the Greymane for her own gains?" Sneering, Thorn stepped forward. "You better watch out, former head disciple, or she may sell you too."

"Hah, is that supposed to make me mad?" Gelish grinned evilly, showing off his massive teeth. "You know nothing of the power that the blood grants us."

"Oh? I think I do. I've beaten it out of a number of people so far, you included. Why on earth would anyone want such a pathetic power?"

"You did not beat me!" Furious, Gelish slammed his hand down on the

armrest of his chair, causing it to shatter into pieces. “Tch. You cheated, inviting that mangy excuse for a god who abandoned us all those years ago. But that will not work this time. Now I have backing of my own. My race will no longer be slaves to your pathetic god. No! We will gain the power to rule ourselves!”

Frowning, Thorn searched Gelish’s face, finding nothing but madness. The words that spilled from the werewolf’s mouth were nonsense, yet the conviction he spoke them with was undoubtedly real.

“Do you really believe that Karrandaras the Betrayer has your best interests in mind?” Thorn chuckled mirthlessly. “It's even in his name. He is the betrayer. If you put your trust in him he will leave you high and dry. You should know that better than anyone.”

“Ahahahaha! You fool, we do not trust in Karrandaras! No, Karrandaras is bound to my master! We use him and draw his power, making it our own! You grovel pathetically at the feet of the mangy wolf, begging for power while I seize strength for my race with my own hands!”

“By becoming a monster? You are not even a Wolfkin anymore, you’re a twisted caricature of a Wolfkin. You’re not seizing power for your race. You’re not seizing power for anyone but yourself. And you are doing it at the cost of that race that you are pretending to care so much about.” Taking another step forward, Thorn lifted his tetsubo and rested it on his shoulder as his finger pointed at Gelish. “Don’t bother pretending that your motives are anything but selfish, Gelish. If you cared even a little for your people you would have served them instead of chasing power.”

“Enough!” Slamming his hand down on the remaining armrest, Gelish bound to his feet as the chair under him was smashed to pieces. “You don’t know anything about my people and our struggles! You think that what you are doing is good for the Wolfkin? Haha, you’re simply the newest slavemaster, chaining them to a weak god! Well no longer! If the Wolfkin must have a slavemaster it might as well be me, right?

“I will bleed away the weakness and forge my people anew through the blood seized from the Greater Devil Karrandras! The Wolfkin will be moulded into the powerful warriors they were meant to be! Once I have dealt with you and the valley is mine, the puny empire that you have bowed to will taste the fury of the reborn Bloodkin!”

“This is so good!” Mina whispered to Seven Twisted Leaves, her eyes burning with excitement as she watched the exchange between Gelish and

Thorn. “It’s like a cut scene.”

“Hush.”

“So that is your plan? Turn your race into werewolves?”

“Ahahaha!”

Booming laughter spilled from Gelish’s mouth when he heard Thorn’s question. Abruptly cutting off his laugh, he snarled and stepped down from the platform he had been standing on. Insanity shimmered in his eyes as he stared Thorn down.

“Werewolves? You think I’m a werewolf? Foolish mortal, I am so much more. I have given up much, you are right. But I have gained so much more than you can ever imagine! What is the use talking? Why don’t I show you the superiority of the Bloodkin? Never fear, you will have plenty of time to appreciate their power as my kin feed on your flesh!”

Throwing back his head, Gelish was about to howl when a figure flashed toward him at incredible speed. Before the former head disciple had finished his sentence, Thorn had already activated [Shadow Dash] and burst forward. As he moved, he stabbed his tetsubo straight forward like a spear. Gelish’s lungs had just expanded to their fullest when Thorn appeared in front of him, the end of the thick metal mace slamming into the center of his chest.

Unable to howl as the air was driven from his lungs, Gelish was knocked flying. The giant werewolf tumbled head over heels from the force of the blow, slamming into the remains of the throne and only stopping when he had plowed through the dead garden behind him. Thorn’s massive figure stood where Gelish had just disappeared, his tetsubo still extended as silence reigned in the courtyard.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Hahaha, that will never get old.”

Mina’s chuckle from the middle of the group broke the thick tension in the air and started a wave of laughter that swept over the team. At a certain point, the group had simply accepted that Thorn was able to do things that other players could not, resulting in the sheer absurdity of Thorn’s action’s being seen as comedy. Suppressing his grin, Seven Twisted Leaves called for the tanks to move up to where Thorn stood.

“Keep focused people. Let’s set our line where Thorn is. I’m pretty sure he has locked aggro. Heidi, SoulSeeker, see if you can pull some of that off of him. I don’t know if there will be any adds, but I want as much damage on the boss as we can possibly get.”

crunch

CRUNCH

A series of sounds echoing from the spot where Gelish’s body had disappeared drew the whole team’s attention and the players rushed to get set up. While Thorn had sent Gelish flying, no one had any doubt that the boss was about to come back, angrier and more dangerous than ever.

“Hahaha, you think you are powerful, don’t you?”

An eerie laugh drifted from the darkness, accompanied by a giant, blood-red hand.

CRUNCH

The bloody hand landed on the ground, crushing the rocks under it to shreds as a massive arm followed it. Slowly Gelish’s body came into view, sending a shiver down the spines of most of the players. As the werewolf stepped into the flickering light and straightened up, the team realized that he had grown almost twice as tall as he had been, standing at a full sixteen feet. His dark fur had been replaced with thick, knotted, bloody muscle, as if his flesh had been stripped from his body, and blood dripped from him continually.

“Ahahaha! Feast your eyes upon my glorious form! Hahaha, this, THIS is true power!” Gelish lifted his head into the air as he roared triumphantly. “This is the power the Wolfkin deserve! See the true form of the Bloodkin and despair!”

“Abomination.”

Though he did not speak loudly, Thorn’s single word put an end to the crazed boss’ rant. His eyes glaring at the Titan, Gelish gave a screeching howl of displeasure and rushed toward Thorn and the tank line.

“I’ve got the first interception!” Heidi muttered to SoulSeeker who gave her a tight nod, his eyes firmly fixed on the bloody monster rushing toward them.

Seeing how Gelish was entirely focused on Thorn who stepped forward to meet the boss with a swing of his tetsubo, Heidi slammed her sword against her shield and activated her [Burning Charge] ability. Thorn saw a burning line accelerating toward the boss from the corner of his eye and frowned slightly. Gelish was speeding up as he charged forward, and the angle of Heidi’s charge was going to cause her to miss the boss completely.

Tightening his grip on his weapon, Thorn was about to adjust his swing when Heidi suddenly shifted, adding a quick side step into her charge. Lowering her shoulder, she slammed into Gelish’s hip and leg, throwing the boss off balance and causing his attack on Thorn to miss. As soon as he was knocked off balance, a rain of attacks slammed into him as the ranged DPS started their assault. Stumbling to the side, Gelish gave Heidi an evil glance, but his attention was still firmly fixed on Thorn so he ignored her and, shrugging off the attacks that were peppering him, he stepped forward to

slash at Thorn.

Before his attack could connect another form rushed toward him, slamming into him. SoulSeeker's kite shield glowed with a crimson light as he hammered it into the boss's side, causing him to stagger again. Seizing their opportunity, the melee dps closed into range and attacked the boss, opening wounds on his legs before jumping back behind the tanks.

With a roar of rage, Gelish's attention swung around the circle until he saw SoulSeeker. About to step toward the Crimson Dragon Knight, a sharp pain lanced through Gelish's side as the tip of Thorn's tetsubo ripped out a piece of flesh and drove him to one knee.

"AARGH!"

Ignoring the scream of rage, the melee players stepped forward again, taking advantage of Gelish's distracted state to land their attacks. Despite not being able to generate the same amount of aggro as Thorn's attacks, Heidi and SoulSeeker both performed their roles admirably, keeping a steady rotation of distractions as the DPS players continued to attack Gelish.

As the blood dripping from Gelish turned into a steady stream from all of his wounds, Thorn found himself suffering a few powerful blows from Gelish's razor sharp claws. Despite the power behind the attack, Thorn's armor held strong and the chunks of health he lost from the blunt force was soon healed up by the support players behind him.

No matter how Gelish raged, the monstrous Bloodkin was unable to withstand the attacks of the whole team and soon fell to the earth with one last pained roar. Panting furiously, he raised his head and looked around with madness in his eyes.

"You think you have won, don't you?! Hah, hah, you have no idea what is coming! You have no…"

SQUELCH

With a wet splatter, Gelish's words cut off as Thorn brought his tetsubo down on the boss' head, driving the last vestiges of life from his grotesque body.

"Enough of that nonsense."

ding

Dungeon: Liberation of Greyfield [Complete]
The Devil's Blood Cult has seized the village of Greyfield, turning it into a

stronghold for their corrupted cause. Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, has made his home in the mayoral mansion at the center of town while his minions prowl the streets. To clear the corruption from Greyfield you must bring down Gelish and his two lieutenants.

You have defeated Korma'hel the Mad and gained the key necessary to open the mayor's courtyard.

You have banished the Raging Beauty, Nellourous Belle and gained the means to open the door to the mayor's mansion.

You have slain Gelish the Bloodkin, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon. Before he died he spoke of a greater threat that would soon emerge.

Max Players: 50

"Whooo, Thorn, check this loot out!"

Stooping down to see what Mina had found, Thorn saw a variety of items had dropped. Nova Terra was loot light as a whole and Thorn was generally indifferent to the few things that did drop, but after seeing the legendary staff [Death Rain] his interest had grown. There were three pieces of gear, in addition to a large sack of gold that had spilled across the ground. Thankful that the blood was automatically cleaned from the coins when he put them in his inventory, Thorn picked them up gingerly.

Gelish had dropped three pieces of equipment that belonged to a set, and Thorn looked at the details that Mina shared as she gathered them up.

Robe of the Head Disciple

A well-used robe that accompanied the head disciple of the Temple of the Moon for years before he fell to corruption, this robe carries a powerful sense of determination and self-sacrifice. Though it looks worn, it can never be ripped or dirtied, proving resistant to all damage but that inflicted by the march of time.

This armor can only be used by a monk class.

Armor Bonuses:

+Concentration
+Endurance
+Constitution
+Defense

Set Bonus:
[1 pieces]: +Concentration for every piece worn
[2 pieces]: +Increased effect of [Chosen Weapon Proficiency] for every piece worn
[3 pieces]: +Increased speed from [Defender's Rush]

Bracers of the Head Disciple
Worn from countless hours of practice and scarred from use in battle, these bracers defended the head disciple of the Temple of the Moon for years before he fell to corruption. Though they look worn, they can never be cut or dirtied, proving resistant to all damage but that inflicted by the march of time. This armor can only be used by a monk class. Armor Bonuses: +Concentration +[Chosen Weapon Proficiency] Set Bonus: [1 pieces]: +Concentration for every piece worn [2 pieces]: +Increased effect of [Chosen Weapon Proficiency] for every piece worn [3 pieces]: +Increased speed from [Defender's Rush]

Unlike the robe, the [Bracers of the Head Disciple] granted their wearer an ability in addition to the other bonuses. Curious, Thorn clicked on it.

Chosen Weapon Proficiency
This passive ability allows the player to select a single weapon, increasing the rate at which they gain proficiency with that weapon by 100% while

this passive ability is active.

The player can choose from any basic weapon their class permits.

Once chosen, the player cannot choose a different weapon even if this ability is removed and reapplied.

Blinking, Thorn read over the ability again. Weapon proficiency was often tied to a class's advancement, making this a massively useful ability. While it was a shame that the ability would only ever work for a single weapon, Thorn still felt a twinge of desire to equip the bracers immediately. Shortening the time it would take him to master his tetsubo was quite an attractive idea. Shaking his head, he closed the window and looked at the last item.

Sandals of the Head Disciple
Bearing the imprint of Gelish's feet from countless hours of wear, these sandals protected the feet of the head disciple of the Temple of the Moon for years before he fell to corruption. Though they look worn, they can never be cut or dirtied, proving resistant to all damage but that inflicted by the march of time. This armor can only be used by a monk class. Armor Bonuses: +Concentration +[Defender's Rush] Set Bonus: [1 pieces]: +Concentration for every piece worn [2 pieces]: +Increased effect of [Chosen Weapon Proficiency] for every piece worn [3 pieces]: +Increased duration of [Defender's Rush] for every piece worn

Just like the [Bracers of the Head Disciple], the [Sandals of the Head Disciple] granted the user an ability instead of multiple attribute increases.

Defender's Rush

The responsibility of the head disciple of the Temple of the Moon is to protect and lead the disciples of the Temple, and the will of the former head disciple, Gelish, manifested itself in the ability to move swiftly to the aid of his companions.

When this ability is activated, the player gains a 45% speed boost so long as they are within twenty feet of their allies. The speed boost lasts for twenty seconds. After each use, this ability takes sixty seconds to recharge.

Mina handed the items to Thorn who put them away in his inventory. As he walked back to Seven Twisted Leaves, he could see the looks of excitement on a few of the players' faces. While the armor was not suitable for everyone, those that could wear it were very happy that this dungeon had a full armor set.

"Hey, Leaves, can I reserve those bracers?" A Dwarven player with the Death Fist Monk class quickly ran up to Seven Twisted Leaves, her eyes shining. "I don't think I'll have enough points for the whole set, but I should be able to get the bracers with this dungeon run, right?"

The players in Nova Luna, like in most large guilds, had an insatiable appetite for high quality gear, and players were constantly competing for the items that dropped in the dungeons. To prevent hard feelings, all of the drops were gathered up and deposited in the guild's treasury. If a player wanted to upgrade their gear they were required to pay a certain number of contribution points. These points were an internal currency that the members of Nova Luna earned by performing their duties and contributing materials or gear to the guild.

The points could also be spent at all of the stores in Moon Wolf Citadel or on issuing requests and missions to the Night Walkers Association, the massive association of Wolfkin that had swept Northern Angoril after the race had become playable.

"Hey, I'm not in charge of items. You'll have to talk to the treasury." Waving her away, Leaves looked at Thorn. "That went well. You're getting a better rhythm with the other tanks. Pretty soon you'll be a pro."

"Hah, thanks. I think we've wrapped up here so we can head back up any time."

"Actually, we should clear the rest of the dungeon." Mina spoke up from behind Thorn. Seeing his confused expression, she grinned. "We beat the

dungeon, but we have not done a full clear. There could be all sorts of cool things hiding in the corners."

"Correct, standard procedure is to do the full clear before we kill the last boss, but, uh...your method is a bit more, uh, direct. We still have two wings of the mansion and about half of the town to sweep through."

"Oh, that makes sense." Thorn nodded. "How long do you think that would take?"

"Well, the bosses are dead so I can't imagine it will take us more than an hour or so."

ding

Lord Greymane,

The cultists have begun to retreat out of Greyfield Village, so I am guessing that you have cleared the dungeon. We've elected to let them retreat to minimize casualties, as we already have close to four hundred wounded. We are isolating them and having them die one at a time so we can prevent any breakout of the corruption. Your generous bonus for anyone wounded has kept everyone in high spirits, and they're making a joke of it by having those players who are wounded fight the corrupted cultists that spawn.

We should be good to go within three hours when you get back to the surface, and I've had all the battalions tightening up their positions outside of the fallen temple to keep any cultists from slipping through. The big wolves have been a huge help in hunting the cultists that are hiding which has allowed us to speed up the process significantly.

The only other thing is that there is a strange group of Dwarves that have taken up residence in your tent and they are refusing to leave. They even chased your guards out. There was a bit of a scuffle, but Commander Del'har calmed it down. Still, you might want to hurry because tempers are flaring.

Your Servant,

Commander Hasta

"Ugh, I don't know if I'm ever going to get used to this," Thorn muttered

under his breath after reading Hasta's message. With a sigh he lifted his head to look at Seven Twisted Leaves again. "On second thought, I have way too much stuff to do up above, so I'll leave the rest of the dungeon to you. We're going to be moving out in three hours, so keep a close eye on the time."

"Yes, sir!"

With a salute, Seven Twisted Leaves led the team to finish exploring the dungeon while Thorn rushed back the way they had come, heading toward the dungeon's exit.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“My lord, the Dwarves have refused to leave. We tried to move them to another tent, but they simply would not go.”

Commander Del’har spoke quickly as he hurried to keep up with Thorn’s large strides. Thorn had arrived back at the Iron Wolves’ camp a few minutes earlier, and the tension in the air was apparent.

“Are they all in my tent?” Thorn asked, his brow furrowing. “How many of them are there?”

“Um, three in your tent, my lord, and there are about ten more who have surrounded your tent and are refusing to allow anyone else near it. The commander is in your tent and there are guards who are blocking the entrance. That is why we almost got into a fight. Thankfully I was able to call our soldiers back in time before they attacked.”

“Only thirteen? Hm. I was expecting a few more.”

“There may only be thirteen, but they are quite powerful, my lord. They appear to be a larger version of the Stone Dwarves who were appearing in the valley before you defeated the Stone King, Courdum. I would hazard a guess that they are related.”

As the large central tent came into view, Thorn saw a large crowd of Wolfkin soldiers milling about. Their unsettled murmurs quieted down as they noticed Thorn's arrival and they fell back, revealing the entrance to the tent where two rows of Dwarves in thick stone armor had planted themselves.

Each Dwarf was unusually large, standing at five and a half feet tall, though how much of that was the thick heel of their boots, Thorn could not tell. Solid stone shields were fixed on their backs and their arms rested on thick hafts of the double headed axe that was wider than their bodies. Every single one of the Dwarves had the typical long beard common to the race, though these were grey and black with flecks of white rather than the typical brown or black.

"Stop. State your business."

One of the Dwarves stepped forward at Thorn's approach, his hand raised for Thorn to stop.

"Stop? Why on earth should I stop?" Raising his eyebrows, Thorn continued to walk toward his tent.

The Dwarven soldiers' eyes narrowed and they tightened their grips on their axes. The sight of the Dwarves getting ready to stop him nearly caused Thorn to burst out laughing, but he did his best to keep his mirth off of his face.

"No need for violence. I'm pretty sure your leaders want to talk to me."

"Are you Earl Greymane?"

"Yup, that's me." Coming to a stop in front of the two lines, Thorn looked down at the Dwarven soldiers with interest. "And you are members of the Stone Legion, right?"

"Well met, I am Sergeant Hammerfall. Legion Commander Kavalas is waiting inside for you."

"Oh, how nice of you to grant me access to my tent." Thorn gave the sergeant a small smile as the Dwarves parted. Just before he entered, the sound of a notification rang in Thorn's head, causing him to pause for the briefest of seconds.

Call the Stone Legion - Updated
The Stone King, Courdum, forged his underground empire with the power of his Stone Legion. Though only a shadow of their former selves, what remains of the undying army possesses incredible might.

In his madness, Courdum bound the legion to the power of the Stone Heart, the same power that now courses through your veins. You have gained preliminary control over the remnants of the Stone Legion.

The remnants of the Stone Legion have arrived after your summon. With his soldiers still suffering from lingering effects from the Living Statue curse of Courdum the Stone King, Legion Commander Kavalas seeks a way to free them once and for all.

Current Members of the Stone Legion:
Kavalas Kor (Legion Commander)
Felph Kraghammer (Legion Centurion)
Drada Kor (Earth Priestess)
Gramoud Hammerfall (Legion Sergeant)
Bulgec Jelp (Legion Sergeant)
Unranked Legionnaires: 8

The loyalty of the Stone Legion is tied to the Stone Heart, and before you have adapted to the Stone Heart completely, your command of the Legion will face resistance. While they bear the potential to be a powerful fighting force, each ranked member of the Legion has their own motivations, and their abilities will be locked until they individually pledge their loyalty.

To unlock full control of the Stone Legion, you must adapt to the Stone Heart completely.

The inside of the tent was exactly the same as Thorn remembered, only with three large Dwarves taking up the center of the space. The massive chair sat empty at one end and the table that held the map had been pushed to the side to make room for three smaller chairs that the Dwarves were ignoring as they stood. Two of the Dwarves looked much like the soldiers guarding outside, though they lacked the thick shields that the others carried on their backs and their armor was colored differently.

The first Dwarf was the largest, and his stone armor carried a golden sheen. Behind him stood another Dwarf in armor with a faint red coloring who had two warhammers attached to his belt. The last Dwarf, surprisingly, had no beard and was armed with a tall staff topped with a rough hewn stone.

“I don’t know why we came all the way here. The Earl isn’t even here to

greet...” The Dwarf with the staff complained to the golden-armored Dwarf as Thorn entered the room.

“Enough.” The golden-armored Dwarf spoke in a gravelly voice, cutting off the other Dwarf and causing her to fall silent.

“Ah!” Her eyes lighting up at the sight of Thorn, the staff-wielding Dwarf pointed at him and spoke harshly. “Where is your master? Doesn’t he know that it is bad manners to leave distinguished guests waiting?”

Apart from glancing at the finger that was pointing toward his chest, Thorn ignored the female Dwarf and walked past her toward his large chair.

“Hey, I’m speaking to you.”

Annoyed by Thorn’s disregard, the Dwarf stepped forward to go after him, only to discover that Commander Del’har was standing in her way. Sneering, she tapped the tip of her staff on the ground and power surged up into the rock that capped her weapon. Dull yellow light surrounded the rock and it rose imperceptibly from its setting, beginning to turn lazily in place.

Sensing the energy gathering in the end of the staff, Commander Del’har’s hand rested on the pommel of his sword, ready to draw it should the energy be aimed toward Thorn. Still not paying attention, Thorn arrived at his chair and sat down, leaning lazily back as he took out an apple. Big and fresh, it still did not take him more than three bites to consume the entire thing, which he did with crisp crunches. Licking his fingers, he waved toward the commander.

“Stand down, Commander Del’har.”

“Yes, my lord.” Lifting his hand from his weapon, the commander retreated to stand behind Thorn’s chair.

“Hmph. So, are you Earl Greymane?” Her staff still charged, the Dwarf glared at Thorn, not bothering to hide the displeasure in her eyes.

crunch

Getting another apple out of his inventory, Thorn continued to ignore her, his eyes meeting the eyes of the golden armored Dwarf.

“I said, are you…”

Before the female Dwarf could complete her question, Thorn’s eyes narrowed and the temperature in the tent plunged as Thorn’s full aura activated. Ever since he had begun to unlock the effects of the [Stone Heart] his presence had taken on a whole new weight, and now it spread uncontrollably, rolling out from the tent and causing all of those outside to tremble. Even the Dwarven soldiers who stood in iron ranks guarding the

entrance to the tent could not help but shiver, as if a massive predator stood at their backs eyeing their necks hungrily.

Inside the tent it was even worse. The golden-armored Dwarf only blinked, but the other two could not help but twitch badly. Dropping his hands to his two warhammers, the thickly armored Dwarf who had not yet spoken unclipped them from his belt and took a small step back, bringing them up in a defensive stance. His female companion paled as the words she was about to speak died in her throat. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped her staff tightly, a thick bead of sweat running down her neck.

Unable to maintain his calm, a faint frown furrowed the brow of the golden-armored Dwarf as Thorn's aura continued to rise, growing thicker and heavier by the second. Sensing that his companions were soon going to be unable to bear the pressure, the golden-armored Dwarf took a small step forward and bowed his head ever so slightly.

"Greetings, Earl Greymane. I am Legion Commander Kavalas, Commander of the Stone Legion, defenders of the Earth."

His face still impassive, Thorn took out another apple and polished it on his shirt before taking a bite. Though his aura did not disappear, it stopped growing, allowing the other two Dwarves some breathing room.

"My apologies for Drada's disrespect, Earl Greymane. You may consider it the impetuousness of youth." The Legion Commander spoke in a measured manner, his deep rumble displaying no emotion.

Thorn held Kavalas' gaze for a moment as he finished his third apple. Just as everyone was sure that he would get out another piece of fruit, a grin stretched across his face. Despite the fact that he looked genuinely happy, the female Dwarf could not help but shiver slightly.

"Youth? She's what? A few hundred years old? If not thousands of years old if you count the time spent petrified? And at least a sub-commander. Hah, you're funny."

"Regardless, I will make sure to punish her appropriately." Kavalas' voice remained even as he tried to close the topic off. Before he could change the subject, Thorn burst into laughter.

"You will? Really? I'm curious, Legion Commander Kavalas, what is the appropriate punishment for a legionnaire who insults their liege?"

The slight furrow returned to the Dwarf's forehead as he considered Thorn's question. Still chuckling, Thorn waved again and his overflowing aura began to recede until it vanished completely, as if it had never appeared

in the first place.

“But where are my manners? Why don’t we start over? Commander Del’har, please call for some refreshments. No doubt our friends are hungry and thirsty from their long trip. Don’t skimp, they’ll need the sustenance for their return journey.”

“Yes, my lord.” Bowing his head, Commander Del’har opened up the flap at the entrance to the tent and called for some of the soldiers to bring food and drink.

It was not until the tall Wolfkin had returned to his spot behind Thorn that Thorn’s words sank in with the female Dwarf, who immediately shot a concerned glance at Legion Commander Kavalas. The glance was quick, but Thorn still caught it, causing his smile to widen another notch.

“So, tell me, Commander Kavalas, how did you find yourself with only thirteen members. I was under the impression that the Stone Legion was huge. It certainly felt that way when I defeated Courdum the Stone King. We fought what felt like endless waves of stone Dwarves.”

“Hmph.” For the first time, the golden-armored Dwarf’s voice changed, getting even gruffer than it normally was. “When that madman was destroyed most of the legion fell with him. The magic that bound the legion to him brought cold death to us, just as it had once brought endless life. Those few of us that have survived have done so by the force of our will.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It is undoubtedly a terrible feeling to live while your companions have crumbled to pieces.” Thorn carefully erased the smile from his face as he spoke. Though he was still jostling for dominance with the Dwarves, he had no desire to mock them. “Please help me understand, however, as I saw many Dwarves when I was in Rakkam. I was under the impression that they were Stone Dwarves that had woken from the Stone King’s curse.”

“They were, but they were not part of the Stone Legion, they were simply cursed Stone Dwarves. The Stone Legion was, in ancient times, the personal guard of the Stone King. We serve as the final bastion of the king. There were once a thousand of us, now reduced to thirteen.”

“You have my condolences, Commander. I can only imagine what it is like to be separated from your companions forever.”

“They can still wake up…” blurted out the thickset Dwarf with the two warhammers.

“Felph! Hush!” hissed his female companion under her breath, shooting a

glare at him.

Confused, Felph scratched his head and lapsed into silence, unsure what he did wrong. Thorn gave the Legion Commander an interested look and tapped his armrest.

“How fortunate.”

Just then the tent’s flap lifted and a few soldiers entered with a couple large trays of food and pitchers with drinks. Under Commander Del’har’s direction they pulled the table over and placed the food and drinks on it. After they had finished setting up the food, Thorn waved them out and returned to what he was saying.

“Tell me, how could something so magical exist? Can your friends really be brought back to life?”

The faint frown on Kavalas’ face had, by this point, turned into a full blown scowl, and the tent fell into silence as Thorn allowed his question to hang in the air. The answer to his question was obvious, but both Thorn and Kavalas knew that the one who mentioned it first would lose their little power play. Coughing into her hand, the female Dwarf was looking more and more embarrassed. Just as she was about to break her silence, Kavalas held up a hand to forestall her.

“Earl Greymane, my legionnaires who have fallen into the cold slumber of stone due to the curse that Courdum the Stone King placed on us can only be woken by the power of that same magic.”

“Oh man, that sounds rough.” Thorn’s eyes opened wide as he looked around in faux confusion. “Where on earth are you going to find a mage of that calibre? Courdum might have been absolutely nuts, but he sure was good at magic. I think it is pretty unlikely that you’ll find someone who can match him.”

Again the tent fell into silence as Thorn played dumb. While he had thought that his [Call the Stone Legion] ability was cool, reality had proved that it was significantly more complicated than he had realized. Apart from being small, the Stone Legion had come with a serious attitude, one that Thorn had no patience for. From the moment he had seen them outside the tent Thorn had resolved himself to send them away - after all, he had plenty of subordinates and did not fancy keeping a bunch of high maintenance Dwarves.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The silence in the tent continued to stretch as Thorn picked at the food that had been brought in. None of the Dwarves had moved to the table, maintaining their positions facing Thorn's seat. Commander Del'har stood quietly behind Thorn, his eyes fixed on the Dwarves and his hand resting on his belt.

Thorn's flippant attitude was plain to Legion Commander Kavalas, who was slowly beginning to grasp the game that Thorn was playing. Realizing that Thorn was serious about feigning ignorance, and that they would not make any progress if things continued in the same direction they were going, the golden-armored Dwarf sighed.

"You misunderstand, Earl Greymane, the magic we need is that of the Stone Heart. The Stone Heart has another name, one that is much more descriptive of its character. The Heart of Earth. Legend tells us that the Bearer of the Stone Heart is one who holds the power of the earth and is able to control the energy of the earth at will, granting life to even the coldest and hardest stone. What we seek from you is your ability to bring our frozen brothers and sisters to life."

Lounging back in his chair, Thorn's eyes squinted slightly as his gaze swept over the Dwarves.

"Huh, you sure picked a strange way to come and ask for help. You waltz in here like you own the place, try to boss around my soldiers, generally act like fools, and you want me to use my power to help you wake up your dead companions? Tell me, why should I help you?"

"You will gain the service of the Stone Legion!" Exasperated, Drada slammed her staff on the ground as she spoke.

"Oh, will I? And why would I want that? I have plenty of soldiers, even immortal ones. Besides, what use will a broken legion be? I don't know if you noticed, but the last time I checked your legion had been smashed." With a sigh, Thorn shrugged his shoulders. "Look, I don't know what spirit possessed you to come here and be rude, but if you're done I would appreciate it if you would leave. I am on a tight schedule and have way too much to do. Once you have finished up your refreshments please see yourself out."

Thorn stood up as he finished speaking and began to walk out of the tent, Commander Del'har following close behind. The shock that his words had caused was apparent on Drada's face, and even Felph showed his surprise. Proud of their abilities and the history of the Stone Legion, neither of them had ever expected that Thorn would turn down their service. A slight panic overtook the look of shock as Drada looked to Kavalas. Just before Thorn stepped out of the tent, the Legion Commander's gruff voice rang out, making Thorn pause with his hand on the tent flap.

"Earl Greymane, no, my liege."

"Father…" Drada's face paled when she heard how Kavalas addressed Thorn, but the golden-armored Dwarf gestured for her to be quiet.

"The truth is that we are here to pledge our service to you."

"Huh, you have a curious way of doing that." Thorn spoke without turning around, as if he was still about to walk out of the tent.

"If you would spare a few moments of your time, I will give you a proper explanation."

Though Legion Commander Kavalas continued to speak in the same emotionless voice, his quieter tone and bowed head clearly showed his change in demeanor. Turning around to give the Dwarven commander a careful look, Thorn seriously considered sticking with his original plan of leaving. Apart from not wanting to get involved in a contest of egos with the

Stone Legion, he had a strong suspicion that accepting the remnants of the Stone Legion would bring its own troubles, and he had no desire to get involved in anything else at this point.

“You have five minutes.” Against his better judgement, Thorn returned to his chair and sat down.

“Thank you, my liege.”

“Hold up.” Thorn lifted his hand. “I have not accepted you, so you don’t get to call me that. You may call me Earl Greymane.”

“As you wish, Earl Greymane. Thank you for being willing to listen to me. I know we have not made the best impression on you, and for that I apologize. It has been many years since we have been conscious, and much has changed in that time. There was a time when we, the Stone Legion, were considered the strongest and most fearsome army in Angoril. Where we walked, the land trembled, and where we stood, nothing passed. Our shields held back the devils that sought to overrun the land, and our axes demanded such a toll of their blood that they were forced to flee.

“Yet, due to the actions of our former ruler, we, the greatest warriors of Angoril, were bent to an evil end against our will. When Courdum fell we found ourselves few, the rest of our brothers and sisters locked in stone, an eternal testament to our steadfast commitment. As you can understand, this situation has been a shock to us, causing us to be confused. In our overeagerness to save our brothers and sisters, we have allowed our haste to overrule our reason.”

Pausing for a moment, Kavalas thumped his chest with his fist and fell to one knee.

“We are pledged to guard the Bearer of the Stone Heart until we fall. We have come to honor that pledge by offering our service to Earl Greymane, Bearer of the Stone Heart.”

For the sixth time since Thorn had entered the tent, a deep silence covered the space. Legion Commander Kavalas maintained his kneeling position, his fist on his chest and his head bowed. After a few seconds, Drada and Felph knelt as well, copying the golden-armored Dwarf’s motion. With a sigh Thorn looked down at the three Dwarves in front of him before glancing at a notification that had popped up when Kavalas first knelt.

Quest: Allegiance of the Stone Legion

The last remaining commander of the Stone Legion has woken from his stone slumber and reached your land. Despite being upset to find the Stone Heart in the possession of someone who is not of Dwarven descent, Legion Commander Kavalas is bound by an unbreakable oath to protect the Stone Heart and has offered his service and the service of his soldiers to you. Should you accept, you will be responsible for feeding, housing, and arming the Stone Legion. In return, the remnants of the Stone Legion will establish themselves in your lands and guard you. Additionally, Dwarves in your lands will have access to the Legionnaire class path.

Accept	Reject

Holding off on accepting or rejecting the quest, Thorn's mind spun as he tried to understand the ramifications of what was going on. It was in times like these that he really missed having Velin or Corvo around. It had taken him quite a while to understand that few things in Nova Terra were as simple as they seemed on the surface, and this was no different. There were too many incongruities for Thorn's liking, especially since he was about to leave the valley for an extended time.

"Tell me, Commander, where were you before you came here?" Thorn asked, continuing to tap on his armrest.

"We woke in Rakkam and came here as soon as we sensed the Stone Heart."

"Huh. I take it you were not overly welcome there? Is anyone chasing you? Am I inviting disaster by taking you in?"

Again, a small flash of shock appeared in Drada's eyes, disappearing almost as fast as it arrived. If Thorn had not been specifically watching her he would have completely missed it.

"No, no one is chasing us. Though it is true that we are not welcome in Rakkam due to our, uh, history." For the first time since he had started speaking the Legion Commander hesitated.

"Makes sense. Enslaving your entire race might engender bad feelings." Thorn smiled mirthlessly. "You've mentioned a number of times that you are committed to guarding me, but honestly, I'm not sure that I actually need you. I mean, you've been statues for thousands and thousands of years and

have probably lost much of your combat ability. Will you really be helpful if I get attacked?"

"Hah! We are the Stone Legion!" Kelph burst out, jumping to his feet and slapping his hands against the handles of his two warhammers. "Though our prowess cannot match the height of our might, we are more than enough to crush any of the pathetic warriors in this camp!"

"Is that right? Why do I feel like you're boasting?" Thorn chuckled at the obvious look of annoyance that crossed Drada's face when Kelph spoke. He had to admit, he rather liked the impetuous warhammer wielding Dwarf - at least Kelph had not been trying to lie to him.

"If you doubt our might then all you have to do is test us!" A bloodthirsty grin spread across the big Dwarf's face as he glanced provocatively at Commander Del'har who was standing behind Thorn. "Send your best soldiers and our legionnaires will crush them to a man. Or woman."

"That is a great idea." Acting like he had been struck with sudden inspiration, Thorn snapped his fingers. "Commander Del'har, who is the strongest warrior in the camp right now?"

"That would be you, my lord," The tall Wolfkin answered calmly. "But that would not be a fair fight."

"True, true, that would hardly be fair, would it? I mean, I'm like twice their size and might accidently break them. Hmmm. But you could probably test them, right?"

"If that is your wish, my lord."

Taking a small step forward as he spoke, Commander Del'har slid his sword up an inch, exposing a small flash of the blade. A sharp aura rose around him, like a sword that had just been unleashed and was about to strike down. Both Kelph and Drada paled as they were forced to retreat in the face of the Wolfkin commander's strong presence.

Seeing his subordinates falling back, Commander Kavalas stood up, his own aura surging up to block the pressure that Commander Del'har was exuding. Looking innocently at Legion Commander Kavalas who was staring down Commander Del'har, Thorn spoke casually.

"What do you say, Commander Kavalas? Would you give us a demonstration of your abilities? How about going for a couple rounds against Commander Del'har? You can show off how strong you are. Who knows, maybe you'll convince me to let you stay."

"If that is what you wish, my lord." Kavalas' gruff voice was loud in the

tent, and without waiting for a response he turned and strode out, Drada and Kelph following close behind.

Watching his back as he walked away, Thorn could not help but shake his head. The Dwarven commander was undoubtedly powerful simply based on his ability to stand up to Commander Del'har's aura, but what gave Thorn pause was how calculated his actions were. It had not escaped Thorn's notice how quickly Kavalas had changed his tone and objective when he had realized that Thorn was not going to compromise.

All good generals needed an intimate understanding of when to advance and when to retreat, and Kavalas had just demonstrated a masterful grasp of the concept. Allowing his subordinate to gauge Thorn's attitude before stepping in to smooth over the situation, he had quickly seized where Thorn's bottom line was and did his best to present himself and his subordinates in the best possible light. Even Kelph's outburst was likely planned as a way to recover some of the status that Kavalas had given away. After all, what lord would turn down strong subordinates?

Still puzzling over everything that had been happening, Thorn accepted the quest and followed the Dwarves out of the tent. Something seemed to be missing, a piece that would bring the different parts of the situation into clear focus.

Outside of the tent the ten legionnaires saluted as Legion Commander Kavalas appeared. At his command they moved to the side, clearing a large space for him and Commander Del'har to fight. Word swiftly spread among the soldiers in the camp, and soon a massive crowd had gathered to watch the two commanders spar. Taking a look at the crowd, Thorn glanced at Commander Del'har.

"What do you think? Do you think you can win?"

"As much as I would like to say that it is a sure thing," the Wolfkin Warrior paused to let out a deep breath, his eyes never leaving Legion Commander Kavalas. "I don't think my chances are much better than thirty percent, my lord. I'm sorry."

"Hm. Well, we can't have that, can we?" Scratching his chin, Thorn searched through his inventory and pulled out a piece of armor. "I was going to wait to give this to you, but now seems like the best time, so here."

Staring at the smooth black pair of arm guards, Del'har's eyes went wide.

"I've had people keeping an eye out for pieces, and someone picked these arm guards up a few weeks ago."

“Thank you, my lord.” Commander Del’har spoke gruffly as he replaced his arm guards with the smooth black ones that matched his vambrace, greaves, and boots.

Asha’s Arm Guards - Heavy Armor
The legendary holy warrior Asha fell to the darkness, becoming the champion of the Devil King Malros’Tharn. For countless years, he waged war against the forces of good, crushing them in direct combat thanks to his formidable hellplate armor. Marked with the symbol of Malros’Tharn, Asha’s Arm Guards grant the wearer increased defense as they kill their enemies. Set Bonus: [2 pieces]: +Constitution [3 pieces]: [Devilish Aura] [4 pieces]: +Constitution [5 pieces]: [Summon Helfiend] [6 pieces]: +Strength, +Constitution

As soon as he had equipped [Asha’s Arm Guards], Commander Del’har’s presence solidified even further. Though the real benefit of Asha’s armor set would not manifest in single combat, acquiring a fourth piece of the set had activated two constitution boosts, drastically increasing the Wolfkin warrior’s health pool.

With a fighting style that relied on speed, Commander Del’har’s primary weakness was his lack of defense and his smaller health pool, a weakness that Asha’s armor set covered perfectly. Thorn could not wait to see how strong his retainer would become once the full six-piece set had been acquired. Glancing across the open space to where Legion Commander Kavalas stood, Thorn saw that Drada was helping him adjust his armor. At some point a large stone axe had appeared by the commander’s side.

“How are your chances now?” Thorn asked Commander Del’har under his breath.

“At least fifty percent, my lord.” Flexing his claw tipped fingers, Commander Del’har smiled coldly, his eyes burning with fighting spirit.

“Good enough. Just don’t lose,” Thorn said with a chuckle as he walked to

the side.

As if by command, both fighters stepped forward to face each other across the empty grass. Legion Commander Kavalas held his large axe in one hand, resting it on his shoulder. Commander Del’har spoke quietly as he slowly drew his sword

“As you will it, my lord.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Remember, this is a friendly bout.” Thorn’s voice was deep and clear and brought the murmurs of the crowd to silence. “Let’s make sure that when we leave here we do so as friends. Today we’ll witness two accomplished combatants trading blows. If both of you are ready?”

“Yes, my lord.” Commander Del’har’s voice was calm on the surface as if his sharp focus held back a dangerous storm.

“I am.” Legion Commander Kavalas reminded Thorn of a solid mountain.

“You may begin.”

Barely had Thorn’s words settled into the ears of the crowd when Commander Del’har disappeared from where he stood and appeared in front of the Dwarven Legion Commander, his sword stabbing toward a small opening between Kavalas’ helmet and vambrace. So swift and sharp was his attack that even Thorn twitched. Had he been on the receiving end of Del’har’s attack he was not sure that he would have been able to block it.

Despite the speed of the thrust, Kavalas proved his skill by deflecting it with the handle of his axe. Making it look like a simple motion, the Dwarf twisted his upper body to the side, putting the handle of his axe right in the

path of Del’har’s sword. With a clang the blade gouged a piece of the metal axe handle and deflected into the Legion Commander’s stone armor. Commander Del’har disappeared in the shower of sparks his sword left as it skittered across Kavalas’ armor, reappearing just out of the range of the Dwarf’s axe. Letting out his breath, Del’har examined the point of his sword which had been deformed by the golden Stone Legion armor.

“Hmm. If that is all you have you will have no chance of breaching my defenses.” Though Kavalas kept his even tone, everyone could hear the mocking undertone his gravelly voice carried.

“Hahaha, a turtle is a turtle. Maybe I should bring a pot. You look big enough to feed the whole camp.” Commander Del’har replied lightly.

“Careful, this turtle snaps.”

Taking a deliberate step forward, Kavalas held his axe over his shoulder with both hands. One arm protected his neck while the other was raised above his shoulder. With this odd stance he began to advance toward Commander Del’har, who was forced to take a step back. Despite the odd stance, Commander Kavalas had no trouble keeping up with his Wolfkin opponent when Commander Del’har began to rotate around him.

The large Dwarf ignored the testing strikes that Commander Del’har launched, letting them slide off of his armor as he continued to take small steps forward, slowly cornering his opponent. Without the ability to get through his armor, Commander Del’har could not help but continue to back up.

Booing began to echo from the crowd of soldiers watching. They had been expecting an exciting fight, but what they were getting instead was a boring lesson in how to maximize the use of advantages. Though Legion Commander Kavalas’ style of fighting was undoubtedly effective, it was terribly anti-climactic. Thorn could not blame the Dwarf, however. Commander Del’har’s attack had simply been too fast. Attacking wildly would expose Kavalas’ weak spots to the Wolfkin commander’s lightning fast stabs.

Though he looked relaxed, Thorn could tell that Commander Del’har was under just as much pressure as the golden-armored Dwarf who was inching toward him. Without the ability to get through his opponent’s armor, Commander Del’har was forced into a passive position, skirting the line between falling to a powerful attack and being able to take advantage of an opening.

As the boos rose in volume, the moment came suddenly. The Legion Commander shifted slightly and the twelve Dwarves behind him suddenly slammed the flat part of their axes into their armor, creating a loud crash that silenced the boos. In that brief lull, Kavalas struck. Taking a big step forward, he struck out with both hands before releasing the top of the axe and slashing out with a one handed grip.

Commander Del'har sensed that this was his opportunity and dashed to the side, his sword cutting toward his opponent's head. In mid swing the slash turned into a stab aimed at Kavalas' armpit where his armor was the weakest. The point of his blade darted forward only to meet the head of the axe that had suddenly twisted into the sword's path.

CLANG

Borrowing the force of Commander Del'har's stab, Legion Commander Kavalas spun around, switching hands as he turned and bringing his axe sweeping down from over his head like a windmill. Commander Del'har tried to step back to get out of the range of the attack but quickly realized that the hand switch the Legion Commander executed had extended his range substantially. Clenching his teeth, Commander Del'har raised his sword to his shoulder, holding it at an angle to deflect the blade.

Seeing his opponent's response, Legion Commander Kavalas twisted his wrist slightly, changing the angle of his chop so that it was perpendicular to the blocking sword, intending to use his power to break the sword in half. Just as the two weapons were about to collide, Commander Del'har threw himself to the other side, somehow managing to duck under the axe and align his blade with the angle of the attack.

The residual force of the blow sent him staggering, his whole shoulder badly bruised, but not before his sword flicked out toward Legion Commander Kavalas' eyes. Barely getting his hand up to block the tip of the sword, the Dwarven commander could feel it punch into the softer part of his gauntlet, leaving a gash on his palm.

Both fighters reeled from the exchange before driving back toward each other, their minds consumed by the fight. Mustering all of his strength, Legion Commander Kavalas slashed down with his axe. Facing him, Commander Del'har abandoned any attempt at defense and dashed forward, thrusting his sword out toward his opponent's throat.

BANG

With a thunderous noise both of them were halted in their tracks as a

massive figure stepped between them. In one hand he held the Legion Commander's axe, in the other he gripped the Wolfkin commander's blade. The shock of seeing someone catch their weapons shook both fighters out of their battle craze, and their deadly auras quickly withdrew.

"What a powerful display of skill!" Giving them a moment to gather themselves, Thorn turned to the crowd of soldiers. "Good thing they're on our side, huh?"

Though the joke was not funny, it successfully dispelled the thick tension that had blanketed the crowd, as a smattering of laughter and cheers rang out. Glancing at the Dwarves from the Stone Legion who did not look too happy that Thorn had stopped the fight, Thorn gave a small smile.

"Commander Del'har, I am very pleased with your performance and feel completely at ease leaving you in charge of the valley's defense. I know you will not disappoint me."

"Thank you, my lord." With a gratified look, Commander Del'har dropped to one knee, his sword planted in the ground in front of him.

Seeing that Del'har's shoulder was badly wounded from Legion Commander Kavalas' attack, Thorn activated [Improved Rallying Cry] and [Call the Pack], granting the Commander a large boost in health regeneration. Once he was sure that Commander Del'har was healing, Thorn turned to look at Legion Commander Kavalas.

The golden-armored Dwarf was examining his damaged gauntlet impassively, though Thorn's extra sharp senses could detect a hint of sorrow buried deep in Kavalas' stoney face. Walking over, Thorn stretched his hand out. After hesitating slightly, the Legion Commander handed the damaged gauntlet over.

As soon as it touched his hand, Thorn could sense the thick earth element that ran through it. Just as he suspected, the golden sheen on Legion Commander Kavalas' armor was made up of earth element, granting its wearer a nearly impenetrable defense. Thorn could feel the energy flowing through the gauntlet and knew that if he reached for it he could absorb it completely, though that would undoubtedly destroy the gauntlet.

Instead, Thorn held the gauntlet in one hand, the gash facing up. Placing his other hand above it, he concentrated his [Spiritual Sense of Earth]. As he focused it in the hand that hovered over the weapon, he could sense the broken threads of earth element in the gauntlet. Slowly taking control of them he joined them back together, repairing the damage that Commander

Del’har’s sword had done.

As Legion Commander Kavalas saw the glove being repaired before his very eyes, his mouth dropped open and his eyes grew wide. For the first time since he had appeared, his expression truly changed, morphing into complete shock.

THUMP

The sound of Kavalas falling on both knees was so loud that Thorn nearly dropped the glove. Startled, he took a small step back as Kavalas bowed his head to the ground, prostrating himself.

“All glory to the Stone King, the Lord of Earth!”

Kavalas’ gravelly voice was powerful and rang across the whole camp. As the echo died away, even more thumps rang out as the other twelve Dwarves of the Stone Legion knelt down and bowed their heads, their voices echoing out.

“All glory to the Stone King, the Lord of Earth!”

ding

Quest: Allegiance of the Stone Legion (completed)
The last remaining commander of the Stone Legion has woken from his stone slumber and reached your land. Despite being upset to find the Stone Heart in the possession of someone who is not of Dwarven descent, Legion Commander Kavalas is bound by an unbreakable oath to protect the Stone Heart and has offered his service and the service of his soldiers to you. Upon witnessing you using the sacred power of the earth, the remnants of the Stone Legion have recognized you as the Stone King, the Lord of the Earth, the natural ruler of all Dwarves. As their ruler, you are responsible for feeding, housing, and arming the Stone Legion. In return, the remnants of the Stone Legion will establish themselves in your lands and guard you. Additionally, Dwarves in your lands will have access to the Legionnaire class path.

Title Advancement: Bearer of the Stone Heart + The Stone King

You have somehow ingested the source of the Dwarves' connection with the earth, the Heart of Stone. The stone heart holds unimaginable power, granting the one who wields it a unique connection to the earth. Though the Heart of Stone was once corrupted by the evil influence of the greater devil, Balashimir, sealing some of its power, it has been cleansed by the power of the World Tree.

The sworn protectors of the Stone King have seen the power of the Stone Heart in you and have recognized you as the current Stone King.

+Strength
+Constitution
+Endurance

-Dexterity

Abilities:
Earth Sense
Armor of the Earth
Heart of the Earth
Call the Stone Legion

Title Gained: The Stone King, Lord of Earth

"Wha…?"

Lost for words, Thorn looked at Commander Del'har. The Wolfkin commander had no idea what was happening either, so Thorn dismissed the watching soldiers and asked the Dwarves to return to his tent. Entering the tent, he took his seat as the members of the Stone Legion stood respectfully in front of him.

Rubbing his forehead, Thorn closed his eyes for a moment. The last few days had been mentally draining and the Stone Legion's abrupt change in attitude was not helping. After centering himself, he opened his eyes and looked at Legion Commander Kavalas.

"Explain what is going on."

Flinching slightly, Legion Commander Kavalas quickly knelt down. Bowing his head, he began to speak.

"Great Stone King, may your glory stand as eternal as the unbreakable

rock. For my earlier disrespect and insolence I deserve punishment. I was ignorant and did not recognize your majesty. It was not until you, in your kindness, reformed my gauntlet that I was able to clearly see your glory."

"Hold on. First, drop all the honorifics."

"Your majesty! I cannot, I cannot!" A horrified expression crossed Legion Commander Kavalas' face, as if Thorn was asking him to blaspheme.

"Alright, fine, but keep it to a minimum. Why are you calling me the Stone King? Wasn't that Courdum?"

"Yes, your majesty. You are the Bearer of the Stone Heart, the Lord of the Earth, the True Ruler, the Stone King!" The large Dwarf's eyes glowed with fervor as he spoke. "You are Courdum's heir, and our master!"

"You seriously expect me to believe that you are just going to to walk in here, declare me the true king or whatever and pledge allegiance to me? Hah, forget it."

"I mean, that actually does sound like something that would happen to you."

Hearing a frivolous voice from the entrance of the tent, Thorn looked up and saw Corvo smirking at him. Nodding a greeting, the Elf laughed.

"Honestly, I'm surprised it's only Dwarves and not a whole tribe of dragons, or super ancient one-eyed centaurs that can predict the future."

"Are there one-eyed centaurs that can predict the future?"

"Yeah, but that is not the point. The point is that your luck is stupid good and should count as cheating." Rolling his eyes, Corvo grabbed a piece of fruit off of the table and took a bite. "Mmm, so what is going on here? Why are these super buff Dwarves pledging allegiance to you?"

Sighing, Thorn put his head in his hands and explained everything that had happened, starting from using his [Call the Stone Legion] ability. About half way through, Corvo began laughing, and by the end he was nearly crying.

"What's so funny?" Giving Corvo an annoyed look, Thorn smacked his hand on his armrest, being careful to do it lightly. "I need help here, not laughter."

"Haha, you don't get it? You've collected what, three races? Soon four, maybe five? Haha, sorry, sorry. I just got this image of you walking around with a, ehem, Titan sized group of people of different races trailing after you. Haha, better watch out or you'll end up starting a revolt by accident."

Rolling his eyes at Corvo's lame pun, Thorn thought it better to ignore it completely, instead focusing on what Corvo was saying.

“What are you talking about? I’m the ruler of the Wolfkin, but that is it.”

“Sure, just the Wolfkin. And the Ailuridae. And probably the big Wolves I see wandering around. Oh, and the Dwarves, Mr. Stone King. And you’re headed to save your best friend soon, that new Elf queen. Ryshella? Rychell?”

“Rychell.”

“Yeah, her. I count five.”

“Okay, put that aside for a moment. Help me figure out what to do right now,” Thorn said in defeat, rubbing his temples in frustration.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What do you mean?” Corvo looked at Thorn like he was an idiot before turning to the Dwarves. “Hey, thanks for voting him King or whatever. What does he need to do to get the recognition of all of the Dwarves?”

Obviously excited by the question, the Legion Commander bounced to his feet before glancing nervously at Thorn and quickly kneeling again. Annoyed, Thorn waved for him to get up and answer the question.

“Your majesty, the answer to this question requires an understanding of the long history of the Children of the Earth. My daughter, Drada, is an Earth Priestess and knows the history of the Children of the Earth better than most.”

Seeing Thorn’s confusion, Drada coughed and spoke up.

“Your majesty, we call our race the Children of the Earth. That is our oldest and proudest name. Dwarf is a name that was given to us later in our history.”

“Got it, thanks. Please continue.”

Legion Commander Kavalas stepped to the side and gestured for Drada to continue, which she did with a small bow.

“In the time before the gods, the Stone King created and ruled the Children of the Earth. One day, the Stone King vanished, leaving behind the Stone Heart and a message that the one who held the Stone Heart was to be our ruler and the one who wielded the earth element was to be the next Stone King. Throughout our history we have had many rulers, but only two Stone Kings since the original Stone King vanished. Courdum was our third Stone King, and by casting him down and taking the Stone Heart you have gained the right to rule. By wielding its power you have earned the title of the Stone King and with it, our undying allegiance.”

“Hold on.” Thorn lifted his hand. “If I’m the ruler of the, uh, Children of the Earth, why didn’t the Dwarves in Rakkam act this way when they saw me?”

“Your majesty, I believe they were too embarrassed by the fact that you were not one of the Children of the Earth to tell you that you were the rightful ruler.”

“Probably because they didn’t actually see you use the power of the earth, or whatever it is that you did just now.” Corvo spoke up from where he was trying to select a pastry. “I think this is one of those hidden conditions that the average person would never discover. You know how all the things in this game seem to be secretly tied together? This is one of those secret ties. Modern Dwarves wouldn’t necessarily recognize it, but these Stone Legion people have been around for thousands of years. Potentially tens of thousands. Plus, weren’t they super friendly to you? They pretty much gave you the run of the city and let you keep Flamespire Fortress even though they pretty much kicked all the other guilds out of the Deepworld.”

“The esteemed Child of Life is correct.” Drada nodded at Corvo before continuing. “It is a matter of shame for the Stone Heart to fall into the possession of another race.”

“Ugh. This is making my head hurt,” Thorn groaned. “What is the difference between being the rightful ruler of the Dwarves, and being the Stone King? One makes you embarrassed and one makes you so happy you’re falling over.”

“The Great Forge!” Kelph blurted out in a loud voice before catching himself and lapsing into an embarrassed silence.

“Stop.” Standing up, Thorn held out his hands. “If this is a big long quest

that requires me to drop everything and go off adventuring somewhere, I'm out. I don't care, I'm not interested. I have way too much stuff to do here. There are places to be, wars to fight, Children of Life or whatever to save. I am up to my ears in problems and as you can see, that is a whole lot of problems. Not interested."

The disappointment on the faces of the Dwarves was so palpable Thorn had to avert his gaze.

"Ehem. Please excuse his majesty's poor joke." Corvo coughed into his fist while shooting a glare at Thorn. "What he means to say is that even though he is incredibly busy he would be happy to hear about this Great Forge."

Groaning, Thorn sat back down and glumly waved for Drada to continue. Rubbing her hands together nervously, the Earth Priestess picked up the conversation where Kelph had interrupted.

"Your majesty, the Great Forge is the holy land of the Children of the Earth. Sadly, it was lost after the second Stone King was driven out by the Elemental Giants who seized it from my people. The second Stone King was wounded in the war by the leader of the Elemental Giants. It was the third Stone King, Courdum, whose desire to reclaim the Great Forge that led him to create the Stone Legion. Though he attempted to reclaim the Great Forge, he was driven back many times, to the point that he fell into madness and created the [Living Statue] curse in an attempt to cheat death."

ding

Quest: Missing Titans - [Update: Titan's Homeland]
Before the Era of the Gods, Titans walked Angoril. Unmatched in both battle and arts, the Titans were masters of whatever they put their hands to, yet almost overnight they vanished, leaving nothing but giant ruins and dim records of their existence. According to the ancient myths of the Wolfkin, the Titans ruled over all creatures and were the gods' contemporaries. Discover what happened to the Titans and why they disappeared. You have discovered the name and home of Zemtal'Feg, Titan of Life. As a Titan, the [Bearer of the Stone Heart], and a [Friend of the Earth], you are on your way to unlocking the power of the ancient Titan race.

The Great Forge, the home of the Titan of Earth, has been taken over by Elemental Giants. Seek out the Great Forge and drive out the invaders to prove your right to the Heart of Stone.

This quest cannot be turned down.

Requirements:
Unlock the power of the [Heart of the Earth]
Clear the Elemental Giants that occupy the Great Forge

Reward:
Title - [Titan of Earth]
Area - The Great Forge

Seeing Thorn's face get even more glum, Corvo burst into laughter.

"Hahaha, I knew it! You got another quest, didn't you? Ahaha, I'm so glad I joined this ridiculous group. I tell you, life is never dull around you."

"Not a new quest. An update to one I already have. One that I can't turn down."

With a deep sigh, Thorn shared the details of the quest with Corvo. Opening it up, Corvo's eyebrows rose as he read over it.

"Whew, that's something, isn't it?" Scratching his nose, the Avatar of Huginn glanced at Thorn from the corner of his eye before rereading the quest. "You know, the longer I'm around you the more I get the feeling that you are being turned into the final boss. Still, like you said, can't turn it down so you might as well lean into it."

"True. But one thing at a time." Dismissing the quest window, Thorn stood and looked down at the Dwarves from the Stone Legion. "Thank you for your confidence in me. I have a great interest in the Great Forge and would be pleased to lead you to liberate it from the Elemental Giants. Before that, however, I have a laundry list of things that need to be taken care of. I will have Commander Del'har arrange quarters for you. Corvo here is in charge of the valley while I am away and will be assigning work to you."

"Hey, I thought I was coming to Rasyn?!"

Completely ignoring Corvo's outburst, Thorn waved to the Dwarves and fled the tent as fast as he could.

"Hey! Thorn!"

"Thank you, your majesty!"

Legion Commander Kavalas called as Thorn disappeared, chased by an Elf in a ragged coat. Left alone with the Dwarves, Commander Del'har coughed into his fist and invited them to follow him back to Moon Wolf Citadel.

Corvo caught up to Thorn outside the camp, but before he could continue arguing, a small flash of red forced him to jump to the side. Bounding out of the woods, Akira jumped through the air, landing on Thorn's shoulder and hugging his head excitedly.

[Master! Master! I missed you!]

[I missed you too, Akira. How is it going?]

[It's great, master! Ailuridae have the best noses and I am the best Ailuridae, so we found all of them easily. There were even some that tried to hide in some caves, but I found them and then I wacked them with my tail, like this!]

Launching herself off of Thorn's shoulder, Akira's small body abruptly expanded until she was her full size. Smashing into the ground with an earth-shaking rumble, she spun around, her tails leaving trails of red flame as they whipped through the air. Scared out of his wits, Corvo dived to the side, barely dodging the attack. Completing her spin, Akira sat up on her haunches. Raising her front claws, she bared her teeth and growled.

[See! That's what I did, and I scared them so badly they all just fell down.]

[Wow, that is really scary,] Thorn said, doing his best not to laugh as Akira shrunk back down and climbed up his leg. "Corvo, we'll talk about you coming to Rasyn if you can find someone who can run the guild while you're gone."

Leaving Corvo with that ultimatum, Thorn and Akira hurried south to meet up with the rest of the Iron Wolves.

It did not take Thorn long to join the defensive line that had been formed around the old Temple of the Moon. The ten Iron Wolf Battalions had established their perimeter a bit more than a mile out from the ruined temple walls, stationing themselves at regular intervals. Large wolves patrolled the spaces between the battalions in groups of six, their sharp senses preventing the cultists from being able to sneak out. Positioned at the center of the line, Hasta spotted Thorn running over and greeted him with a snappy salute.

"Earl Greymane."

"I thought I told you to cut that out." Thorn said.

"You have to say, 'at ease, commander', or I'll be forced to keep

saluting.” The grin on Hasta’s face did not match the seriousness of his tone at all.

“I dunno, maybe I should make you continue saluting for being insubordinate.”

ding

> Sorry, my lord, it isn’t insubordination when refusing to perform an action that is not within the scope of authority of the person issuing the order. Military order cannot be... must not be denied. Sun Tzu lists Method and Discipline as one of the five governing factors of the art of war and indicates that victory will lie with the force that enforces discipline most rigorously. As the Sovereign, you may commission the army and appoint or dismiss the general, but you cannot neglect proper protocol if you wish for this to be a real army. Doing so undermines your commander’s authority with the troops.

Reading over the message that Hasta sent him, Thorn paused for a second. His aunt had specifically sent Hasta and the other bodyguards into the game to help him with establishing the Iron Wolf army, and he knew it would be foolish not to take the advice, even if it went against his preference.

“At ease, commander. Your point is taken.” Thorn nodded to show that he accepted Hasta’s rebuke.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“What is the situation?”

“We’ve been stalled here, my lord. As you can see, there is a nasty fog that is preventing us from getting close.” Hasta pointed toward the temple ruins that were covered by a thick corrosive mist that emanated from the cave where Mayari was sealed.

“Hmm.”

Sniffing the air, Thorn could smell that faintly rotten odor that was indicative of the devil’s corruption. Frowning, he walked forward into the mist. As it grew thicker so too did the smell. Reaching out, Thorn could feel the corruption trying to enter into his body as the mist swirled around his hand. A faint tingling on his skin indicated just how corrosive it was, but he could feel the effect of the sap from the World Tree keeping it out. Retreating out of the mist, Thorn thought for a moment and then opened up a call to Mina.

“Hey Thorn, what’s up?”

“Have you checked out this mist?”

“Are you at the blockade? How’d the thing with the Dwarves go?”

“Uh, it was weird. I’ll tell you about it later. Have you tested the effect of the mist?”

“Are you crazy? Someone nearly melted after walking in there. There is no way I am about to go into there.”

“Well, I seem to be immune.”

“Of course you are.”

Ignoring Mina’s eye rolling, Thorn took out a vial of the golden [Sap of the World Tree].

“I think this stuff makes us immune, but I need you or Heidi to test it out for me. You two are the only other people here who have ingested this stuff.”

“Huh, that is an interesting idea. Hold on, let me check it out.”

Without ending the call Mina lifted her wand and waved it, summoning a shimmering field of snow around her body. Tiny flakes of ice glinted in the light, making her sparkle as if her skin was covered in tiny diamonds. Another wave summoned a track of ice under her feet, allowing her to slide forward into the mist.

As she arrived at the edge of the mist the shimmering ice on her skin began to dim as it fought against the corrosive effect that the mist carried. Stretching out her hand, Mina allowed the protection on her hand to disappear, leaving her skin exposed. After a moment, her eyes lit up as all she felt was a small tingle. Sliding back out of the mist, Mina dispelled her protective spell with a wave.

“I think you might be right! How much [Sap of the World Tree] do you have?”

“Well, I emptied out the whole pool. We might have to run some tests, but so long as a diluted version works against the mist, we should be able to get everyone some. It will depend on how diluted it can be. Hey, that was a nice defensive spell. I’ve never seen that one.”

“Oh, [Shimmering Snow]? I came up with that the other day. It's got a reflective effect as well so it is better against magic and light-based attacks.”

“Wait, you created it? You can make magic spells?”

“Ice-based ones, yup. I can feel that I’m getting close to mastering my Ice Witch class. Probably just one or two more spells. I’ve been playing around with a freezing curse as well as a large-scale ice storm spell. Something

bigger than my [Avalanche] and [Blizzard] combo. Once I nail them down I have a good feeling that I'll progress."

"An ice curse? That sounds really interesting. Let me get someone started on testing diluting this sap and then I want to hear more about this."

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“So, the way it works is pretty simple. Instead of doing direct damage, the curse is a damage over time effect, commonly referred to as DoT, which means it does damage for regular intervals for a given amount of time. In this case, every three seconds, starting from when it is applied, for 45 seconds,” Mina explained, showing Thorn the ability window for [Blistering Chill], her new magic curse. “It also adds two status effects that trigger on alternating ticks, so as soon as it is applied, there is a damage effect, then at one second, it slows the target. At second two, it reduces endurance regen. Second three is damage again, and the whole process cycles fifteen times.

“The slow effect and the endurance regen debuff stack, so if it is not removed, the person who gets hit with it will be frozen after the forty five seconds are up. This makes it great for engaging with multiple targets, though I cannot maintain it on more than two people at a time. Still, if used on rotation, it adds to my stun-lock combo. Plus, if I can get it off on two targets at the same time, it will help out with my [Raging Blizzard] spell’s

targeting.”

“That sounds pretty intense.” Thorn sat next to Mina, enjoying the rising sun as they waited for the players distributing the diluted sap from the World Tree to return.

“Yeah, making spells from scratch like this is a really time consuming process, but being in tune with the element that you are using is really helpful. As an Ice Witch, I get a huge boost in proficiency when casting ice spells, and since they are just about all I use, I’ve been advancing pretty fast.”

“When do you think you’ll be done?”

“Not totally sure. Could be in the next fight, or the following one, or the one after that. I just need to get used to these new spells.”

“Well,” Thorn grinned and scratched the back of his head, “if you ever want to practice, feel free to call me.”

“Hah, as if. You’re pretty much immune to curses so it would not be helpful at all. If Velin was still here I probably would have advanced already.” Mina stopped and covered her mouth quickly when she saw Thorn’s face fall. “Sorry. Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring that up.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.” Thorn waved his hand, adjusting his face into a halfhearted smile that somehow only made Mina feel even worse. “No reason to be sad. I’m sure she is doing something important.”

“You haven’t heard anything yet?”

“No.” Thorn’s frown quickly returned. “How about you?”

“Nope. We both transitioned to deep dive, and when I checked in Fantasia her indicator was perfectly fine. She is probably just in a place where she can’t respond to messages.”

“That’s true.” The idea that it was the game that was hindering Velin from communicating with her team made Thorn feel much better.

“I mean, it happened to you, so it could, in theory, happen to her.”

“Yeah, that is probably what it is.”

Mina was not sure whether Thorn was saying it for her sake or his own, but either way, she was happy to be able to distract him. Every time Velin had come up in the past few weeks Thorn’s attitude had fallen quickly. As much as he tried to hide it, it was abundantly obvious that Thorn really missed the Elven War Priestess.

“So, what is she doing anyway?” Thorn asked casually as he looked toward the thick mist that surrounded the abandoned Temple of the Moon.

“She…” Catching herself, Mina’s mouth snapped shut. “Sorry I’m...”

“Yeah, yeah, sworn to secrecy. I know,” Thorn said with an exaggerated sigh.

“Earl Greymane, the first tests have been completed properly. If we can get more of this sap we should be able to enter the fog.” A player from the Iron Wolves jogged up and reported to Thorn.

“Great, how many players can one vial cover?”

“If we dilute it into one hundred parts, we can cover one hundred people for an hour.”

“Hmm, with ten thousand players, we’ll need one hundred vials of the sap, maybe minus some for the players who have yet to respawn.” Doing some quick math, Thorn thought for a moment and then nodded. “I was hoping to save more of this, but let’s say the boss fight takes four hours, start to finish. That is four hundred vials. At six hours it’ll be six hundred with some left in reserve. Better safe than sorry, right? Here you go. Please see that everyone gets six vials of the diluted sap.”

With a wave, Thorn took six hundred of the vials of sap from the World Tree that he had collected. Only a few vials remained in his inventory, but Thorn was not overly worried about it. Even though the concentrated sap was miraculous and unbelievably precious, he had never been overly attached to resources. If using the sap enabled them to clear a threat in the valley it was worth whatever cost Thorn had to pay.

“Thank you, sir.” Bowing excitedly, the player who had reported took the vials and ran back to where a few of Nova Luna’s alchemists were diluting the sap and splitting it up.

The Iron Wolves were all professional players and took the game and their roles in the Greymane army very seriously. Within twenty-five minutes everyone had their six vials and had finished their final gear check. Seeing the gazes directed at them, Mina stood up and patted Thorn on the knee.

“Time to go, boss.”

Rising to his feet, Thorn stretched his arms and rolled his shoulders, preparing himself for the upcoming attack. Putting his large rock away, he took a few steps forward and opened up the Iron Wolf command channel after sliding on his helmet.

“Hello.” Thorn’s voice echoed in the player’s ears, bringing instant silence to the army. “Over the last few days we have been hard at work cleansing the corruption that has infested our valley. Many of our brave brothers and sisters have fallen to the enemy, victims of this corruption that seeks to sweep us

away. It has proven itself dangerous, but we have proven ourselves even more dangerous.

“Though we stand before the biggest challenge yet, I am sure in the knowledge of our success. We have proven ourselves to be fierce wolves, an indomitable army. As we fight this last battle, know that this does not mark the end of our mission, but simply the very first step in our ascent to glory. We are the Iron Wolves, and we will write our names across Angoril, forging a legacy of blood and iron that will never be forgotten.”

Pausing for a moment, Thorn could feel the swelling energy from the players. Just as it was about to burst, he gave Commander Hasta a small signal. Stepping forward, the Commander stepped forward and thrust his spear up into the air, his voice ringing clearly in the channel.

“Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

The thunderous roar rose from the players, setting the mist in front of them swirling as the air itself shook. As one, all ten of the battalions sprang forward, rushing toward the walls of the abandoned temple. The tanks charged in front, a wide variety of armor in every color of the rainbow glistened in the early morning light. Behind them, also arrayed in a huge variety of different styles of armor, came the DPS and support players, readying their attack spells or precasting their buffs.

Huge dark forms sprinted among them as the Children of the Moon joined the attacking army in full force. Easily keeping pace with the Iron Wolf soldiers, the Children of the Moon kept their senses sharp, on the lookout for ambushes. A particularly large wolf stopped next to where Thorn stood watching the army stream forward.

“I’m glad you chose the correct side,” Maugrim said, flashing a wicked set of teeth at Thorn who just chuckled.

“It was inevitable.” Thorn’s teeth were hidden by his helmet, but Maugrim could sense that Thorn had returned a grin. “There is only room for one ruler in this valley. Remember that.”

Without waiting for a response, Thorn hoisted his tetsubo and charged after the Iron Wolf players, Akira bounding alongside him.

“Hah, welp,” Maugrim muttered, only to feel an ice cold gaze settle on him.

“You know, a wolf your size, would probably make a rug big enough for the Wolf Lord’s Throne,” Mina said, her eyes fixed on Maugrim as her ice

orbs spun around her head. “Remember, even if the big guy isn’t around, there are plenty of us who are.”

Stunned, Maugrim watched as the tiny Ice Witch vanished, appearing above Thorn’s shoulder. A small foot touched down lightly on the Titan’s armor as Mina launched herself forward, a path of ice appearing under her feet.

“Ahaha, mother was right about these travelers!” A sense of excitement filled the giant wolf as his competitive spirit rose.

Throwing back his head, Maugrim let out a deep howl that was picked up by the rest of the Children of the Moon. The sound echoed around the Iron Wolf players who suddenly found themselves moving even faster than normal. Seeing the change, a smile spread on Thorn’s face and he joined the howl, activating his own [Pack Travel].

As the army plunged into the red fog, the players could feel that the thin layer of protection offered by the diluted sap of the World Tree covered them, keeping the mist at bay. Emboldened by the discovery, the players all sped up, rushing toward the abandoned temple as fast as they could.

ding

Quest: An Ancient Priestess - Updated
Led to a ruined temple by a giant wolf, you have discovered a woman in white who claims to be the High Priestess of Hati. She appears to be trapped in a magical prison. Mayari has asked you to free her while Mani, the matron of the Children of the Moon, has asked you to slay Mayari after freeing her. To free Mayari you must unlock the magical circle by entering it with the Ring of the Wolf Lord. While you were pondering over the best course to take, Mayari has silently enlisted the support of Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, and a large number of Wolfkin disciples. After growing in secret, the corrupted disciples have finally rebelled, beginning to raid the valley and kill those who do not pledge their loyalty to Mayari. Every day that Mayari remains alive, and for every player that is killed, the number of corrupted disciples will increase.

You have entered the struggle against the corruption that Mayari brought to Fang Valley. After cleansing the rest of the valley of the taint, you tracked down Gelish the Bloodkin, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, to Greyfield Village and slew him. Before he died he spoke of an even greater threat, which you discovered in the abandoned ruins of the old Temple of the Moon.

Enter the ruins of the temple and slay Mayari before she can turn all of the corrupted cultists into Bloodkin.

As a special reward, Mani, the matron of the Children of the Moon, has agreed to tell you what she knows about the Titan race.

Reward: Children of the Moon, High Priestess of Hati, Information about Titans

Soon the walls of the ruined temple came into view, and as the players watched, they saw cultists begin to boil out of the ruins. A sea of red started to form around the temple, giving the impression that the cultists were endless. Thorn's eyes flickered as he scanned the enemy, searching for a weakness.

Despite how thickly packed the red-robed cultists were, Thorn soon saw a spot that was not as tightly packed. The cultists in that area were spread out a little more, creating the illusion that they were just as thickly packed there as everywhere else, but Thorn's sharp vision was not fooled. Just as he was about to point it out, a message arrived from Commander Hasta.

"My lord, there is a weak spot in the cultists formation to the right. If you lead the charge there we should be able to break open the formation without much trouble."

"Got it."

Adjusting his path slightly, Thorn led his team toward the point that Hasta had pointed out.

"Do be careful because the enemy probably is using that as a trap. Though it is true that it is the weakest spot in the enemy lines, they have positioned a number of elite units right behind that spot. Their goal is to blunt our charge by taking apart the point of the spear."

"Wait, it's a trap?" Despite his confusion, Thorn did not slow in the slightest.

“That is highly likely. But the most efficient way to crush a trap is to blow it up from the inside. Rather than struggle against the walls and engage in a meat grinder, we are better off splitting the enemy and crushing one flank at a time. The enemy is expecting a succulent bite of steak. I’m betting that you and your squad are going to be a bone too hard for them to chew.”

“Haha, got it. Well, just sit back and watch!” Closing his messaging window, Thorn called to Heidi and SoulSeeker who ran alongside him. “Are you ready? Let’s do this!”

Activating [Shadow Dash] Thorn’s body turned hazy as he darted forward, slipping through the first few lines of red-robed cultists. Now that he was closer, he could see a few of the hulking Bloodkin hiding in the ranks of the cultists. Marveling at how Hasta had been able to spot them from so far away, Thorn gave his teammates a heads up and then exploded into action.

[Shadow Dash] was canceled, and as the shadows cleared Thorn’s tetsubo cleared a swath through his enemies. Not bothering to finish off the cultists that he batted aside, Thorn instead struck again with a reverse sweep. The thick metal mace hammered into the side of a cultist, nearly ripping the poor Wolfkin in half. Instead, the force of the attack smashed all of the cultist’s ribs and snapped his spine before sending him flying into his companions like a bowling ball.

Thorn could feel two burning forces at his back and knew that Heidi and SoulSeeker had caught up. Without waiting, he took a big step forward, his tetsubo slashing out at the Wolfkin cultist’s head height like a scythe harvesting wheat. The cultists who had the presence of mind to duck found themselves facing a storm of razor sharp ice spikes and the sharp blades of a white-armored figure who appeared next to them long enough to cut their throats before fading into the air.

“Man, Julia wasn’t kidding, was she?” said Commander Hasta to himself as he watched in awe as Thorn ripped through the ranks of the red-robed cultists. Still, it would not do to be completely outdone by the boss, so, shaking his head, the commander gripped his spear and launched himself forward into the fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sea of red that surrounded Thorn at the beginning of the fight had begun to give way under the Titan squad's relentless attacks. Together they drove into the cultist's lines, carving a path for the players behind them. Once again Thorn was reminded how different fighting in a mass battle was from one on one combat. The pace was frantic as the action swirled around him, another new enemy charging toward him as soon as he cleared one from his path.

Every step forward was a lesson in balance. Though he could rush forward, that would simply separate him from the other players, leaving his back open in the thick melee. Instead, he had to keep pushing forward, but always in concert with those who protected his sides. To his left, Heidi carefully blocked the incoming attacks, skillfully deflecting the attacking enemies into the blades and spells of the players behind her. On Thorn's right, SoulSeeker took a more aggressive approach, his big blade cutting down any enemy foolish enough to linger.

“Thorn, watch out for the Bloodkin.” Mina had fallen into the formation behind Thorn, her spinning ice orbs sending out a near constant stream of [Ice Spikes].

“Yup, I see them.” Thorn’s eyes flickered under his helmet as he picked out the three nearest Bloodkin. “Akira, get ready.”

[I’m ready, master!]

“Good. Heidi, SoulSeeker, get ready to close the gap. Alabaster, your team gets the one on the right. Akira, you’re taking the one on the left. Remember to call for help if you need it.”

[Against these degenerates?] Akira’s voice carried a deep scorn that Thorn had never heard before. [Please.]

“Go!”

With a roar, Thorn sprinted forward, smashing through the red-robed cultists and arriving in front of the shocked Bloodkin in the middle. Lifting his tetsubo over his head, Thorn brought it down with blistering speed on the Bloodkin’s head. Thorn’s abrupt advance and attack had startled the Bloodkin warrior so badly that it took a moment for him to react. The hulking monster tried to jump to the side as he brought his arms up to block, but Thorn had not held back at all and the metal spikes of the tetsubo cut through the monster’s arms, crushing its head without resistance.

A quick glance over his shoulder showed that Heidi and SoulSeeker had tightened up the formation, even as they continued to push forward. On his right, Alabaster, EphemeralWhisper, and another two rogues were doing their best to cut their target to pieces. With four assassins targeting the Bloodkin, Thorn was confident that he did not need to help them so he turned to check up on Akira as he waited for the rest of the squad to catch up.

As soon as Thorn had shouted, Akira had darted out of the player’s formation. With each step her body grew larger, forcing the Wolfkin cultists to the side until she was simply trampling over them. A few of the more enterprising cultists managed to attack her as she ran by, but her red fur was almost as hard as armor in her battle form and she simply ignored the attacks. With a thought, her three tails burst into flame, leaving burning trails in her wake.

The sight of the fire streaming from her tail seemed to have a cowing effect on the red-robed cultists and they scrambled back, trying to get out of her way. Even the Bloodkin warrior quailed as she got close, starting to retreat. Before the monster could take even one step, Akira had arrived. A

fierce light burned in her eyes as she brought up a claw and slashed, cutting a huge gash in the Bloodkin's side. The attack caused her to spin around, her three tails slamming into the unfortunate monster, crushing him into the ground and lighting his body on fire.

Without bothering to see if he was dead, Akira used the impact of her tails to launch herself in the air. As her head swung around her eyes locked onto another Bloodkin hiding further back in the crowd, closer to the ruined temple. A twist of her tails allowed her to adjust the trajectory of her upper body, and with an earth shaking boom she landed among the cultists, crushing half a dozen under her big body.

About to call her back, Thorn saw a blur and suddenly Akira had crossed a large distance and was holding the Bloodkin Warrior she had spotted. As she smashed the monster into the ground repeatedly, Thorn swallowed his words. It was obvious that there was little in this crowd of enemies that could even hope to harm her, so he simply let her run wild.

[Good job, Akira. Keep hunting the Bloodkin.]

[See, I told you they were not worth worrying about.]

Rejoining the squad, Thorn revised his plan and leveled his tetsubo at the wall of the ruined temple.

"New plan, folks. We are going hard. Alabaster, take down Bloodkin when you see them. We're busting through. Iron Wolves!"

"KILL!"

Surging forward, the players stopped holding back and began to rampage through the cultists' lines with renewed fervor. Sensing that their trap was about to fail, the remaining Bloodkin abandoned all pretense of hiding and tried to rush forward to blunt the Titan Squad's charge. Unfortunately for them, as soon as they started to move they revealed themselves to Akira and Alabaster's assassin squad who began to cut them down. Hit from the flanks, only a scant few Bloodkin warriors made it to the player's lines, only to be met with Thorn's whirling tetsubo or a tank's shield.

With the Bloodkin taken out of the picture, the remaining cultists were quickly cleaned up and the Titan Squad broke through the cultists' lines and made it to the walls of the ruined temple. Behind them, the other players of the Iron Wolf army widened the channel that had been cut in the cultist's lines, splitting them into two parts, one to the east and the other to the west. Hasta seized the opportunity as soon as he got Thorn's message and had the bulk of the players attack the western half of the cultist's army.

“Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

Every time the chant rang out the players attacked faster and harder, using every skill at their disposal to cut down their enemies. The cultists held for only a brief moment before crumbling as they were overwhelmed on three sides.

“Battalions six, seven, eight, nine, and ten, begin the calculated retreat.” Hasta’s voice rang clearly in the ears of the battalion commanders.

The battalions fighting against the cultist force on the eastern side of the battlefield suddenly began to move backwards, leaving the cultists who had been holding them back swinging at air. Confused, the cultists milled about as some of them pursued the retreating players and the others began to rush to reinforce the cultist army on the western side of the battlefield.

“Re-engage!”

As Hasta’s order came through, the now familiar cry burst from the battalion commander’s lips.

“Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

Like a ton of bricks the sixth through tenth battalions hammered into the disordered cultists, swiftly crushing through them. Toward the back of the battlefield, one of the large Children of the Moon looked at Maugrim.

“You know, I sure am glad we didn’t go with your plan of trying to drive them out of the valley. Immortal is one thing, but they’re organized too. Fighting by their side sure is exciting.”

“That’s why Mother is the master, and I am not.” Unabashed, Maugrim licked his lips with a long tongue. “I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities to fight alongside these Iron Wolves in the future. For now just focus on making sure that none of the cultist scum escape.”

With a howl that was picked up by the other Children of the Moon, the two large wolves began to comb the battlefield, ending the lives of any of the cultists that tried to flee. Within less than forty-five minutes the battle was over, the cultist army completely defeated. From where he stood, Thorn could see a few crowds of red-robed cultists holding defense points in the ruined temple, but the thick throng of cultists who had met them outside the walls had been wiped out.

“Still have about fifteen minutes on the second potion. After that, we have four more hours.” Mina stood next to Thorn, petting Akira who was still in

her battle form.

“So let's try to clear the temple within an hour. Then we’ll take ten minutes to rest up and I’ll release Mayari. Who knows what sort of fight this will be, so we’ll need to keep our guard up. Hasta.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Begin to clear the temple. We need to be done within the hour.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Snapping a salute, Hasta began barking orders, sending squad after squad into the temple to hunt down the remaining cultists. The last thing that Thorn wanted was a group of cultists distracting them as they were trying to fight Mayari. Mina watched Hasta leave, a small frown forming on her face. Noticing her expression, Thorn squatted down next to her.

“What’s up?”

“These guys are...” Mina paused as she searched for the right words. “Different. They’re not like normal players, are they?”

“Hasta and the other soldiers? Haha,” Thorn’s deep chuckle carried through the abandoned temple’s courtyard, earning him some looks. “No, they’re not normal players. They’re soldiers. Real ones.”

“How on earth did you find soldiers?” Mina’s frown deepened even further. “I thought that the world was at peace? When was the last armed conflict? And why do they seem to be so familiar with using cold weapons?”

“Eh, peace is relative. Any time money and power are involved there will be conflict. Atlas did not grow to be the foremost energy company in the world without conflict. Henr...Hasta and his men were responsible for making sure that me and my aunt were, uh, safe. As for their weapon use? Well, guns are not always the best option in close quarters.”

“You mean you had your own army? In the real world?”

“Haha, you know? Sometimes I feel like real life was even stranger than this game. But no, armies are illegal. Private security details? Totally legal. And if you assign bodyguards to every single one of your staff at every single one of your homes, you build up the numbers pretty quick. We were able to pull in nearly a thousand of our own men for this army, which has really accelerated the army’s overall training speed.” Seeing Mina’s mouth hanging open, Thorn could not help but chuckle again. “Look, there are things that come with wealth and influence that are great.

“And there are things that are, frankly, terrible.” Here Thorn’s tone gained a bleak edge, his gaze drifting into the distance as if he was watching a

distant memory. “The world I lived in before Nova Terra was probably not what you imagine. My life, ever since I can remember, was bound in place. My aunt did her best to protect me, but it is sort of hard when your bodyguards are taking bullets aimed at you, simply because some power hungry board member thinks that the most expedient way to climb the hierarchy is if you are not breathing.”

Looking down at his gauntleted hand, Thorn slowly squeezed his fingers together, forming a fist. Feeling a slight weight on his shoulder, the Titan looked up and saw Akira had transformed back into her pet form and jumped up on him.

“Haha, but enough of that. I’m here now, and what matters is not what has happened, but what I do with what is in front of me. Ms. Chen said that.” Thorn let out a big breath as he scratched Akira under the chin lightly. “So let’s end this ancient priestess and protect our valley.”

Staring at Thorn’s back as he walked away, Mina did not know what to say. Sometimes she thought she understood the gentle giant who had blundered around Nova Terra for so long, and then he would reveal a side of himself that took her breath away.

One by one, the cultists fell under the players’ blades until the entire temple had been cleared out, and Thorn found himself standing before the door where he had first met Mayari. Much had changed since that encounter, and this time Thorn had brought an army. Lifting his hand, he was about to place it on the door when his sharp hearing picked up the soft patter of paws behind him.

“Earl Greymane, please hold for a moment.”

Turning around, Thorn looked at Maugrim with surprise. The Children of the Moon had proven themselves powerful allies in the fight against the cultists, even though they had stayed clear of the front lines. If anything, they had shown their intelligence by picking the perfect role for themselves.

“The master has requested that you wait for her before you release the fallen priestess. We, uh, did not anticipate your, uh, efficiency in dealing with the cultists.” The massive black wolf looked almost embarrassed. “I have dispatched my fastest scout to fetch her, and she should be here soon.”

“Oh, sure.” Nodding, Thorn took a couple steps away from the door. “I’d be foolish not to accept such a powerful ally.”

“Thank you.”

Thorn and Maugrim lapsed into silence. Noticing that the giant wolf kept

stealing glances at Akira, Thorn brought his battle pet down from his shoulder and held her in front of his chest, scratching behind her ears. Akira ignored Maugrim completely, but after a few minutes of silence, she batted Thorn's fingers away with her tails and bolted up his body, standing tall on his head as she stared toward the mountains.

Feeling how tense she was, Thorn surreptitiously summoned his tetsubo behind his leg and sent a message to Hasta. Oblivious to Akira and Thorn's reaction, Maugrim wore a pleased look on his face as he kept his gaze on the mountain.

"The master comes."

As the players watched, a huge shining form appeared from the mountains, walking out from behind a hill. Easily twice the size of the hill, the gargantuan silver wolf soon reached the players' lines. Too shocked to make way, the players only recovered when the silver wolf stepped over them and strode to where Thorn, Akira, and Maugrim stood.

[Hello, Lord Greymane, Moon Wolf. I see you have solved your small stone problem.]

[Hello, Lady Mani. Yes, it was the sap of the World Tree that helped.]

[That must have been quite the adventure. I must express my thankfulness that you have made time to deal with this corruption. Had Mayari been allowed to spread her corrupting tendrils any further this whole valley may have been lost.] Pausing, Mani's calm eyes lifted to scan Akira, only to widen in surprise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

[Greetings to you as well, Akira. You have changed much since I last saw you, little one.]

[Hello, Lady Mani.] Akira bowed her head. [I benefited from the sap of the World Tree as well.]

[I can see that.]

The giant silver wolf sat down next to Thorn and opened her mouth in a wide yawn, revealing teeth as big as Mina. Despite how dangerous she looked, Mani gave off a motherly air that made the players nearby feel comfortable. Still, there was not a person present who doubted that she could swallow any of them whole.

[Lady Mani, Maugrim said that you were hoping to be involved in the fight against Mayari?]

[That is correct, Lord Greymane. Mayari is a master of beguilement. As a Foxkin, she excels at twisting people to her service. I will assist you by restricting that aspect of her abilities. While I am keeping her occupied, you will fight against her minions and assist me as I slay her.]

[That sounds like a great plan. We'll leave the main fight to you and will

handle the rest.]

Turning to Hasta, who was standing next to him keeping a wary eye on the massive silver furred wolf, Thorn relayed what Mani had said.

“New plan, instead of a normal tank rotation, Lady Mani is going to tank Mayari. We’ll be responsible for adds and DPS on Mayari. Split the tanks into groups and spread them out so we can react no matter where the adds come from. Let me know when everyone is in position and I’ll get this party started.”

“Yes, my lord.” Hasta snapped a salute and went to reorganize the teams.

Word that the giant silver wolf was going to fight alongside them quickly spread through the Iron Wolves, lifting morale as all the players rushed to their new spots. Once everyone was in place, Thorn told Akira to protect Mina until he came back, and he walked into the tunnel where he had first met Mayari.

The stone hallway had been cleaned up since the last time that Thorn had been here. Fresh torches burned on the walls, lighting up the stone carvings that decorated the walls. Thorn had walked about half way down the hall when the torches flickered and a robed figure appeared at the end of the hall by the door to Mayari’s chamber. A blood red mask glistened sinisterly in the torchlight, the rest of the figure’s body hidden by the black robe that they wore.

“Greetings, Lord Greymane. Lady Mayari waits for you inside. She has been expecting you for some time.”

“Devil’s Blood? I’m surprised you guys have not run away. I thought I made myself clear that you and your minions will not be tolerated in my land.” Thorn spoke sternly, as he continued to walk down the hallway.

“We exist to serve and free our Lord’s allies, we never shirk our duty.”

“Hah, oddly honorable considering that your lord is a devil. I find it surprising that you would be marked by steadfastness.”

By this point, Thorn was within arms reach of the red-masked assassin so he stopped and regarded the assassin’s mask with interest.

“Tell me, what do the different masks mean? I’m guessing the color and marking mean something right? White masks for minions? Red masks for leaders? Gold masks for mages? Are there others that I have not run into? Purple? Blue? Do any of them glow in the dark?”

Pointedly ignoring Thorn’s questions, the robed figure gestured to the door behind him.

“Lord Greymane, Lady Mayari is waiting for you.”

“Mmm. Well, lead the way.”

The door to Mayari’s chamber opened slowly, giving Thorn a glimpse of the room before he entered. Mayari herself had not changed one bit, still sitting in the magic circle. Around the chamber, facing Mayari, stood black-robed figures in red and gold masks. Not seeing any traps, Thorn walked into the room confidently.

“Hello, Lord Greymane.”

Mayari’s voice was just as sickly sweet as it had been the last time, though Thorn found it much easier to identify the coercive effect that it carried. Like a faint pink mist, Mayari's coercion was visible to Thorn’s [Spiritual Sense]. He could feel it swirling around him, attempting to infiltrate his body through his ears. As the mist crept in with her words, Thorn could feel a faint call to his subconscious.

Come closer and free me. Serve me, worship me.

Instantly, Thorn’s [Spiritual Sense] rose in his body, a faint yellow light that swept toward the pink mist and surrounded it, blocking out its call. Like a devouring beast, Thorn’s [Spiritual Sense] eliminated the mist, leaving Thorn completely clear-headed and undistracted by Mayari’s beauty.

“Have you finally come to your decision, my lord? If you free me we will rule the valley together, bringing peace to the Wolfkin.” Even without the influence of the pink mist, Mayari’s words were persuasive, her soft voice awakening Thorn’s protective instincts.

Looking at her beautiful, innocent face, anger began to boil in Thorn’s chest. Though she looked like she could not hurt a fly, Mayari had split the disciples of the Temple of the Moon, nearly killing Elder Havva in the process. Her corruption of the head disciple, Gelish, had created the Bloodkin, a twisted abomination that made a mockery of the Wolfkin. Forcing back his anger, Thorn kept his tone polite.

“I have certainly come to free you from your imprisonment, Lady Mayari.”

“You have? Oh, how wonderful. I just knew that you would make the right choice. Tell me, Lord Greymane, what did that oversized fur ball tell you? Did she say that I was evil and would corrupt the Wolfkin? Did she tell you that I was going to try and seize the valley from you?” Mayari batted her long eyelashes at Thorn, giving him a gentle smile. “But as wise as you are, I’m sure you know what I really want, don’t you? I just want to serve at the

side of a powerful man, doing my duty as the priestess of Hati."

Pausing slightly, Mayari's eyes scanned Thorn's face, registering every reaction. Seeing that he was not saying anything, she smoothly changed tacts, trying a different angle.

"After all, the Wolfkin have been obstructed for too long. It is time that they rose to their rightful place at the forefront of the continent. Their birthright is that of a god and it has been an age since they last claimed it. Together, you and I could forge them into a powerful and fierce fighting force, seizing what is rightfully ours for Hati's honor."

"Hati's honor? Oh? Is that why you have allied yourself with the Devil's Blood? I'm confused as to how cooperating with such an evil organization could be good for the Wolfkin? I mean, I'm pretty sure that even the last owner of this ring thought so," Thorn said, unequipping his gauntlet and holding up his right hand to show off the [Wolf Lord's Ring].

As Mayari's mouth opened, a cold voice came from the side of the room where one of the red-masked figures stood.

"Lady Mayari, why do we bother with this? Wouldn't it be simpler to just kill him and seize the ring?"

"What's the matter, Abatos, jealous?" Another voice sounded from a golden-masked figure on the opposite side of the room. "Don't tell me you still have illusions of making Lady Mayari yours after you failed to find Gelish the Blood Hunter for so long."

"Shut your mouth, hag!" The red-masked figure took an aggressive step forward as two long blades appeared in his hands.

"Or what?" A burst of laughter drifted from the golden-masked figure. "Are you going to shut me up with those tiny knives of yours?"

"Abatos, Genfir, be quiet." A third voice rose from behind Mayari, causing the arguing Devil's Blood officers to fall silent.

Leaning to the side slightly, Thorn saw a figure with a half red, half black mask who had been hidden from sight behind Mayari. Unlike the other figures, this one had an open robe and a large sword on his back.

"Look, I don't even know why we're here." Genfir's nasal voice echoed in the small room. "We are all busy and he is going to do our job for us."

"Threat elimination." This time Thorn did not catch who spoke.

"Threat elimination?" Genfir burst into laughter. "Ahahah, you are crazy. He killed Kenyos in single-hand combat and bested that insane witch, Nellorous Belle. What makes you think that we can fell him?"

“We outnumber him significantly?”

The voice spoke again, though less confidently, allowing Thorn to identify a short red-masked assassin as the speaker.

“Oh? Do we? Have you looked outside recently? Because I’m pretty sure we don’t outnumber anyone. There is an entire army of travelers just waiting outside. Honestly, this is a complete waste of time.”

“I agree.”

Before anyone else could respond, another gold mask wearing figure spoke and then snapped their fingers, vanishing into thin air. After a stunned silence, a smattering of snaps rang out and most of the other masked figures vanished as well, leaving Thorn, Mayari, and three of the Devil Blood officers in the room.

“I guess they all agreed.” Thorn chuckled, letting his gaze sweep across the remaining three assassins. “How about you? Do you want to throw down? I’m happy to entertain you if you do.”

“No, I have no desire to fight.” With a sigh the assassin with the half black, half red mask held up his empty hands. “Genfir is right, we have way too much to do to worry about what you will do with Mayari after you free her. Whether you free her or we do, our objective will be reached.”

“Then what are you still hanging around here for?”

“I just wanted to meet you, and see if I could come to a better understanding of you. After all, if you are setting yourself against us, we will eventually clash.”

“Hm. If we’re going to fight later, why not simply do it now?” Thorn asked, re-equipping his gauntlet and flexing his shining claws. “We could cut to the chase, save time for both of us.”

“No thanks.” With a click of his fingers, the man in the half black, half red mask vanished like those before him.

“How about you two?” Thorn looked at the two remaining red-masked assassins.

Making a spitting sound, Abatos snapped his fingers and vanished without replying, but the other masked figure did not move.

“I remain to witness whether you actually free Mayari. As soon as the seal is broken, I will be on my way, just like my sisters and brothers.”

Throughout the bizarre conversation between Thorn and the members of the Devil Blood organization, Mayari’s already pale face had been growing paler. It was obvious that the Devil Blood officers had no regard for her since

her army of cultists had been defeated. Choosing to focus their attention elsewhere, they simply left Mayari to her own devices, though in doing so they had revealed much to Thorn.

“I guess you are not as close to them as I thought,” Thorn said, taking a step toward the sealing circle. “Time to get you out of there, how do we do this?”

“All you have to do is break the circle while wearing the ring. As long as the ring enters the sealed area, the seal will be nullified,” Mayari said, her shoulders slumped like she had given up.

Watching her carefully as he got closer to the magical seal, Thorn did not let his guard down. If the quest description was anything to go by, Mayari was exceedingly dangerous, and he did not believe for a second that she had accepted her fate. Taking a deep breath, Thorn did his best to quiet his mind so that he would be ready for anything. Stretching out his hand, Thorn felt a tingle when the ring passed over the arcane circle that surrounded Mayari.

ting

Like the shattering of glass, the air around Mayari trembled as the circle lit up with arcane power. The tremble grew stronger until even Mayari’s figure shook in Thorn’s vision. Blinking, he did his best to keep Mayari in view while taking a few steps back. As Thorn arrived at the door to the room, the red-masked figure bowed and snapped their fingers, vanishing on the spot.

“That seems awfully convenient,” Thorn muttered, trying not to allow himself to be distracted.

“Wow, you really did it! For a moment I honestly thought that you would choose to leave me locked up in here forever!” The sense of defeat was gone from Mayari’s voice, and a gleeful happiness had replaced it. “Tell me, Lord Greymane, what would you like for your reward?”

ding

Quest: An Ancient Priestess - Updated
Led to a ruined temple by a giant wolf, you have discovered a woman in white who claims to be the High Priestess of Hati. She appears to be trapped in a magical prison. Mayari has asked you to free her while Mani, the matron of the Children of the Moon, has asked you to slay Mayari after freeing her. To free Mayari you must unlock the magical circle by entering it with the Ring of the Wolf

Lord.

While you were pondering over the best course to take, Mayari has silently enlisted the support of Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon and a large number of Wolfkin disciples. After growing in secret, the corrupted disciples have finally rebelled, beginning to raid the valley and kill those who do not pledge their loyalty to Mayari.

Every day that Mayari remains alive, and for every player that is killed, the number of corrupted disciples will increase.

You have entered the struggle against the corruption that Mayari brought to Fang Valley. After cleansing the rest of the valley of the taint, you tracked down Gelish the Bloodkin, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, to Greyfield Village and slew him. Before he died he spoke of an even greater threat, which you discovered in the abandoned ruins of the old Temple of the Moon.

After entering the ruins of the temple to release and slay Mayari before she could turn all of the corrupted cultists into Bloodkin, Mayari has made you an offer. If you choose to, you may pledge your allegiance to her, changing the fate of the Wolfkin forever.

Option 1: Stay true to your calling as the Avatar of Hati and slay Mayari, driving out the corruption that has infested Fang Valley once and for all.

Reward: Children of the Moon, High Priestess of Hati, Information about Titans

Option 2: Accept Mayari’s offer and become the ruler of a brand new race, the Bloodkin.

Reward: Bloodkin, Mayari’s favor, Membership in Devil Blood, Unique Class: Fallen Bloodkin Wolf Devil Lord

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As the two different options flashed across Thorn's vision, he felt the world slow down around him, and for the briefest of moments he actually wavered. Even with the incredible advantages he had, the thought of a unique five category class was enticing.

"Join me, and you will become one of a kind. The most powerful man to walk Angoril. You will command a legion of unstoppable warriors, and with me by your side we shall sweep aside all who would challenge your rule, crushing the continent under your heel!"

Despite the fact that everything had slowed down, Mayari's words flowed into Thorn's head as normal, the coercive pink mist coming with them. Still clear-headed despite the enchanting effect Mayari's words held, Thorn saw the corrupted High Priestess getting to her feet. With a slow motion flick of her thin wrists Mayari snapped the thin black chains that had kept her bound. Without their magic they were no stronger than iron and could not stand against her strength.

An insane grin inched its way across her face as the tips of five tails sprang up behind her. More pink mist poured out of her tails, forming a giant

clawed hand that began to drift toward Thorn, sending a chill down his back. Somehow, in his hyper aware state, Thorn knew that the pink claws were actually shooting toward him incredibly quickly, even though they currently appeared to be moving through thick molasses.

Throwing any thought of going along with Mayari out of his head, Thorn drew up his [Spiritual Sense] and expanded it until it filled his entire body. Though it stopped at his skin, it caused his aura to explode wildly, filling the room with a crushing presence and casting everything in a faintly yellow light.

The pink hand that Mayari had conjured was smashed back, deforming back into a thick cloud. Even Mayari herself was knocked backward as the aura coming from Thorn took her by surprise. Without waiting for her to recover, Thorn stomped hard, activating [Predator's Leap] to send himself shooting straight up toward the ceiling of the room. He followed [Predator's Leap] up with [Moon's Reflection] just before his body slammed into the ceiling. As his body turned incorporeal, he rushed through the stone roof into the dirt hill piled on top of it.

Behind him he could hear a roar of rage so powerful that it began to shake apart the hill around him. Just before the two seconds of [Moon's Reflection] ended, Thorn activated it again, continuing to fly upward. His arms broke the surface of the hill, quickly followed by his head and his chest. As his body started to come back into focus with [Moon's Reflection] wearing off, he thrust both palms at the ground, freeing his legs. Pushing off of the shaking earth, Thorn launched himself down the hill in a wild tumble as everything exploded behind him.

BOOOM

The players surrounding the cave quickly took refuge behind their shields, trying to block the flying dirt and stones as the entire top of the hill blasted apart. From the massive hole she had created, Mayari rose into the air, surrounded by five thick arms made of pink mist that extended from her tails. Using the arms like the limbs of an octopus, her body floated in the air. Gone was her docile, innocent air, and in its place was a savagely beautiful bloodthirst that radiated from the fallen High Priestess of Hati, seeking to infect anyone who came in contact with it.

[It is time to end this once and for all, betrayer!]

Mani's voice was no longer confined to Thorn's head as it echoed in the minds of every creature in the valley. The silver furred wolf crouched

slightly, her fur bristling as her eyes locked onto Mayari.

“Ahahah! Is that you, sister? How delightful!” Mayari’s mad laughter echoed through the valley, causing all the surrounding players to wince in pain. “Who could have imagined that you would have lived until now? Are you sure you want to do this? The last time you were barely able to trap me in that wicked seal. Do you really think that you will be able to beat me? You could barely hold me back then and I’ve only gotten stronger!”

[Enough, witch. Come and meet your doom!]

As her words fell, both Mani and Mayari launched themselves at one another, colliding with an earthshaking slam. Ripping and tearing at each other, they crushed the surrounding buildings into dust, forcing the players to flee backward. After half a minute of brutal fighting, Mayari jumped backward, letting out a titter that sent shivers down the players’ spines.

“Ehehe, I see you brought some minions, sister. Is that what you were relying on to win against me? Well, I learned my lesson, you see, and I have not been idle. You may have trapped me, but my minions have been hard at work! Rise, Bloodkin, RISE!”

From deeper under the ruins of the temple a guttural roar rose in response to Mayari’s words, and four gaping holes appeared in the ground. Thick, clawed hands appeared first, followed by slavering maws and bulging muscles as four huge Bloodkin that were nearly twenty feet tall each rose from the pits.

“Hasta, take battalions six through ten and lock down the two Bloodkin on your side. Battalions one through five, you’re with me!” Slightly dusty, but no worse for wear, Thorn began giving commands as soon as the first bloody claws appeared. “I want one hundred ranged DPS from each battalion to focus on Mayari! Battalion one support, keep Mani as healthy as you can! Support from battalions two through five, pick up the slack as we fight the Bloodkin! Iron Wolves!”

“KILL!”

Splitting like well oiled machinery, the Iron Wolf army quickly divided and headed toward their targets. Hasta selected five hundred ranged DPS players from the battalions under his command and sent them to Mina to assist in attacking Mayari. The support team from battalion one set up behind Mani, getting ready to do their best to keep the massive silver wolf alive.

“Battalions two and three, you’re on the Bloodkin on the left. Four and five, you take the Bloodkin on the right. Battalion one, as soon as aggro is

stabilized, hit the Bloodkin on the left as hard as you can!”

The four massive monsters finally pulled themselves out of the pits, roaring up at the sky. As they looked around for targets, they quickly found themselves completely swarmed by players. In the center of the ruined temple Mani and Mayari were locked in a ferocious battle to the death, surrounded by a crowd of players who were either healing Mani or blasting Mayari with deadly ranged attacks. At the edges of the ruins the huge Bloodkin were completely locked down by a constantly rotating set of tanks while the DPS players bombarded them with spells.

Standing back, Thorn watched the field carefully, keeping his eyes open for any changes in the fight. Sure enough, as the first of the Bloodkin sub-bosses fell to 75% of his health, he threw back his head and roared, gaining a temporary invulnerability. Turning to the left, he began to charge toward one of the other Bloodkin, knocking the players who were in the way to the side.

Just before the invulnerable Bloodkin arrived next to the other Bloodkin, the players managed to cut its health down to the 75% mark, causing it to throw back its head just like the first and charge toward the Bloodkin to its left, leaving the first Bloodkin standing where it had just been.

“They’re rotating at 75% health. Try not to let them stack up!” Thorn commanded, quickly scanning the last two Bloodkin who had yet to move. “All DPS, focus on getting the last two down to 75% so we can get them repositioned.”

With all of the DPS shifting their attention, the third and fourth Bloodkin soon repeated the same process as the first two, shifting over one position. This time, knowing what to expect, the players were able to clear a path for them and avoid getting knocked out of the way. Once the Bloodkin were back in their positions, the Iron Wolf players settled back into the rhythm that they had used at first, rotating tanks while the DPS hammered the sub-bosses.

Keeping a careful watch, Thorn tried to help the teams adjust their speed, trying to ensure that each of the Bloodkin was losing health at about the same rate. Just as he suspected, as soon as the sub-bosses hit 50% of their total health they began to react again.

“All tanks and melee, pull back. Hit them with stuns just in case, but stay out of their path.”

Throwing back their heads again, the four Bloodkin roared with rage and then darted to the right, heading back to their original positions. This time, instead of stopping, they continued their charge, rotating an additional spot.

A few players, not expecting them to continue moving, had stepped forward to begin attacking only to get run over by an enraged twenty foot tall Bloodkin. After arriving at their new spots, the Bloodkin stopped and began attacking again as the players flooded toward them.

“Mina, how is it going?” Thorn spared a brief glance at the center of the ruins where even the rocks had been ground down to a fine powder.

“It is a really good thing that Mani is here,” Mina said, pausing to cast another spell. “Our damage can barely get through, and this fox lady is flattening everything she touches. If we were fighting her ourselves we’d all be dead. Seriously, I don’t know where you found the giant wolf, but you should keep her around.”

“Uh, yeah, I think she is keeping us around. Pretty sure they are both world bosses like Courdum.”

“Well, however it is, just be thankful that we have a big bad friend. Otherwise we’d be super dead.”

“Are you helping at all? Should I pull your team to kill the Bloodkin?” Thorn’s brow furrowed as he watched the Bloodkin sub-bosses get closer to 25% of their health.

“No, we’ve almost got her down to 40%. I mean, silver wolf has been doing most of the damage, but our attacks are forcing the fox lady to use her pink aura to block us which keeps her from completely blocking the silver wolf’s attacks.”

“The silver wolf’s name is Lady Mani. We’re about to fall into enraged mode, so I’ll call for you when that happens. We’ll need help burning the Bloodkin down as fast as possible.”

“Got it.”

Closing the call, Thorn watched the Bloodkin carefully, trying to anticipate when they would hit 25% of their health. With Nova Terra’s lack of health bars, it could be hard to accurately judge an enemy’s remaining health. Most support players had a slightly better sense of it to assist them in their healing, but the best way that Thorn had found was to watch their body condition. As the Bloodkin took more damage, the number of wounds that their bodies carried grew more severe and their reaction times began to slow down.

“Keep your eyes peeled, everyone. We’re getting close to 25%.” Thorn’s eyes kept moving between the four sub-bosses as he spoke in the general channel. “We don’t know if they’ll repeat their pattern or do something else

so be ready.”

OWOOOOOOOOO

At almost exactly the same moment the four Bloodkin threw back their heads and let out an earthshaking howl. Waves of sound radiated from them, buffeting the tanks and sending them stumbling backward. Just like before, the Bloodkin followed this up by beginning to move from their positions. This time, instead of charging toward each other, they began to stomp this way and that, moving in an unpredictable manner that forced the tanks to run to catch up.

One of the Bloodkin seemed to spot Thorn who was standing at the edge of ruins and suddenly accelerated, charging toward him. Startled by the abrupt shift, the tanks around the charging Bloodkin were unable to react in time and were quickly left behind. Warned by the players’ shouts, Thorn turned to meet the incoming charge. Bracing himself, he got out his tetsubo and took a deep breath. He was confident in being able to stop the Bloodkin for at least a second, but beyond that he was not so sure.

Slavering jaws and massive, bloody claws filled his vision as the monster neared him, its body shedding large streams of blood as it charged. Closer it came until Thorn could see the details of its rotting teeth in its wide open mouth. Deciding to meet its charge with full force, Thorn was about to activate [Armor of the Earth] and launch an attack of his own when he saw a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye.

“FOR THE STONE KING!”

Six large stone covered Dwarves dashed toward the Bloodkin, huge shields smashing into its legs so hard that it completely flipped over. After their attack, they fell back, joining Drada and Felph who had appeared next to Thorn.

“Never fear, your Majesty, we will protect you from this abomination.” Felph’s voice boomed across the battlefield, amplified by his helmet.

“What are you doing here?” Thorn asked, ignoring the weird looks he was getting from nearby players.

“We have come to fulfill our duty, your Majesty,” Drada said, leveling her staff at the Bloodkin who was struggling to his feet. “[Earth Bind].”

The ground under the Bloodkin’s feet softened as the arcane command flowed from Drada’s lips, causing its feet to sink into the ground. All around it, the earth started to swell, locking onto its body and hardening, trying to keep the struggling monster in place. With a furious roar it broke free of the

stone shackles, lunging away, only to find itself surrounded by a wall of angry players.

“Don’t let it get away again!” shouted the lead tank, casting his taunt.

Swarming around it, the Iron Wolves began to attack with renewed intensity as Thorn moved out of range, closely guarded by the Dwarves of the Stone Legion. Everywhere Thorn went, the massive Dwarves stood around him, giving him six feet of space on either side. Drada and Felph stood at his left and right, keeping themselves behind him at all times, even when he turned.

Slightly annoyed that the Dwarves were staying so close to Thorn, Akira jumped down from Mina’s shoulder and ran over to him, shifting into her combat form as she got nearer. For a moment two of the Dwarves considered trying to stop the little red creature, until she grew to three times their size and flames burst from her three tails. Wisely choosing to step out of the way, they gave her plenty of room as she ran up to Thorn.

[Master, when did you get more pets? I’m still your number one pet, right? Why are they standing so close to you?]

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Glancing at the Dwarves that surrounded him, Thorn nearly burst out laughing. Scratching Akira under her chin, Thorn shook his head.

[They’re not pets, Akira. They’re, um, bodyguards? Subjects?]

[Do they follow you around?]

[Yeah.]

[And they listen to what you say?]

[Yup.]

[Do you feed them?]

[Uh…]

[And give them a place to live? And tell them when they’ve done a good job?]

Thorn just stared at Akira speechlessly as she shifted back to her small form and jumped up on Thorn’s shoulder. Looking quite pleased with her impeccable logic, she patted his head with her small claw.

[They’re pets.]

This time, Thorn failed to hold in his laughter, increasing the number of strange looks he was getting. Turning his attention back to the field, Thorn

saw that the four Bloodkin sub-bosses were nearly unrecognizable from the attacks that pounded into them. They were beginning to slow down even further, so Thorn drew his arbalest and leveled it at the Bloodkin closest to him.

“Mina, follow my target and hit them with everything!”

Mina’s head snapped around at Thorn’s shout, leveling her wand at the Bloodkin who had just taken a massive siege bolt to his shoulder. Following her lead, the rest of the thousand DPS Iron Wolf players changed their target, raining down a veritable storm of attacks on the Bloodkin. Ice, flame, lightning, stone, and all sorts of other arcane elements slammed into the sub-boss, bottoming out its health almost instantly.

With a roar of rage, the Bloodkin lurched and fell to the ground where a second round of attacks made sure it stayed down, never to rise again. Before the echo of its last cry of rage had left the air, the sharp twang of Thorn’s arbalest alerted the players to their new target. Turning as one, the DPS players focused their attention and quickly obliterated the next sub-boss. Normally, when a boss fell to one percent of its health it would enrage, temporarily gaining both strength and speed as it flailed about. Though the Bloodkin did possess an enraged state, the concentrated damage from close to two thousand players was simply too much for them to handle, cutting them down before they could activate their ability.

“Well done! I want all teams rotating to the next target! Let’s end this!”

As each Bloodkin sub-boss fell, the players who had been targeting them quickly shifted their target to the next sub-boss, rapidly increasing the number of attacks hitting them with each successive boss that fell.

After the second sub-boss fell, the third and fourth followed even faster, allowing the Iron Wolves to turn their attention to Mayari who was still struggling with Mani in the center of the ruins. Noticing that her minions had fallen, a dismal look flashed across Mayari’s face and she tried to disengage, only to have three of her tails caught in the giant silver wolf’s mouth.

[Why do you run, witch? Where is that arrogance that you carried before?] Mani’s fury-filled voice rang throughout the valley as she ripped and tugged at the white fur tails between her teeth.

“Let me go!”

With a tremendous tug, Mayari pulled herself free of Mani’s grip, losing large pieces of her three tails in the process. Pink mist began to pour from the ripped stubs of her tails forming a solid wall around her body. Spinning

furiously, she launched herself into the air and tucked her arms and legs tightly against her body, the mist condensing tighter and tighter around her.

“Uh oh, I think she is mad,” Mina said as she took a few steps back.

“Iron Wolves! Pull back!” Thorn’s deep voice echoed across the battlefield, shocking the entire player army into action. “Put up your defenses!”

Furious at the situation, Mayari opened her eyes and glared at the players that surrounded her. The musical lilt that had enchanted listeners earlier was completely gone, replaced with pained screeching and mad laughter.

“You fools think you have won! You have no idea of my strength! Ahaha! No idea of my power! How dare you mar my perfect form! I’ll send you to the abyss for your insolence!”

Mayari’s anguished and hate-filled cries filled the air as she continued to gather and compress the pink mist that flowed from her tails. As Thorn watched he saw that the three damaged tails had begun to unravel, spinning apart and turning into the mist that swirled in tight spirals around the corrupted High Priestess. The mist quickly formed into two tightly rolled ribbons, spiralling around Mayari’s floating body. As one of the ribbons continued its frantic motion around her, the other shot out and slashed at the air in front of Mayari.

Under the player’s astonished gaze, the pink ribbon appeared to cut a hole in the air itself, revealing a pitch black gap from which a creepy air flowed. Like a pot of ink spilled across the table, the space inside of the slash rippled and shimmered like a deep pool of black water. With a shiver, all the players took another step backward. All the players except Thorn. Instead, driven by an overwhelming aggression, Thorn took a step forward.

Along with him, every single one of the Children of the Moon took a step toward the rip in the sky, their teeth bared and their hackles raised. Even Mani took her eyes off of Mayari’s figure to watch the darkness hovering in the air carefully. The rift exuded an air of deep evil, and for a second Thorn’s mind flashed to the deep darkness that he had seen Hati cast himself into only a few days before when he had upgraded his class.

[What have you done, witch?]

“Ahahahaha!” Mayari’s crazed laughter rang out, as her figure unfolded. “This, this is what I have sought all this time. A direct path from the valley to the abyss. Though I sacrificed much of my power to do it, this path shall be the downfall of Angoril! Forever I shall be known as the one who opened the

way!”

“Opened the way for what?” Mina muttered under her breath as she watched the black portal warily.

“Um, probably that. Or lots of things like it?” Thorn’s impossibly sharp hearing picked up Mina’s question, and he lifted his finger to point at the edge of the darkness where a creeping tentacle had appeared, feeling its way around the edge of the rip as if something waited just beyond the darkness.

Thorn was not the only one who saw the tentacle as it began to seep out of the rip in the sky. Mani saw it as well and snarled. The deep, rumbling sound rippled through the air, shredding everything in its path, including the tentacle which pulled back quickly as its tip just evaporated into the air.

[Do you really think you can succeed with us here?] Mani’s voice was scornful, but all she earned was another mad laugh from Mayari.

“Ahahaha! You think you can stop me? The abyss will eat you all up and spit out your bones! AHAHHA! Nothing will survive, nothing! Such is the price for getting in my way!”

[You forget where you are, witch. These are Hati’s lands, and we do not suffer the devils or their spawn in our home!]

As she finished speaking, the massive silver wolf shivered and vanished, appearing behind Mayari and smashing her with a massive paw. The blow, though blocked by the remaining pink ribbon, sent Mayari flying through the air, tumbling straight into the black rip in the sky where her body completely vanished with a terrified scream.

Her body vanishing again, Mani appeared in the air in front of the portal, slamming another paw down on the rip. Looking closely, Thorn could see Mayari struggling to get out of the inky blackness, only to be smashed under by Mani’s heavy paw. With half of her leg submerged, Mani glanced down at her children with a faint tenderness. After a brief look, her eyes turned to Maugrim and Thorn who found themselves standing together.

[Maugrim, my child, lead your brothers and sisters to follow Lord Greymane. Protect this valley for it is of vital importance in what will come. What must come. You are the alpha of the Children of the Moon and you must carry the burden that comes with that. Seek evil in the darkness and destroy it, protecting the light.]

[Mother!]

[There is no time for arguments, my child. This rift must be sealed unless you would see this turned into a second Battlefield of Flame and Shadow.

Angoril cannot bear another scar of that nature. As is the calling of our kind, I will keep this path, letting nothing come forth.] Pausing for a moment more to gaze on her son, Mani's lips drew back slightly in what looked to Thorn like a smile. [Lord Greymane, it is not yet time for the final fight, so I will seal this rift and guard over it until the time of the Great Chase. Treat my children well lest you find yourself my target in those last days. I am sorry that I cannot uphold my end of the bargain and tell you more about your people. All I have time to say is that if you find the home of your race you will discover what you want to know.]

While Mani was speaking, pink tendrils had begun to creep out of the ink once again, seeking to pull against the edges of the rift as Mayari tried to free herself. Having none of it, Mani snapped the flailing tendrils with a swipe of her free paw and dove head first into the inky darkness. As her tail disappeared into the gateway to the abyss, a deep and pain-filled howl rang out.

Each of the Children of the Moon threw their heads up and joined the call, creating a mournful chorus. The call echoed around the valley, filling the hearts of all who heard it with deep sorrow, and soon other animals began to join in. Sitting up on her haunches on Thorn's shoulder, Akira raised her little nose and began to howl along with the Children of the Moon.

Infected by the mood, Thorn took a deep breath and lifted his voice alongside the others, his deep bass adding a thrumming undercurrent to the haunting howl. The sound magnified as even the rocks and hills seemed alive with the chorus. One by one, the Iron Wolf players were swept up in the sound, lifting their voices to pay tribute. As the howl grew, the inky black rip in the sky began to tremble, its sides slowly starting to close until, finally, it sealed completely. Both Mayari and Mani were gone, vanished into the abyss.

The long howl faded into silence, leaving nothing but a choking feeling behind.

ding

Quest: An Ancient Priestess - Completed
Led to a ruined temple by a giant wolf, you have discovered a woman in white who claims to be the High Priestess of Hati. She appears to be trapped in a magical prison.

Mayari has asked you to free her while Mani, the matron of the Children of the Moon, has asked you to slay Mayari after freeing her. To free Mayari you must unlock the magical circle by entering it with the Ring of the Wolf Lord.

While you were pondering over the best course to take, Mayari has silently enlisted the support of Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon and a large number of Wolfkin disciples. After growing in secret, the corrupted disciples have finally rebelled, beginning to raid the valley and kill those who do not pledge their loyalty to Mayari.

Every day that Mayari remains alive, and for every player that is killed, the number of corrupted disciples will increase.

You have entered the struggle against the corruption that Mayari brought to Fang Valley. After cleansing the rest of the valley of the taint, you tracked down Gelish the Bloodkin, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, to Greyfield Village and slew him. Before he died he spoke of an even greater threat, which you discovered in the abandoned ruins of the old Temple of the Moon.

After entering the ruins of the temple to release and slay Mayari before she could turn all of the corrupted cultists into Bloodkin, Mayari has made you an offer. If you choose to, you may pledge your allegiance to her, changing the fate of the Wolfkin forever.

Having rejected Mayari's offer, you and your army have defeated Mayari and her Bloodkin. Though the cost of defeating the fallen High Priestess was high, requiring the sacrifice of the great silver wolf Mani, the Mother of the Children of the Moon, the valley is finally free of the corruption of the greater devil, Karrandras.

Rewards:
Allegiance of the Children of the Moon
Class: High Priestess of Hati

Clicking on the first of the rewards, Thorn took a look at the window that popped up.

Allegiance of the Children of the Moon
The Children of the Moon have been pledged to follow you at the command of their mother, Mani. While in the valley, you may call upon the Children of the Moon to guard you from any threats. They will live in the valley, coexisting with the valley's inhabitants and growing in number. The following new quests are available from any member of the Children of the Moon: Quest: Building the Pack Quest: Packmates Quest: Hunting Partner

Class - [High Priestess of Hati]
As the Greymane, you have done your duty and cast down the fallen High Priestess. It is your right and responsibility to nominate the next High Priestess. High Priestess of Hati is a quad category class that can be granted to anyone with sufficient Destiny Points, or any triple category class holder of the priestess class path. To grant this class to another player, simply announce that you intend to grant it to them.

Thorn had just closed the windows when another notification popped up, making his eyes widen in surprise.

ding

You have destroyed the corruption that had long taken root in Fang Valley. You have gained the favor of Hati.

Wolf Form Unlocked
Though you share many of Hati's features, the greatest power that the Moon Wolf has is found in his true form. Roaming where he wishes without hindrance, hunting and slaying even the most powerful devil's, Hati's unique abilities make him as comfortable in the light as he is in the deepest darkness. You have unlocked the Moon Wolf's likeness and the

benefits of it.

By activating your [Wolf Form] ability, you will take on the shape of a Child of the Moon, one of Hati's descendants. When you shift into your [Wolf Form] all items will be unequipped and stored in your inventory until you cancel the ability. When you cancel [Wolf Form] you will need to reequip all items apart from basic clothing. This ability can be used any number of times.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Ugh, am I glad that is done!” Exhausted, Mina plopped herself down on the ground next to Thorn.

“Did you get a quest completion notification?”

“Yeah, didn’t you?” Staring up at him from where she lay, Mina shared the quest window that she had just completed.

Quest: An Ancient Priestess - Completed
In ancient times the High Priestess of Hati fell to corruption and was trapped in a magical prison. Only the Wolf Lord may unlock the magical circle by entering it with the Ring of the Wolf Lord. Still able to exert her influence, Mayari has silently enlisted the support of Gelish, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon and a large number of Wolfkin disciples. After growing in secret, the corrupted disciples have finally rebelled, beginning to raid the valley and kill those who do not pledge their loyalty to Mayari.

Every day that Mayari remains alive, and for every player that is killed, the number of corrupted disciples will increase.

You have entered the struggle against the corruption that Mayari brought to Fang Valley. After cleansing the rest of the valley of the taint, you tracked down Gelish the Bloodkin, former head disciple of the Temple of the Moon, to Greyfield Village and slew him. Before he died he spoke of an even greater threat, the Bloodkin, which you discovered in the abandoned ruins of the old Temple of the Moon.

After entering the ruins of the temple to release and slay Mayari before she could turn all of the corrupted cultists into Bloodkin, you and your army have defeated Mayari and her Bloodkin. Though the cost of defeating the fallen High Priestess was high, requiring the sacrifice of the great silver wolf Mani, the Mother of the Children of the Moon, the valley is finally free of the corruption of the greater devil, Karrandras.

Rewards:
+Reputation with the Children of the Moon
+Reputation with the Temple of the Moon
+Reputation with Moon Wolf Citadel
+Reputation with Fang Valley citizens
+Reputation with Lord Greymane

"You know, you look even taller from this angle. Seriously, if I didn't know better I would think that your head was touching the sky. You should have called yourself Atlas. Doesn't he hold up the sky or something?"

"Hold on, how come you got five rewards and I only got two? And what the heck is reputation with Lord Greymane? I'm Lord Greymane!"

"Haha, aren't you pleased with how everyone here did during the fight?" Sitting up, Mina brushed some dust from her hat and plopped it back on her head.

"Yeah, sure, but what does that…" Thorn stopped, his eyes going wide. "Oh."

"Exactly. You are much more likely to favor someone wearing the symbol of the Iron Wolves now than you were when the army formed. I've been getting reputation with you as quest rewards pretty regularly. I mean, I don't get a lot of quests, unlike some freaks I know. But the ones I do around you

always seem to have rep tacked on."

"Wait, is this normal? I've never gotten reputation for another player before."

"Sure, but you're the only player with a native office. It makes sense that players would want to grind your rep. I wouldn't worry about it too much. Instead, figure out what to do with all of them before that devolves into chaos."

Looking around, Thorn saw that most of the Iron Wolves were sprawled around on the ground like Mina, recovering their energy. A fair few of the officers had gathered around the spot where Mayari had emerged from the hill, looking down into the hole. At first, Thorn could not tell what Mina was referring to, but then his sharp ears caught the raised voices of the officers. Frowning, he strode over toward the hill, Mina and Hasta trailing behind him.

"What is going on here?"

Like kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar, the players on the hill jerked in surprise, quickly retreating and leaving the captain of the fourth battalion who had been too slow to move by himself. Seeing Thorn's eyes on him, he looked around in panic, only to see everyone else moving even further back.

"Lord Greymane asked you a question, captain," Commander Hasta barked from behind Thorn, fixing a severe glare on the unfortunate captain.

"Um, yes, yes sir. Uh, your majesty, I mean your lordship."

"At ease, captain. Just call me Lord Greymane. Or Thorn."

"Ah, thanks, Tho…" halfway through his reply the poor captain caught Commander Hasta's look and the words died in his throat. "Ehem. Lord Greymane! We found a lot of treasure! We were discussing what to do with it! The second battalion's captain wanted to split it up among the men, but the seventh battalion captain thought that officers should get an extra share!"

Oblivious to the glares from the other two captains that he had implicated, the fourth battalion captain stood as still and straight as he could. Despite his best efforts, he found himself staring at Thorn's stomach and eventually shifted his gaze to the side uncomfortably.

"Treasure, huh? Commander, do we have a process for handling that?"

"Yes, my lord. No looting, ever. Period. Summary dismissal for looting of any kind." Commander Hasta's words caused cold sweat to drip down the heads of the listening captains. "However, those rules were written prior to entering the game and fail to take drops into account."

“Exactly, this is a video game, Thorn.” Mina spoke up, trying to entice Akira off of Thorn’s shoulder with a cookie. “If you kill something, you get to loot it. Those are the rules we and everyone else in the game operate by.”

“Hmm, you’re right. Let's do this...” Tapping his chin, Thorn glanced at the fourth battalion’s captain. “I want everything categorized and transported back to camp. Just like the guild, we’ll set up a points system. Members of the Iron Wolf army will earn points for participation and those points will have an equivalent value in gold and gear. Anything that does not drop from a mob will be subject to this system. Anything that is not dropped goes into the Iron Wolf treasury and can be redeemed through points. Thoughts?”

“That sounds pretty decent.” Mina nodded after thinking about it for a second.

“Excellent plan, my lord.” Commander Hasta agreed.

“Great, I’m sure it actually sucks which is why no one is using this sort of a system, but I’m sure smarter minds can improve it. Hey, that's a great idea.” Snapping his fingers at his brilliant idea, Thorn opened up his messaging system.

“Yes?”

“Hey, Corvo! I’ve got an okay idea for what to do about loot distribution for the army. But then I thought, Corvo is way smarter than I am, why don’t I just ask him? Can you come up with an idea and talk to Hasta about it? Try to have it done before we leave for the duke’s camp in a few days. Thanks!”

Quickly hanging up before Corvo could reply and reject him, Thorn gave Mina and Hasta a thumbs up, scooped up Akira, and ran for the woods, leaving both the players and the Dwarven guards from the Stone Legion staring at his back. Completely ignoring the strange looks he was getting, the Titan was soon hidden by the trees.

Behind him, Hasta looked at Mina who just shrugged and shook her head as she giggled.

In the forest, Thorn was excitedly looking through his status for the newest ability that he had unlocked. With the latest bit of favor that he had earned from Hati he had finally unlocked all of the sub-abilities attached to his [Avatar of the Wolf] ability. Combing through his status, he saw that a few things had changed

Status

Name: [Thorn]	Race:

	[Titan]
Health: [100%]	Mana: [100%]
Titles: [Battle Mad], [Wolfsbane], [Lord Greymane, the Moon Wolf (First Rank)], [Friend of the Earth], [Inheritor], [Commissioned Knight (Order of the Flame)], [Kingbreaker], [Hero], [Gladiator], [The Stone King, Lord of Earth]	Class: [Dawn Walker] Mastery: [Persuasive Aura] Allegiance: [Temple of the Moon]
Abilities: [Wolf Lord's Howl], [Avatar of the Wolf], [Call the Pack], [Blessing of the Moon], [Presence of the Wolf Lord], [Martial Form: Dawn], [Basic Weapons Mastery], [Journeyman Orator], [Improved Rallying Cry], [Improved Pack Travel], [Pack Leader], [Persuasive Aura], [Earth Sense], [The Devil is in the Details], [Shadow Dash], [Language Proficiency: Abyssal], [Intercepting Strike (lvl 1)], [Armor of the Earth], [Heart of the Earth], [Call the Stone Legion], [Spiritual Sense of Earth]	

The most obvious change was Thorn's new title, [The Stone King, Lord of Earth]. Like his [Lord Greymane, the Moon Wolf (First Rank)] title, this title was a combination of his old [Bearer of the Stone Heart] title and the [Stone King] title that he had received from taking in the remnants of the Stone Legion. Noticing that he still had his [Call the Stone Legion] ability, Thorn opened it up to see how it had changed.

Call the Stone Legion
Heir to Courdum, you have taken up the mantle of rulership and have become the new Stone King. While Courdum forged his underground empire with the power of his Stone Legion, he also brought it to ruin, binding it to eternal servitude with his Living Statue curse. Though only a shadow of their former self, what remains of the undying army possesses powerful might.

With your growing control of the Stone Heart you are able to reverse the curse, allowing you to free those who are still locked in their stone forms. As you continue to grow in strength you have the option of increasing the size of the legion, either by granting players the Legionnaire class or by removing the curse from Legionnaires sealed by the Living Statue curse.

Class: [Legionnaire] (Restricted: Dwarf)

To unlock full control of the Stone Legion, you must adapt to the Stone Heart completely.

[Legionnaire] was the second class that Thorn had been granted, not for himself, but to give out. Curious, Thorn opened up the descriptions for [Legionnaire] and [High Priestess of Hati].

Class - [Legionnaire] (Restricted: Dwarf)

Forged in the fires of war, the Legionnaires of the Stone Legion hold fast to their ancient oaths. Bound to guard the Stone King and fight against the corruption of the devils, members of the Legion are known as stalwart defenders and devastating combatants.

Legionnaire Abilities:
[Shield Strike]
[Stone Legion Weapons Mastery]
[Legion Formation Mastery]

Mastery Ability:
[Armor of the Earth (locked)]

Like most single category classes that Thorn had seen, [Legionnaire] came with three abilities and a mastery that would unlock when the class was mastered. [Shield Strike] was the charging stun that Thorn had witnessed the six Legionnaires using on the Bloodkin sub-boss earlier, while [Stone Legion Weapons Mastery] was similar to his [Basic Weapon Mastery]. The Legion focused on shields, axes, spears, and thick machete like swords. [Legion Formation Mastery] was a passive ability that gave the Legionnaires an instinctive understanding of the various formations that the Stone Legion

employed in battle. Like the [Silver Guard] class that Ragnarok's guild leader Sylith could give out, [Legionnaire] was a class designed to be played in teams rather than solo.

Class - [High Priestess of Hati] (Restricted: Female, [Priestess])
Since times untold the High Priestess of Hati has kept the rituals of Hati, ensuring peace and prosperity for the Wolfkin. Working together with the Greymane, the High Priestess provides the balance necessary for the Wolfkin to avoid slipping into the madness of the hunt. High Priestess of Hati Responsibilities: [Ritual of the Dusk] [Ritual of the Moon] [Ritual of the Dawn] [Greater Ritual of the Dusk] [Greater Ritual of the Moon] [Greater Ritual of the Dawn] [Tending of the Pack] [Honoring Hati] [Ritual of Comfort] [Ritual of Humility] [Ritual of Guidance] [Ritual of Peace] High Priestess of Hati Abilities: [Moon Strike] [Moon Shield] [Moon’s Reflection] [Moon Wolf’s Call] [Call the Pack] [Soul-Severing Strike] [Moon Magic Mastery] [Priestess Weapons Mastery] [Moon Ritual Mastery] [Lunar Grace] [Phase Shift] [Moonbeam]

[Vigil]
[Vigilance]
[Lick your Wounds]
[Darkness' Bane]
[Purify]
[Cleanse]

Mastery Abilities:
[Shifting the Moon]
[Aura of Peace]
[Moon-touched Mana]
[Full Moon’s Glory]

Reading over the nearly overwhelming number of abilities and masteries listed in the High Priestess of Hati class description, Thorn’s eyes widened. It would take him hours to go through the class description. Resolutely shutting the window without opening up any of the abilities, the Titan shook his head. No wonder everyone was so desperate to get a quad category class.

Still blinking from the wall of text that had just smacked him in the face, Thorn looked at his newest title and his newest ability.

The Stone King, Lord of Earth
You have somehow ingested the source of the Dwarves’ connection with the earth, the Heart of Stone. The stone heart holds unimaginable power, granting the one who wields it a unique connection to the earth. Though the Heart of Stone was once corrupted by the evil influence of the greater devil, Balashimir, sealing some of its power, it has been cleansed by the power of the World Tree. The sworn protectors of the Stone King have seen the power of the Stone Heart in you and have recognized you as the current Stone King. Only by proving yourself to the Council of Stone will the rest of the Children of the Earth recognize your right to rule. +Strength +Constitution +Endurance

-Dexterity

+Allegiance of the Stone Legion
+Allegiance of the Children of the Earth (Locked)

Abilities:
Earth Sense
Armor of the Earth
Heart of the Earth
Call the Stone Legion

Ability: Avatar of the Wolf

Because you carry the essence of the Moon Wolf, you have gained the form of the wolf. As you grow, you can adopt features of the Moon Wolf Form.

Wolf Claws: You gain the Claws of the Moon Wolf
Wolf Hide: You gain the Armor of the Moon Wolf
Wolf's Rage: You gain the Strength and Speed of the Moon Wolf
Wolf Helm: You gain the Presence of the Moon Wolf
Wolf Form: You gain the Form and Likeness of the Moon Wolf

After reading through all of his notifications, Thorn finally closed them and took a deep breath. He had been anticipating having full access to the [Wolf Form] for a long time. Ever since he had first met Hati, in fact. Stretching his body, he took another deep breath.

[Hey, Akira. Want to see something cool?]

Without waiting for Akira to respond, Thorn let out his breath and activated [Wolf Form]. All around him silver light coalesced, spinning through him as it formed a halo that looked like a full moon over his head. The air around Thorn shivered and the halo around his head began to change rapidly. Flashing through the different phases of the moon, the halo pulsed and Thorn’s body vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The figure of the Titan who had stood between the tall trees a moment earlier was gone, and in its place a wolf rose. Thick black fur that seemed to absorb the light that filtered through the leaves covered Thorn's new form. Without his glittering yellow-gold eyes, he could have easily been mistaken for nothing more than the shadow of a giant wolf. It was a strange feeling to be in a completely different body, almost like he was sitting in the driver's seat of an intricate machine. Every thought, every motion was translated into a complex set of commands that filtered down into the muscles, bones, and sinews of the wolf body.

Standing at a clean ten feet at his shoulder, Thorn's massive body was nearly thirty feet long from the tip of his nose to the point of his tail. Finally looking up from the cookie she had been nibbling on, Akira was completely dumbfounded to see that Thorn had disappeared. Her master was gone, and in his place was a huge wolf, its long red tongue licking around its lips. Akira's mouth fell open, spilling crumbs everywhere.

ding

Before Thorn could check the notification that popped up as his transformation completed, he heard an enraged mental cry and saw Akira abandon her cookie and jump up into the air.

[Master!? Oh no! You got eaten by a giant shadow wolf! I'll rescue you!]

The surrounding temperature abruptly shot up as intense flames erupted around Akira. Going from cute forest animal to raging behemoth in less than half a second, Akira grew until she matched Thorn's size, her flaming tails lifting behind her as she got ready to attack.

[Whoa! Akira, stop! This is me, I'm the wolf! I turned into a wolf!] Thorn shouted with his mind.

Trying to create some distance, he dodged backward, but while the mental command to jump backwards was successfully executed, Thorn was not used to taking up so much space and he felt his butt and hind legs slam into a tree, cracking it in half. Shards of wood stabbed into his haunches, causing him to twitch his body away. Unfortunately, his quick action only made things worse as he moved his back legs and inadvertently smashed into another tree on the other side.

[What?] Confused, Akira looked around for a second, her paw hovering above Thorn's head. [Master? How did you transform into a giant wolf?]

[It is a new ability I unlocked called *Wolf Form*. I think I turned into one of the Children of the Moon.]

[Umm, you smell similar, but different.]

Her animosity forgotten, Akira turned back into her small form and jumped up onto Thorn, running up and down his back as she sniffed. Finally satisfied that he was who he was claiming to be, she settled down between his ears and took out another cookie from her belt pouch.

Bemused, Thorn stepped away from the trees that he had knocked over and sat down gingerly. His health regeneration had kicked in almost immediately, healing up his wounds and forcing the long splinters out, but as he sat down his head went up in the air and crashed into a thick branch that stretched over his head as Akira dived away with a squeak.

Wincing, he flopped down on the ground with an earth shaking sound

[Ugh, this is not nearly as cool as I thought it would be,] Thorn said, giving his rattled head a small shake.

[Um, I think you might be too big for this forest, master. You need a small form like mine.] Akira scampered onto Thorn's huge snout and stood up with

her arms outstretched to show off her fluffy little body. [You should have turned into an Ailuridae, master! Then you would look almost as nice as me. You would smell nicer too. Being big is annoying unless you are trying to crush someone, so I don't know why you bothered getting even bigger than you usually are.]

[I didn't mean to,] Thorn complained, [I thought I would turn into a normal-sized wolf. Not a bus-sized wolf.]

[Oooh, what is a bus, master? Is it scary?]

[Uh. Hmm. Do you know what a car is?]

[A car?!] Akira's eyes lit up and she scooched closer to Thorn's eyes, making him go cross eyed for a second. [No! I've never heard of a car before!]

[Wait, why are you so excited to have never heard of a car before?]

[Because it's probably from your world, master. I've always wondered about the place you come from. I would love to see it! And then I could see cars, and beat up the buses if they attack you!]

Imagining Akira in her battle form smashing any vehicle that came close to her with her tails gave Thorn pause. It would be quite the sight to see. Unsure if it was even possible to bring battle pets into Fantasia, Thorn finally took a look at the notification that had popped up right before Akira attacked him.

Wolf Form
You have been granted the form of Hati, the Moon Wolf. While you are in this form, you may activate any of your abilities but you may not equip any gear. All current gear will be stored upon assuming this form. All gear will remain in your inventory when shifting back to your natural form with the exception of any armor that has been blessed by Hati. +Agility +Agility +Agility +Regeneration Abilities: [Shadow Walk] [Call the Pack]

[Hunter’s Mark]
[Hunter’s Senses]

[Huh, so my agility is supposed to be way up. Why am I not feeling it?] Closing the window, Thorn stood carefully to his feet, making sure to keep his head down. His paws were absolutely huge, and as he focused on them, he found that he could feel the earth clearly beneath his feet.

[Earth Sense]

A subtle tremor spread from his feet, rippling through the ground around him. In his mind, he felt a flat plane appear. Surprisingly, the plane was simultaneously separate from his sight and integrated with it. As the ripple continued to spread across the flat plane, it suddenly began to shoot upward, twisting in thick rods that then split into a variety of smaller rods stabbing into space.

As Thorn took a small step forward the image in his mind refreshed, cross referencing itself with the images his eyes were taking in. Recognizing the tree in front of him, Thorn instinctively knew that there was another tree four feet away from it to the right that had thick branches that spread over his head.

The knowledge both startled and thrilled Thorn as he realized that what had appeared in his head was a three dimensional model of the ground and everything attached to it within ten feet of his huge body. Taking a large step forward, Thorn’s big paw landed silently on the forest floor, another tree coming into view in front of him. Another step took him past it and brought more trees into focus for Thorn. Behind him the trees that left the range of his abilities faded from the model he had in his head.

Continuing to walk through the forest, Thorn slowly got used to both his [Earth Sense] ability and to his monstrous new body. [Earth Sense] had improved slightly since the first time he had used it in the Titan of Life, Zemtal’Feg’s, chambers. The ability’s advancement was tied to how well he had adapted to the Stone Heart, and as he increased his familiarity with it, his ability to sense the world around him would increase as well.

As he padded through the forest toward Moon Wolf Citadel chatting with Akira, Thorn felt something strange beneath his feet. His [Earth Sense] ability seemed to be alerting him that there was something buried there, but it was not very clear what it was. Almost by instinct, Thorn activated his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] to try and connect with the thick earth energy under

his feet when the model in his mind abruptly lit up like a 120 watt bulb.

The small tremors that gave him a jerky picture whenever he moved smoothed out and a continuous picture appeared in his mind. At the same time, the edges of the model began to expand outward, spreading until he could clearly see fifty feet in any direction. Blinking in surprise, Thorn looked down and the earth seemed to peel back, revealing a small silver deposit. As he blinked again, the earth was still there, but he instinctively understood that with a thought he could look past it again.

[Whoa. There is silver here.] Looking around, Thorn could see nothing but trees. [Um, how do we mark this spot so that we can find it again?]

[Master, that is easy, you just need to use scent,] Akira replied from where she sat comfortably between Thorn's ears.

[You mean I need to pee on it?] Thorn was not sure that he cared that much.

[Ew, gross. That is disgusting, master. Use your scent gland.]

[Uh, I don't know if wolves have a scent gland, Akira. I think they just use their urine to mark stuff like dogs.]

[Just another way that Ailuridae are way better and not nearly as gross as wolves, master. You really should have turned into an Ailuridae. I'm sure you would be a very handsome Ailuridae, though not as good looking as me.]

[Would you mind marking this for me?]

[But master, if I do that then it will be mine. Don't you want the silver? How are you supposed to get it if I mark it?]

From the tone of Akira's voice in his head, Thorn could tell that the Royal Ailuridae was genuinely concerned about this issue so he reassured her that it would be okay.

[How about we split it? You mark it, and I'll bring in the crew to get it out. I'll even buy the silver you don't want from you.]

[Ooooh, will you pay in pastries?] Akira asked, clapping her paws together.

[Sure, I can do that.]

[DEAL!] As if she was afraid that Thorn would reconsider, Akira quickly patted Thorn's back.

Jumping down, Akira asked Thorn to turn around, which he did with some difficulty, and then marked the spot where Thorn had sensed the silver vein. Once she was done, they continued toward the citadel, covering ground quickly. As the long road leading up to the citadel's gate came into sight,

Thorn transformed back into his Titan form and finished the journey on two feet instead of four.

Moon Wolf Citadel was bustling, with countless carts going in and out of the gates. Walking past the line of players waiting to get checked by the guards, Thorn saw many members of both Nova Luna and the Night Walker's Association. Nodding to the guards who saluted as soon as they saw him, Thorn headed up to his throne room.

Even before he got to the large double doors of his throne room, he could hear the bellows coming from inside. Picking up a quiet, yet firm voice that he identified as Commander Del'har, Thorn frowned. In front of the door to the throne room stood two of the huge Legionnaires next to Thorn's normal Wolfkin guards. From the way the Wolfkin were standing, Thorn could tell that they were on edge from whatever was going on in the throne room, causing Thorn's frown to deepen.

As the four guards saw him they all rushed to open the door, nearly falling over each other. After exchanging some glares the guards managed to get the door open and Thorn walked in on the tense scene playing itself out in front of the Wolf Lord's Throne.

On one side stood Legion Commander Kavalas, flanked by two sergeants and two Legionnaires of the Stone Legion. The Legion Commander was shouting at Commander Del'har, spittle flying from his mouth as his words echoed around the chamber. Facing the enraged Dwarf, Commander Del'har was icy cold, though no less angry. Though he stood alone his aura was more than a match for the Legion Commander.

"How dare you…" Legion Commander Kavalas' words cut off as he saw Thorn enter the room.

"Welcome back, my lord." Commander Del'har dropped to one knee as he saluted. "Congratulations on your victory against Mayari, my lord. The residents will be relieved to know the cult has been dealt with."

"Thank you, commander."

Walking between the two commanders, Thorn took off his helmet and snapped his fingers, instantly changing into clothing suited to a noble of his stature. Though he had not spent much time in the capital during his last visit, it had still been sufficient to visit a tailor to buy the appropriate clothing. Turning, he ran his eyes over the two different groups and then sat down. Giving Akira a pastry from his inventory, he called to one of the Wolfkin guards at the throne room's entrance.

“Please inform the kitchens that I’d like to host a small banquet tonight to celebrate our victory. We’ll eat at six. You can let them know that I am quite hungry.”

“Yes, my lord!” Saluting, the Wolfkin turned and ran down the steps to let the kitchen staff know Thorn’s request.

As he left, Thorn caught the scornful look on the Legionnaire’s otherwise impassive faces and his eyes narrowed slightly. Tapping the wolf on his arm rest, Thorn held his silence, allowing it to grow in the room until the Legion Commander finally stepped forward and bowed.

“Great Stone King, Lord of Earth, may your glory stand as eternal as the unbreakable rock. I have discovered a grave negligence that must be corrected as quickly as possible!”

Waiting for a moment before responding, Thorn idly scratched Akira who had taken up position on the armrest of his throne.

“A grave negligence, huh? And what might that be?”

“Your Majesty, you are the true ruler of the earth, the incarnate stone. To leave you unguarded is a crime against the very code of earth itself! You yourself have seen how lax these Wolfkin are, how disrespectful. They do not respect you as they ought, even going so far as to leave you alone and unguarded! Your Majesty, this cannot be! I humbly request that you grant your servants of the Stone Legion the position as your private guard. We know the code by heart and abide by its principles unlike these...guards.” Stopping himself just before he said something nasty, Legion Commander Kavalas bowed his head as the four soldiers behind him quickly knelt.

Looking down at the five Dwarves, Thorn’s gaze flickered as his mind spun rapidly. Seeing that Commander Del’har was still standing ram-rod straight across from the golden-armored Dwarf, Thorn’s expression eased.

“Commander Del’har, what are you standing down there for?” As he spoke, Thorn glanced at the position beside his throne that the Wolfkin commander normally occupied.

A flash of joy and relief crossed Commander Del’har’s eyes at Thorn’s words and he quickly walked up and took up his position next to Thorn. Though he kept his face in check, Thorn could sense the pride that was nearly bursting from him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The sun shone into Moon Wolf Citadel's throne room, reflecting off of the polished stone and enveloping Thorn who sat comfortably on his throne, dressed in the latest fashion of Northern Angoril's capital city. As he stroked Akira's fur and looked down at the kneeling Dwarves, he suddenly had an absurd feeling that he was turning into a cheesy movie villain. The similarities were striking. Suppressing his urge to laugh, Thorn watched Legion Commander Kavalas carefully, taking in every detail.

"My guards are perfectly sufficient, Legion Commander. Why would you insist that I replace them?"

"I would never do such a thing, my liege!" Kavalas' face was aghast as he neatly sidestepped the trap in Thorn's words. "My purpose is only to see to your safety. You are the Lord of Earth, you must be granted the honor and veneration that is your due."

"Hm. I find myself with enough honor and veneration, thank you. Instead, why don't you tell me what you are actually useful for?"

“Your Majesty, the Stone Legion’s place is beside you! We exist to serve and protect the Stone King. It is the duty we have gladly carried for thousands of years! We must be by your side.”

There was something about the righteousness in the Legion Commander’s words that rubbed Thorn the wrong way. No matter what he said, the Dwarf always brought it back to this idea of serving and protecting Thorn. Curious at how far he could push, Thorn tapped his armrest and gave the commander a lazy smile.

“But I don’t need guards. Anything that can kill me will be able to eat your whole legion for breakfast.”

“Your Majesty, even if that was the case we would not falter for a moment!” Legion Commander Kavalas slammed his fist into his chest, the sound ringing throughout the room as he continued. “But I think you underestimate us, my liege. We are at our most powerful together. It is when we join forces that the true might of the Stone Legion is made manifest!”

“Oh? So your fight against Commander Del’har was not the extent of your abilities? Hm. I’m curious.”

Standing, Thorn lifted Akira to his shoulder and strode down from the dais, Commander Del’har following him closely. When Thorn walked by the startled Legion Commander, he paused and patted him on the shoulder.

“Come, the rest of your legion should have arrived. Let's go down to the temple practice grounds and see if you are actually able to protect me.”

Without waiting for a response he strode out of the room and down the steps, forcing the Dwarves to scurry after him. By the time they got to the bottom of the staircase, the legionnaires had caught up, and as they walked toward the Temple of the Moon, Thorn acted as a tour guide, pointing out the various parts of Moon Wolf Citadel that they passed by.

“The Citadel is designed for defensive ability, with only one clear path into the valley. Behind us you’ll see that the road passes under the center of the fortress. There are over six gates within the tunnel as well as numerous defensive features designed to prevent an army from being able to get through. As you can see, the majority of the citadel is actually three levels. The lowest level is underground. That is where all the storage is. Goods are lowered and retrieved by crane from that level.

“Above that, we have the majority of the housing and the paths that allow for goods and service personnel to move around the citadel. All business takes place on the upper level. That is where we’ll be heading. When we

moved to the pass from the old Greymane Keep across the valley we thought it would make sense to relocate the Temple of the Moon. After all, we serve Hati, the Moon Wolf. So it made sense that we would dedicate a place to him."

Realizing that Legion Commander Kavalas and the rest of the Dwarves had stopped in their tracks, Thorn turned to look at him.

"Is something the matter, Legion Commander?"

"Your Majesty, it is not my place to correct you, but you are the Stone King. It is blasphemy for you to worship a mere god like Hati."

Kavalas' voice carried clearly through the entrance of the Temple of the Moon, instantly drawing the ire of the disciples within earshot. Undeterred by the ugly looks that he was getting, the Dwarf continued.

"You are the Lord of Earth, your position is above that of a mere wolf of the moon."

"Heh. Better watch what you say, Legion Commander." A smile of genuine humor crossed Thorn's face. "Hati might not take kindly to those sorts of words. Plus, why would I ever put myself on the same level as a god? I don't know what fantasy you are living in, but even Hati's kids could probably swat me to death with a single paw."

"But you slew Courdum, and took the Stone Crown. How can you say that you are inferior?"

"First of all, I didn't kill Courdum. Terminal velocity and a massive rock monster killed Courdum. Eh, I guess my punch helped. But Hati is on a whole different level, believe me." Turning his head, Thorn saw Mina hurrying over with the other eight dwarves. "Looks like the gang's all here, so let's get this show on the road."

After meeting up with Mina and the rest of the Legionnaires, Thorn brought them all to one of the many practice grounds where numerous disciples were practicing their forms. Wielding all sorts of weapons, both players and natives alike were sweating in the sun as they followed their teacher's guidance. Pausing at the edge of the field, Thorn waited for one of the nearby teachers to finish before approaching her.

"My lord!" The teacher brought her fist to her chest in a warrior's salute, trying to drop to one knee, only to have Thorn reach over to keep her up.

"None of that now. Ehem. Hi. I was wondering if you would mind if we borrowed some space for a bit of a demonstration."

"Of course, my lord."

Nodding her head vigorously, the teacher began to shoo her students into a large circle. Seeing what was going on, the other disciples quickly finished their practices and began to crowd around. The training ground quickly became packed with disciples, but eventually the teachers were able to move them back to the edge, leaving the majority of the field open for Thorn and the Stone Legion to use.

“Alright, Legion Commander. I’m excited to see what you can do.” Stepping back, Thorn gestured for the Stone Legion to begin their demonstration.

“Your Majesty, we can only properly showcase our skill with an opponent.” While Kavalas kept his tone even, Thorn could sense the pride leaking from the large Dwarf as he looked with disdain at the surrounding Wolfkin disciples. “Without an opponent, we cannot unleash our true power.”

“Oh? And none of these people here would do?” Thorn said, gesturing to the crowd.

“Haha, you jest, my liege. They would not be enough to pick the food from our teeth!”

“Oh? Then let me help.”

Annoyed by the Dwarf’s smug look, Thorn took a step forward, his armor appearing around his body with a silver glare. With the next step Thorn’s helmet appeared in his hand and he bent his head to slip it on his head. As soon as his helm settled, he looked up, his armor’s red eyes flaring. A third step landed as his hand stretched out, his metal tetsubo appearing in his grasp.

Within three steps he had transformed from a gentleman of the highest noble order into a raging giant with a massive metal club. The sight was so ferocious that even the disciples who were quite familiar with him could not help but take a step back. To their credit, the members of the Stone Legion did not back up, though the legionnaires did draw their shields tighter to their body.

“Your Majesty…”

“Enough. If you wish to prove yourself to me, then ready your formations. I will not keep a bunch of useless mouths around to feed. If you cannot fight, you have no business pledging yourself to me, let alone being my guards.” Thorn took another step forward, his tetsubo whirring through the air as he spun it around his hand. “It is time to, as they say, put up or shut up.”

“As you command.” Without changing his expression, the Legion Commander slammed a fist to his chest in salute and fell back, the Stone

Legion closing in around him.

The Legionnaire's shields rose, edge to edge, forming a thick wall of stone between them and Thorn. For a moment, Thorn felt the urge to command the stone of the shields to fuse together but he resisted the thought. He was genuinely interested in seeing what the Stone Legion could do. Legion Commander Kavalas had already proved himself so it was time to see if the other members of the Legion could do the same.

"Careful," Thorn warned, spinning his tetsubo as his gaze scanned them for weak spots.

The Legionnaires stood close together, carefully covering each other's weaknesses. Their formation reminded Thorn of the historical records of the Roman Legion's turtle formation. Stepping to the side, he was gratified to see them move as a single unit to keep him at their front. As Thorn took another step sideways, the Stone Legion's formation rotated again but this time they also took a step forward, bringing themselves closer to him.

"Interesting! And here I thought you would just defend the whole time."

Excitement rose in Thorn's chest as he saw the tiny bit of aggression from the Dwarves. Thorn's combat style was one of power and ferocity, so the defensive formation that the Dwarves showcased had left a bit of a sour taste in his mouth. Now, seeing them begin to move toward him before he stepped closer woke his curiosity.

"Here I come." Thorn announced, bouncing slightly on his feet.

[Shadow Dash]

As shadows enveloped Thorn's body and he shot forward, the Dwarves reacted exactly as he expected. The center of their formation clumped tightly together and took four quick steps backwards to create as much space as possible while the four Dwarves on the sides of the formation took steps forward, creating a neat little horseshoe trap. Not bothering to try and stop, Thorn arrived in the middle formation, his tetsubo striking out.

[Armor of the Earth]

A yellow glow rose around one of the Dwarves as he linked his shield with the Dwarves next to him. Thorn's weapon slammed into the yellow glow, sending powerful ripples across it. For a second the ripples were so intense that the Stone Legion were not visible through the shaking shield. As the force was dispersed by the spell, the two Dwarves along the side of the formation stepped forward, jabbing with their short spears.

Thorn ignored the attacks completely, letting them skitter off of his armor

as he brought his tetsubo around for a two-handed overhead chop. Looking shaken from the last attack, the Legionnaire who had blocked Thorn's attack with his [Armor of the Earth] ability stumbled to the side, looking much worse for wear. The Stone Legion soldier who stepped into his place wasted no time, activating her copy of [Armor of the Earth] to block the overhead smash.

This time the force of the attack drove the blocking Dwarf to the ground and left her completely stunned. Kicking her out of the way, Thorn used the force of the rebound from the attack to begin his next movement, just like Master Sun had taught him. Slashing sideways, he encountered another yellow shield and his attack bounced off.

Snapping a kick to the side, he prevented the Dwarves from closing the formation and making it tighter. Despite the fact that he could easily escape from the Stone Legion's formation whenever he wanted with either [Predator's Leap] or [Moon's Reflection], Thorn stayed where he was. His goal was to test out the Dwarves' combat ability and running away would not help him.

He was about to attack again when his [Earth Sense] picked up a massive tremor in the ground quickly closing on his position. Without turning his head he was able to identify Felph from the sound of the large Dwarf's two warhammers ringing against each other. The Stone Legion Captain was charging toward Thorn like a small rhinoceros, his weapons swinging. Noticing that Thorn had not turned around, the Dwarf roared out his challenge as he launched himself toward Thorn.

"Watch out, your Majesty, here I come!"

Amused by the way Felph announced his attack, Thorn adjusted his counter attack at the last moment, lifting his arm to block the incoming warhammers rather than using his tetsubo to bat Felph out of the air like a baseball. A sharp stinging rose in Thorn's arm as the warhammers pounded into his arm, but it was Felph and the surrounding Legionnaires who were surprised when Thorn's body simply did not move and the fast moving Dwarven captain bounced off of Thorn's arm.

"Ugh!"

With the air knocked out of him, Felph stumbled backward, gulping in huge mouthfuls of air as he tried to recover. Just as he was about to get his feet under him a giant boot appeared in front of his chest, launching him through the air once again. Nodding in satisfaction as he saw the Dwarf fly,

Thorn was about to turn back to the rest of the Legionnaires when a thick spike of stone stabbed up from the ground toward his stomach, announcing Earth Priestess Drada's entrance into the fight.

Just before the spike shot up, Thorn's [Earth Sense] had alerted him that earth energy was gathering under his feet so he was ready to block the attack with his tetsubo, but as the attack was quickly followed up by another, Thorn had to dodge to the side. As he moved, he scanned the Stone Legionnaires who were forming another formation. This time they had abandoned their spears, shifted their shields to their backs and drawn the large double-headed axes that Thorn had seen the first time he saw them outside his tent.

"For the Legion! For the Stone King!"

Roaring out their battle cry, the Stone Legion charged forward Dressed in thick armor, each one of the Legionnaires was like a small mobile tank, and together they presented an incredibly fearsome force. Seeing them rush toward Thorn, Akira twitched in distress, causing Mina who was holding her to nearly drop her. The Stone Legion neared Thorn, their axes beginning to chop toward him, when suddenly he smiled and dismissed his weapon, disappearing from where he was in a burst of air. Landing next to Mina with a stone shaking crunch, he took off his helmet and nodded toward Legion Commander Kavalas.

"You're not bad. I'll grant you the responsibility of guarding my throne room. As part of the valley defense you will report to Commander Del'har while I am gone." Ignoring the slightly offended look on Earth Priestess Drada's face, Thorn locked eyes with the Legion Commander. "You have professed your allegiance to me, I will give you a chance to prove it. Do not disappoint me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Well, that was scary,” Mina said in a dry voice as she walked next to Thorn toward the back of the citadel where the Iron Wolf army had set up camp.

“Really? I was safe the whole time. I still have almost all of my bubbles.”

“I am not talking about the Dwarves. Hah, they’re not bad for natives, but any half decent player could run circles around them. Way too locked into their formations. No, I’m talking about you.” Mina glanced at Thorn from the corner of her eyes before mimicking his deep voice. “I will give you a chance to prove it. Do not disappoint me.”

“Ah, yeah,” Thorn rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “I think it is my mastery coming through. It seems to add weight to what I say. Makes me more convincing.”

“Hmm. You know, I don’t think that is it.” Mina shook her head, taking a deep breath. “You’ve changed you know. Or maybe you were always like this but we just didn’t see it. Not that I am complaining at all, you know. We’ve all grown and changed since we met. I’ve certainly gotten more mature. And so have you.”

“That’s true,” Thorn said with a sigh, his gaze sweeping the crowds of players and natives at the gate.

“Like I said, it isn’t necessarily a bad thing.” Mina grinned and punched Thorn’s arm lightly. “Everything and every one changes, we just have to make sure we’re not losing sight of what is actually important. That’s the danger you know? I’ve been thinking a lot about our last team and why it fell apart. And I think it is because we lost sight of what actually matters. We got so tied up in gaining every advantage we could by any means we could that we ended up alienating everyone around us.”

“Yeah, well, betraying people for their Destiny Points will do that.”

“I’m not even talking about that. Honestly, that was the nail in the coffin, but we had already built the coffin by making ourselves hated in Ragnarok. The quad category class was our last ditch effort to stay relevant. But what is so stupid is that since we gave up that path and followed you we’ve been getting stronger and stronger. Not just because you are on this bizarre ‘chosen one’ path either. I’ve been focusing on my magic and combat again and have been improving like you would not believe. Jorge is running around like a lunatic with Oberlin, and both of them are almost at their next advance. Velin... well, just wait.”

Stopping at the edge of the Iron Wolf camp, Thorn looked down at Mina. When he first met her she had been quite chatty, but ever since they had reunified, she had been much quieter, focusing all of her attention and effort on doing her job.

“What do you think the secret is? Why is everyone advancing so fast?” Thorn asked.

“We’re playing like this is real.” After speaking, Mina turned back toward the citadel and gestured. “To you this game is real life. And because you take it so seriously, we do too. That is why the natives distrust us players, you know? Because they know travelers are fickle. But you’re treating this whole thing differently. You treat natives like you treat players, and they can tell. I think we’re learning faster because we’ve started to do the same.”

“It sounds like there is something you are not saying.”

“I don’t really have more to say.” Mina looked at Thorn and shook her head. “I just. I dunno. I feel like we’re all getting farther away from each other the more we become part of this world. I mean, Jorge is running around collecting bounties by the stack, Velin is off doing her own thing. You are Earl Greymane, the Moon Wolf, Avatar of Hati, the Stone King, and who

knows what else."

"Lord of the Earth."

"See, that is exactly what I am talking about. Maybe I just feel like I'm being left behind."

In all the time he had known her, Thorn had never heard Mina sound so defeated and it gave him pause. Looking at the camp in front of him, and then down at Mina, he suddenly chuckled. With a wide grin he scooped her up and placed her on his shoulder.

"Whoa, what are you doing?!"

"Hang on."

Turning toward the citadel, Thorn began to walk up the path to the gate. His long strides soon carried him under the citadel's portcullis and across the long stone path that led to the fortress.

"Hold on," Thorn said to Mina, "I want to show you something."

[Predator's Leap]

Rocketing up into the air, Thorn grabbed the fortress wall and began to scramble upward, his incredible reach and tremendous strength allowing him to climb the outside of the fortress like a monkey. The fortress was huge, and as Thorn continued to climb, the landscape opened up under Mina's eyes. Higher and higher they went, until they reached the throne room balcony. Grabbing the edge of the railing, Thorn pulled himself up, Mina clinging to his back.

"We're almost there."

Crouching slightly, Thorn launched himself up again, continuing the journey to the top of the fortress. At the very top of the fortress was a massive wolf's head with an open mouth. A thick stream of water poured down from it, falling unbroken into the citadel below. Putting Mina down, Thorn let her scramble up the last few feet by herself. He paused, giving her the chance to turn around and take in the valley and mountains that stretched before them. Joining her on the top of the wolf's head, Thorn sat down and took a deep breath.

The view was breathtaking in the late afternoon sun. The players and natives in the citadel were tiny dots on the ground below, and in the clear daylight they could see all the way across the valley. The ruins of Greymane Keep were a small grey smudge against the mountains at the other end of the valley, separated from them by a sea of green trees. Scattered across the valley, plumes of smoke rose from the new towns and villages like islands

amidst the leafy waves.

On the roads that cut through the valley's forest Mina could see Wolkin workers and merchants moving goods from place to place. Everywhere she looked there was the green of nature, mixed with the peaceful activity of natives going about their day. It was almost shocking how different the scene was from the blood-filled morning she had experienced fighting Mayari in the ruins of the old Temple of the Moon.

"That's something, isn't it?" A happy smile spread across Thorn's face as he looked down at the valley.

"It is very beautiful," Mina agreed.

"It's partly yours, you know." Thorn gestured to the valley that spread before them. "I might hold the title, but the only way I got to this point was with your help. And Velin's, and Corvo's, and Jorge's. It has been a team effort through and through, Mina. This is something that we built together, something we protect together."

A few minutes passed as Thorn and Mina sat silently together, appreciating the beauty of Fang Valley spread out under them. Up in the sky they could see hawks and eagles flying over the valley and even higher up the large figure of Roko, Peregrine's Imperial Roc partner, turning lazy circles as Peregrine patrolled the mountains that surrounded the valley.

"Ours, huh?" Mina sighed. "The whole time I worked for Ragnarok, everything we did was the guild's. Or for Ouroboros."

"But this isn't Ragnarok and I'm not Ouroboros." Leaning back on his hands, Thorn looked up at the mountains in the distance. "I can understand if you worry that I am becoming like him, though. Like you said, we all change. And I've certainly been changing. I hope I'm changing for the better, but to a certain extent, I rely on the people around me to help me know if I'm on the right path. That includes you, Mina. If you see me becoming like Ouroboros did, I'm counting on you to let me know, alright?"

After a moment of silence, Thorn looked at Mina and smiled. His eyes held a clear, sincere look, unclouded by any worries.

"Everything changes, Mina, and we're going to change along with it. I'm happy that our relationship has been able to change and grow, and I have no doubt that it will continue to change and grow the longer we know each other."

"So you're not mad at us anymore?" Mina had trouble meeting Thorn's gaze, but finally she mustered up the courage to lift her head.

“I have not been mad at you for a really long time. You have more than shown through your actions that you really do value our friendship, so why would I allow our relationship to be defined by a single action? We define our relationship every time we interact, Mina, and from what I see, we’re on a great trajectory.”

As Thorn’s words were carried off by the breeze, Mina released a long breath, as if she was breathing out the weight, burdens, and worries that had weighed her down ever since she had walked away from Thorn’s body in Hati's Ascent. Lifting her gaze up to the blue sky, a genuinely happy smile spread across her face.

“Oh man, you have no idea how glad I am to hear that.” Bouncing to her feet, she spread her arms wide and whirled around. “Whew. Like, no joke, I’ve been worried this whole time that you were still holding it against us, and that is why you have been getting more and more distant. Velin told me that it was only because you were busy and you were taking the game seriously, but I thought it might be because we had ruined any chance of really being friends.”

“At first I think I was still pretty wary.”

“That makes sense, you know,” Mina nodded sagely. “I mean, we really screwed you over. And we did it by choice. I could probably blame Ouroboros, but at the end of the day I still made the decision to try and freeze your head off. I can’t tell you how freeing it is to find out that you really have completely forgiven me. Forgiven us.”

“Just don’t do it again,” Thorn chuckled.

“Haha, you got it boss. I know you have a ton to do before we leave for the military camp, so we should get going. Thanks for showing me your special spot, Thorn.” The wide smile returned to Mina’s face. “Velin’s going to be jealous when I tell her.”

Standing, Thorn stretched his body and walked to the edge to look down at the Citadel spread beneath their feet.

“You sure you don’t want to tell me what is going on with Velin?”

“Nah, she’d be really mad. It’ll be a great surprise.” Joining Thorn at the edge of the wolf’s head, Mina glanced at him slyly. “Race you down?”

Without waiting for the Titan to answer, Mina jumped forward, summoning a small plate of ice in the air where her foot was about to land. Stepping off of the plate of ice, she began to fall down toward the side of the fortress. Another wave of her wand created a path of ice that stretched down

the side of the fortress wall, ending in a little ramp. Mina's feet touched down neatly on the icy path and she slid down and forward, gaining speed as she went. Launching herself off of the end of the ice path, she turned a neat flip in the air as she cleared the side of the fortress and began to plunge down toward the ground.

"Come on, slowpoke!"

Mina's voice drifted up to Thorn, who just grinned and began to climb down the side of the fortress. It took him much longer to climb down since he did not want to damage the outside of the building. While he probably could have slid down the side of the wall, he was concerned that his claws would leave large gouges in the stone, so he took his time. Mina was waiting for him at the bottom of the wall, tapping her foot and pretending to look at her wrist, as if she was checking her watch.

"Hey, that was cheating!" Thorn protested lightly as he walked by.

"Gotta take any advantage I can against you," Mina said with a wink, falling into step with him.

Traveling back to the Iron Wolf camp that they had originally been headed to, Thorn sent out a message, asking all of the officers to gather. Soon his tent was full of players and natives. Commander Del'har had fobbed off the Dwarves of the Stone Legion and arrived to stand next to Thorn's chair. Commander Hasta had arrived as well, bringing all ten of the Iron Wolf battalion captains with him. One side of the tent had been rolled up and Maugrim lay along the opening, blocking it completely.

Ten of the top administrators from Nova Luna and the Night Walker's Association had arrived with Jora Silverhand, the Dwarf Merchant who was running Silver Moon, the merchant wing of Nova Luna; Corvo, who was handling the valley's overall administration; and Jorge, who was in charge of the valley's intelligence wing while Oberlin was gone. Elder Havva had arrived as well, along with the new head disciple of the Temple of the Moon. Next to him, Peregrine, Mina, Baxby, and Seven Twisted Leaves were muttering about something. Thorn kept catching them looking at him and laughing, but they were talking too quietly for even his superior hearing to pick up their words.

"Alright, let's bring this meeting to order." Thorn's deep voice quieted the tent.

Before he could continue, Commander Del'har stepped forward and saluted with a closed fist across his chest. Everyone in the tent apart from

Thorn copied the gesture, saluting Thorn with a loud thump. Ignoring Thorn's bemused expression, the Wolfkin commander stepped back and resumed his guard.

"Okay, okay. Thanks." Quickly getting back on track, Thorn scanned the tent.

Though there were some people missing, most of the players and natives who had helped him build up the valley were all gathered here. Seeing them all look at him was equally gratifying and terrifying for Thorn. They had placed their hopes for the future in his hands and he was honored by that trust. Making a silent vow to never disappoint them, Thorn continued to speak.

"Due to the monumental efforts of the Iron Wolf battalions, the Dawn Guardians, and the Children of the Moon, the threat of the corruption spread by Mayari has been extinguished. We must be sure to offer a special thanks for Mani, the mother of the Children of the Moon, who has continued to suppress Mayari. It is only through her generous sacrifice that we were able to defeat Mayari." Pausing, Thorn gave a small bow toward Maugrim.

"Thank you, Lord Greymane." Maugrim's gruff voice held the smallest tinge of sadness. "The Children of the Moon know their duty."

"This brings us to the present. In a few short days the Iron Wolf battalions will march for war. We will march under the banner of the Ironhold Duke, Lord Carlton, to Rasyn, where we will liberate the island from the Orc army that seeks to control it. In the process we will rescue and free the Elves and drive the Orcs back to their desert homeland. But before all of that, we will make arrangements for the valley. Corvo, do you have the report ready?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Stepping forward, Corvo saluted Thorn again and then turned to the rest of the people crowded in the tent.

“Thanks. At our fearless leader’s request I have compiled a full report on the valley and the various organizations that make up our small kingdom. Incidentally, the valley has gotten much bigger than it was when we started this whole thing. I’ve sent the full report for you to read, but as it is nearly two hundred pages long I’ll just summarize for you. I’ll be calling on the heads of each department to give a short update just in case I miss anything. Before I report I want to say thanks to Tara and MightyPen who helped me put it together.

“First, with the growth of the valley and Earl Greymane’s holding, the number of people who have become permanent residents of the hold is still growing. We’ve leveled off from the explosive growth of the first half a year, but we are still adding people regularly. On that note, membership in the Night Walker Association continues to grow. The tie-ins we’ve developed between the association and Silver Moon have made it very attractive for new players. Jora, do you mind filling us in on what’s happening with the

markets?”

“Of course.” Jora took a small step forward and saluted Thorn, just like Corvo had done. “Silver Moon has completely dominated the trade in the valley due to a variety of factors detailed in the report. A number of mines have been found in the mountains around the valley which we have been able to exploit. Our current plans for expansion include setting up more trade in the Ironhold Duchy, and establishing a port along the northern coast. With the increase in the Earl’s holdings we’ve gained access to a few villages there, and we are in the process of determining which is the best for building a trading port.”

“Thank you, Jora. What Ms. Silverhand has not mentioned is that Silver Moon has a fantastic relationship and reputation with the members of the Night Walker Association, which has resulted in a powerful symbiosis. Silver Moon has been providing both repairs, goods, and missions for the Night Walker Association members, who in turn have been going out of their way to guard and patronize the Silver Moon shops. We’ve created a nice little ecosystem that will only continue to grow.”

Pausing, Corvo looked at Thorn to see if he had any questions. When Thorn shook his head, the Elf continued.

“Next up is the guild, Nova Luna. Thanks to our administrators we have been running smoothly. We are continuing to dive dungeons and recruit crafters and production class players. Moon Wolf Citadel is also running well, thanks in large part to the disciples of the Temple of the Moon who have been helping keep the peace. The guild has been continuing to dive dungeons and crusades as normal, and the latest major development is the establishment of the Iron Wolf battalions. Commander Del’har, can you give us an update on the valley’s defenses? And then, after that we’ll turn it over to Commander Hasta for an update on how the Iron Wolf army is coming.”

“Thank you, Sir Corvo.” Commander Del’har nodded to Corvo and saluted Thorn before beginning to speak to the crowd. “The valley is currently secure, thanks to the efforts of the Iron Wolf army and the Children of the Moon. The valley’s official defense force, the Dawn Guardian army is around fifteen thousand members strong, though if we are attacked we estimate that we could levy an additional fifty thousand soldiers. This does not include the disciples of the Temple of the Moon, travelers who live and operate in the valley, or the Night Walker Association.”

Stepping back to his position behind Thorn’s seat, Commander Del’har

nodded to Hasta who stepped forward and saluted. Commander Hasta kept his back straight, standing at attention as he faced Thorn and spoke briskly, his tone short and clipped.

“My lord, the Iron Wolf army has been organized, and preliminary training is in progress. Since we were able to clear up Mayari earlier than anticipated, I’ve taken the liberty of deploying the battalions to train in the Battlefield of Flame and Shadow. We have about two days before we leave for the duke’s camp, so if you would like to join the training I think it would be appropriate. Additionally, you will need to decide if you will be operating as primary commander for the upcoming deployment.”

“Hm. What do you recommend?” Frowning, Thorn rubbed his temple. As much as he wanted to command the Iron Wolf army, being on the front lines sounded more fun, and Thorn was afraid that he would be stuck on the back lines if he took command.

“You should take the position of primary commander, my lord.” Commander Hasta’s tone was firm. “The commander of an army is responsible for morale as well as execution of strategy and tactics, and we have no figure better for morale than you.”

“Fair enough. I’ll take command. Anything else to report?”

“Yes, my lord.” Commander Hasta nodded and glanced at Maugrim. “A large number of the Iron Wolf players have begun familiarizing themselves with the Children of the Moon. There seem to be a series of quests that have the potential to create significant bonds between a player and a Child of the Moon. We are currently exploring our options there.”

“Oh, that’s right. Hold on.” Opening his interface, Thorn shared the three quests for gaining reputation with the Children of the Moon that he had been alerted about with Hasta. “Are these the quests?”

“Yes! With these we should be able to speed up the process, my lord. With your permission, I’ll call the battalions back from the Battlefield of Flame and Shadow to assist with completing these quests.”

“Maugrim, do you have any issues with that?” Thorn looked at the giant wolf lying outside the tent.

“No, we are always interested in strong allies,” Maugrim replied in a calm voice, his rapidly wagging tail betraying his hidden excitement.

“You have my permission. Let me know if you need any help.” Suppressing his smile, Thorn nodded toward Hasta.

“Thank you, my lord.” Saluting again, Hasta stepped back into the crowd.

“That about sums up my report.” Corvo checked over his notes again. “Which just leaves the arrangements for the valley while we go to Rasyn. The short version is that everyone will continue to be responsible for what they are responsible for now. The valley’s council will continue to oversee the valley, the admin team from Nova Luna will keep doing what they do. Jora will keep running Silver Moon, Commander Del’har and Elder Havva will be responsible for the defense of Moon Wolf Citadel and the valley. The only real question is what do you want to do with the Stone Legion?”

Rubbing his temples, Thorn sighed. Most of the people in the tent had no idea what Corvo was talking about so Thorn gave a brief explanation.

“The remnants of Courdum, the Stone King’s army, the Stone Legion, have arrived and declared me the new Stone King. It is a long story, so don’t ask. They’re pretty strong, but I’m not sure about them. Something in my gut is telling me that they are not being entirely honest with me. Either they are seeking refuge with us to protect them from someone or something, or they have an agenda in coming to the valley to pledge their undying loyalty.

“I’ve noticed at least two attempts by the Legion Commander of the Stone Legion to begin isolating me from my subjects and retainers which is strange. In light of that I have assigned them the job of protecting the throne room. While I am gone they are to be treated as my guards, but I don’t want anyone getting too involved with them. At least until I know what they are actually after. Corvo, did you get the office cleared out?”

“Yup, I’ve moved everything of importance to the other offices, or into my inventory. From now on our intelligence network will operate remotely.”

“Good.” Thorn’s gaze swept over everyone in the tent. “I’ve asked Corvo to empty the offices behind the throne room. From now on, all administration will take place in Nova Luna’s admin offices. If you have questions or documents to pass, use the system or someone with access to it. All non-travelers should connect with their nearest administrative traveler to make things easier. Until we figure out what is going on with the Stone Legion I don’t want anyone talking about business around them.”

“Why are we bothering?” Mina’s voice drifted out of the crowd as she pushed her way to the front. Seeing the withering stares being sent her way, she quickly added, “uh, my lord.”

“You mean with the Stone Legion?”

“Yeah. If they are so much trouble, wouldn’t it be better to just kick them out of the valley?”

“Sure, that could be easy, but they bring too many advantages. They grant us access to a special class that will be helpful in expanding our army in the future. They also are the key to what might be a world quest.”

Hearing the gasp from the rest of the tent, Mina just rolled her eyes.

“Of course they are. Alright. Just let me know if you want them taken down. Always happy to prove my supremacy in my height bracket.”

“Thank you, Mina. Thank you, everyone. Without your hard work, dedication, and sacrifice, there is no way we would ever have made it to this point. I’ve requested for a feast to be prepared at the fortress to celebrate our victory over Mayari and her cult. We’ll be eating at six.”

After dismissing the meeting, Thorn returned to the fortress to rest until the banquet. He had been going nearly non-stop for the last week and, despite his near unlimited endurance, was mentally exhausted. After a few hours of sleep, he woke and dressed for the banquet, joining the rest of the guild officers and valley administrators in one of the fortress’ large dining rooms.

“Hey, boss! Or should I call you Earl Greymane?” Jorge sidled up next to Thorn with a wide grin on his face and a drink in his hand.

“Boss is fine.” Thorn patted Jorge on the shoulder happily, causing the Shadow Assassin to nearly spill his drink.

“Whoa there, big guy. Don’t waste the wine.”

“I heard you have been going to town on Ragnarok.”

“Hah, you heard right.” Jorge flashed a wicked grin and downed his glass, his eyes drifting toward the large golden-armored Dwarf who was standing near Thorn. “Who’s the fat guy?”

“Oh, let me introduce you. Jorge, meet Legion Commander Kavalas. Kavalas, this is one of our chief intelligence officers, Jorge.”

“You are his majesty’s shadow?” Kavalas was only a foot or so taller than Jorge, but he still managed to look down his nose at the Shadow Assassin, his dislike thick in his voice.

“Nah, only a piece of it.” Jorge’s eyes narrowed, his grin growing wider. “I dunno if you’ve seen the boss in the sun but it would take five of me to be his shadow. Probably only two of you, though. Haha.”

Without waiting for the Legion Commander to respond, Jorge slapped Thorn on the back and lifted his glass.

“Time for some more wine to wash the vomit out of my mouth.”

Bristling, Kavalas was about to step forward when a quiet cough drifted into his ear, freezing him in place. Without looking at him, Thorn spoke

quietly as they watched Jorge walk away.

“So far, you are not engendering my good feelings, Legion Commander. If you wish to serve, I’ll take you in gladly. If you wish to rule, you will quickly find yourself on the wrong end of a blade. I’m not sure who you believe yourself to be, but as far as I am concerned, the Stone Legion is at the very bottom of the list of my retainers, so if you don’t want to get stomped back down, don’t try and lift yourself above your place.”

Across the room, Mina and Corvo were standing together, when Corvo saw Jorge’s exchange with Kavalas. Chuckling, the Avatar of Huginn took a sip from his wine glass.

“Uh oh, scary Thorn is coming out.”

“What? Where?” Looking around, Mina’s eyes were wide.

“Something wrong?”

“Uh, no, no. I just hate scary Thorn.” Mina shivered slightly.

“Well, as I’ve always said, better a scary Thorn on our side than a scary Thorn on the other side.” Corvo spoke flippantly, selecting an hors d'oeuvre from a passing tray.

“Have you always said that?” Giggling, Mina glanced up at the tall Elf. “How come I have not heard that before?”

“Oh, I only started saying it since he started getting scary. Which, now that I think about it, has been as long as I’ve known him. Have I ever mentioned how we met? He walked into my jail cell, ripped a metal bed right out of a stone wall, and then bent it like a piece of string. Terrifying I tell you, terrifying. Luckily, yours truly is a quick thinker, otherwise I might have followed in that poor bed’s metaphorical footsteps. Let me escort you to your seat and tell you about it.”

Offering his arm to Mina, Corvo escorted her to the table, keeping her giggling the whole way. Across the room, Thorn left Legion Commander Kavalas standing by himself as he made his way to his seat at the head of the massive table. Waving for everyone to find their seats, Thorn smiled and sat down, lifting his cup as everyone found their seats.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Today we celebrate our victory. For generations a curse has held these lands, and the people in them, in its corrupt grasp. That evil was vanquished completely today. Never again shall that curse plague the Wolfkin. Mayari has been cast down, though our victory has not come without cost. For as long as we remember our victory, we will remember our benefactor, Mani. In a few days we will march forth and the world will learn

of our might, but tonight, I lift my glass to salute you. To victory!”

“To victory!”

Draining his glass dry as the shouts and cheers sounded around him, Thorn slammed his cup on the table and pushed back his chair, rising to his feet as the servers brought in tray after tray of food.

“Come, eat, enjoy the feast.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Squinting his eyes against the rays of the sun that was peeking over the horizon, Thorn crouched behind a large copse near Duke Carlton's camp. The duke had gathered his forces at the northwest side of a large lake that lay to the east outside the duke's stronghold, Stormwatch.

Thorn was currently in his [Wolf Form], his midnight black fur making him blend into the dawn shadows. On top of his head, Akira was sprawled out between his ears, still sleeping from the trip. With a thought, he shifted back into his Titan form, catching Akira before she could slip off of his head.

[Hmm? Oh, master, have we arrived?] Blinking her eyes sleepily, Akira looked around. [I thought we were going to a big campsite. Where are all the tents? Are we camping up in the trees?]

[The camp is on the other side of the trees. You can take a look, but don't get caught.]

[Oh, okay!] Perking up, Akira scampered through the underbrush to take a look. After a few seconds, Thorn heard a sound and she reappeared, looking

disdainful. [Master, that camp site is filthy. It looks terrible. Why do we want to go there? Let’s just stay here. Or better yet, let's go back to the valley!]

[We have been summoned by the duke, Akira, so we have to go.]

Standing up, Thorn checked his messages to see how far behind him the Iron Wolf army was and then strode out of the trees and into the open. As Akira had observed, the duke’s camp was a dirty mess. The roads that crossed it had been ground into giant mud pits by the groups of soldiers that bustled this way and that and the tents that were visible looked like they had not been washed in years. Even as he watched, the marching soldiers splattered through the mud, completely covering their uniforms.

A unit patrolling the edge of the camp spotted him and, after shouting back into the camp, hurried over to intercept him. Jogging at first, the closer they got to Thorn the slower they moved until they halted altogether about twenty feet away from him. Clutching their weapons they stared at his massive figure, their expressions showing awe and fear in equal measure.

“H...halt! This is the camp of Duke Tembris Carlton, the Ironhold Duke. The camp and all the land around it are restricted to military personnel. Civilians are not permitted. State your business!”

Smiling down at the nervous officer, Thorn pulled himself up to his full height and snapped a quick salute.

“At ease, Lieutenant. My name is Thorn Greymane, I’m here to report for duty.”

“You are here to enlist?” The lieutenant’s eyes lit up with surprise as he took in Thorn’s gleaming silver armor. “What did you say your name was?”

“Greymane.”

“Oh, are you related to the Earl? I’ve heard he is huge…” Stopping mid sentence, the lieutenant blanched white as realization set in that he was currently talking to the person he had just made a comment about.

Chuckling quietly, Thorn waved his hand to show he did not mind.

“I see my reputation precedes me. My force is on its way and should be arriving shortly. I wonder if you would be so kind as to show me where I’ll be camping.”

“Yes, yes your lordship, uh sir,” the lieutenant stammered out as he saluted.

Turning on his heel, the lieutenant walked Thorn into the camp where he arranged for an adjutant to show Thorn where to go. Giving another salute, the lieutenant assured Thorn that he would keep an eye out for his force

before leading his men to resume his patrol. The adjutant who had been tasked with showing Thorn to his camp led Thorn around to the southern part of the encampment. The further they walked, the muddier the ground became, until the adjutant had to struggle to even walk.

With every step his feet would sink four to five inches into the mud, and his feet and legs were soon completely covered. Grimacing, the adjutant glanced over his shoulder to see how Thorn was doing, only to see that the Titan was walking across the mud as if it was flat stone. Not even a single speck of mud could be seen on Thorn's body, as every time he put his foot down, the mud naturally hardened under his feet.

Thorn looked around with interest as they arrived at the southern side of the camp. The grassland where the camp was located had a slight slope to it, and the southern side was a good bit lower than the northern side, resulting in it being a complete soggy mess. All of the water used in the camp joined the natural runoff, pooling on the southern end of the camp, making it look like a swamp. Seeing that Thorn was examining the area, the adjutant waited nervously by the side.

"Thank you, adjutant...?"

"Hawks, sir. Adjutant Hawks."

"Well, Adjutant Hawks, thank you for showing me to my camp. Would you mind leading me to the duke's tent? I'd like to report before the rest of my men arrive."

Gulping, Adjutant Hawks agreed and brought Thorn back through the camp to the large set of tents at the northern end. Here the ground was much drier and there was significantly less mud. Around the command tent Thorn could see a variety of flags waving in the breeze, signifying the forces of the nobles who had come to support the duke's army. Carefully noting all of the flags, Thorn thanked Adjutant Hawks again and approached the soldiers guarding the entrance to the tent.

"Hold! State your name and your business here," one of the knights said in a loud voice.

"Earl Greymane, reporting to Duke Carlton."

"Please wait, Earl Greymane. I'll report your arrival to the duke." His tone much more respectful, the knight ducked inside the tent, emerging after a minute to invite Thorn inside. "The duke requests that you enter, Earl Greymane."

Ducking to step through the flap, Thorn was pleased to find that the tent

was more than tall enough for him to stand up fully. Scanning the tent as he straightened up, Thorn saw close to twenty people, all staring at him in various degrees of shock. Quite used to the impression he had on people the first time they met him, Thorn took a large step forward and bowed at the waist to an older gentleman with a salt and pepper beard sitting behind a large table.

“Greetings, Duke Carlton. I am Earl Greymane, the Moon Wolf.”

As Thorn paused slightly, a nasal voice sounded from the surrounding crowd.

“Arriving a bit late, don’t you think Earl Greymane?”

Completely ignoring the interruption, Thorn held his bow as he continued to speak to the duke in his slow and steady voice.

“Hero, Kingbreaker, Avatar of Hati, Stone King, Lord of Earth, Inheriting Disciple of the Temple of the Moon, and generally a scourge to my enemies.”

Silence reigned when Thorn finally finished his introduction. Lifting his head, Thorn casually glanced around at the nobles and soldiers who stood on either side of the duke. It was obvious from the map and markers spread out on the table in front of him that the duke had just been conducting a discussion of the strategy that would be used to retake Rasyn from the Orcs. On the duke’s right stood a group of well-armored men and women who were obviously from a military background. On the other side, arrayed in a fanciful rainbow of colors were the nobles who had come to join the duke’s force.

“Welcome, Earl Greymane.” Duke Carlton measured Thorn carefully with his eyes as he greeted him.

Though the duke had helped Thorn before as a favor to Athena and the Society of Roses, he had never actually met the Titan himself. Thorn stood calmly before him, his sheer size easily dominating the room. Apart from his height, Thorn had a natural presence that held up firmly against the pressure that the duke was trying to put him under. Smirking slightly, Duke Carlton gestured to one of the straight-backed military men who stood on his right.

“This is Baron Oleander. He is in charge of logistics and will get you settled. We have just finished discussing the campaign and will resume tomorrow. The baron will get you caught up. Tonight we will have a small dinner to introduce everyone and kick this thing off properly. Are your troops outside the camp?”

“They should be arriving within the next ten minutes, sir.”

“Oh? Well, in that case why not go and inspect them?” Maintaining his

smirk, the duke stood up, his eyes staying fixed on Thorn's face. "You don't mind, right? We are somewhat pressed for time, and rather than have them parade, it would be better to inspect them as they arrive. Don't you think so?"

"As you command, sir." Smiling placidly in return, Thorn stepped to the side and gestured for the duke to lead the way.

The duke walked past Thorn and out of the tent, the various people in uniforms following him closely. As soon as the officers had passed, the nobles who had been standing on the left side of the duke pushed their way forward, leaving the tent with Thorn standing silently in the middle. Dropping his gaze to the ground, Thorn's slight smile grew slightly. Wiping the expression from his face, he exited the tent after everyone else, walking leisurely behind the crowd of officers and nobles.

Adjutant Hawks had been standing at the entrance to the tent, chatting with the guards, when Duke Carlton came out, startling him into a quick salute. One of the officers explained that they were going to inspect the arriving troops, throwing the Adjutant into a panic. The place where Thorn and the Iron Wolf army had been assigned was, without question, the worst in the camp, and Adjutant Hawks was worried that taking the duke there would get him censured.

Noticing his hesitancy, Baron Oleander stepped forward, his captain's epaulets glinting in the sun. Patting the adjutant on the shoulder, Baron Oleander offered to lead the way, an offer that Adjutant Hawks gladly took.

"Sir, you don't mind if I lead the way, right? Based on where the scouts first spotted Earl Greymane, we should be able to intercept this Iron Wolf army at the western end of the camp. The ground there is best for parading, so it will make the inspection much easier."

"Very well, please lead the way." Nodding, Duke Carlton dismissed Adjutant Hawks with a wave.

"Thank you, sir." Baron Oleander glanced at Thorn and spoke loudly enough for his voice to carry over the crowd. "Earl Greymane, we are heading over to the west side of the camp where you entered. The duke will inspect your troops there."

"Mmm." Confirming the baron's words with a grunt, Thorn watched as many of the nobles and officers scattered, spreading in all directions.

Before the group that Baron Oleander was leading had walked more than half a mile, Thorn saw troops of soldiers beginning to gather. Immediately guessing that they were coming to check out the quality of the Iron Wolf

army, Thorn stopped worrying about them. From what he had seen, there was not a single fighter in this entire army apart from the officers that could stand up to even the weakest of the Iron Wolves.

As they walked back through the camp, Thorn's sharp ears picked up countless muffled conversations as the soldiers saw his massive form. Chuckling to himself as he thought about what sort of expressions they would have if they saw him with his [Wolf Form] ability active, Thorn continued to follow the duke and Baron Oleander. It quickly became obvious that the baron was taking the long way around, in order to give the other nobles time to gather their armies and make their way to the western parade ground.

By the time Thorn arrived at the parade ground, the entire area was surrounded by soldiers from the various nobles' forces, all standing at attention behind the noble that they were serving under. The various nobles' flags snapped in the wind as the sun glinted off of the brilliant armor of their soldiers who all stood as straight as pikes, creating an intimidating picture.

"Earl Greymane, I don't see your force? Do you think they might have gotten lost?" Baron Oleander looked around with mock concern.

Ignoring him completely, Thorn pulled a small treat out of his inventory as a red streak zipped across the parade ground and climbed up onto his shoulder. Handing Akira the treat, Thorn gently scratched her stomach with his finger.

"Is that your pet? I never would have pegged you as one to keep a small vanity pet, Earl Greymane." Obviously annoyed by Thorn's disregard, Baron Oleander spoke louder than before, drawing the attention of a number of other nobles.

Leaning back slightly as if he was recoiling from the baron's volume, Thorn kept his mouth shut and got out another treat. Just as the baron was about to boil over, Duke Carlton stepped in, causing Baron Oleander to snap his mouth shut.

"Earl Greymane, as nice as the weather is, we cannot wait all afternoon. There is a banquet tonight and most of the nobles will need as much time as possible to get ready."

"Yes, sir." Snapping a quick salute, Thorn took two steps forward and sent a message to Hasta.

For a brief moment nothing happened, and the various nobles looked at each other. Before anyone could speak up, a small vibration sent the dust on the parade ground dancing. All eyes turned to the northwest as a massive

group of players trickled out from behind the copse where Thorn had hidden earlier in the day.

Dressed in all sorts of fantastical and colorful armor, the players looked nothing like the well-polished soldiers standing in neat rows on either side of the parade ground. As they advanced the players laughed and joked with each other, looking more like a rowdy mob than an army. Hasta and Mina advanced at the front, chatting with Seven Twisted Leaves and Heidi. Above them a crow turned lazy circles in the air.

The closer they got, the more chaotic they seemed, leaving the nobles sneering in disdain. The crow that circled around the front of the army abruptly turned and dived down toward Thorn. Akira, noticing the incoming bird, lifted her tails in excitement, but Thorn murmured something and she lowered her head and continued to nibble on her treat. With a swirl of deep violet feathers, the crow vanished and Corvo dropped to the ground in front of Thorn, smoothly transitioning into a deep bow.

Behind him the rest of the army arrived, standing together in a loose group. Mina, Hasta, Seven Twisted Leaves, and Heidi all stepped forward to stand next to Corvo who was still bent in his bow. Slamming their fists into their chests, the four players bowed to match Corvo as the ten thousand players behind them gave a warrior’s salute.

“The Iron Wolf army reports for duty, my lord.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Iron Wolf army presented quite a sight standing next to the well-ordered troops of the Ironhold nobles, who gave off a more disciplined air. With a wide variety of classes, weapons, and equipment, they looked more like a crowd that had gathered randomly than an army. One of the watching nobles looked over them, the sneer on her face deepening.

“Earl Greymane, what is this? You were supposed to bring an army, not a mob.”

Ignoring the piercing voice, Thorn stood by Duke Carlton who was looking over the Iron Wolves with an experienced eye.

“Thank you, Commander Hasta. This is Duke Carlton, the primary commander for the expedition. He was excited to see our army.”

“Understood, my lord!” Turning smartly on his heel, Hasta faced the milling players.

Without a single word being spoken out loud, the players fell into formation. Already grouped in their battalions, the players were able to get

into position without any chaos. At the front of the ten battalions, Hasta raised his hand, and every single player lifted their hands, placing one on the back of the person in front of them and the other on the shoulder to their right. As Hasta closed his fist a ripple ran through the formations as each soldier adjusted their position to be exactly the same distance apart.

Within a scant few seconds the unruly crowd of milling players was gone, and replacing it was ten thousand soldiers standing at attention in perfect formation. Pin drop silence followed their abrupt action as all of the nobles, officers, and soldiers who were there to observe them gaped in shock. The players gave off an air of quiet menace, as if they were a giant beast about to strike. After making sure everything was perfect, Hasta spun back around to face Thorn and saluted again.

“The troops are ready for your inspection, my lord.”

“Thank you, commander.” Returning Hasta’s salute, Thorn gestured for Duke Carlton to proceed. “Duke, if you would like?”

“Are they all professional soldiers?” Duke Carlton’s eyes were burning with interest as he looked over the Iron Wolf army.

“Yes, sir.”

Duke Carlton had spent his entire life in the military and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only way to get coordination executed that precisely was to train for years. However, from what he knew about Thorn, the Titan had only gained his title a few weeks ago which meant that he must have hired all of these players. The thought that Thorn might have converted part of his guild into a military force never even crossed the duke’s mind as his experience with guilds was that they were only concerned with making a profit, and raising a standing army was entirely outside their normal way of operating.

Looking at the strange army stretched out before him with new eyes, the duke did a quick estimation, his eyes widening in surprise as he realized that Thorn had brought a full ten thousand soldiers. An army of ten thousand was one thing. An army of ten thousand elites was something entirely different. Most nobles never managed to raise a full army as the economic cost was simply too much for them to bear, so he was surprised to see that Earl Greymane had not only brought a full force, but that every one of the earl’s soldiers were professionals.

“Hmm. Well, I hope that they can fight as well as they can stand in lines,” said Duke Carlton, amusement plain in his voice. “I’ll have the baron show

you to your camp. I look forward to speaking to you more tonight."

"Thank you, sir."

Behind Thorn, the Iron Wolf army abruptly saluted the duke, the combined sound of their fists hitting their chests creating a loud crash that startled the whole camp. All ten battalions fell in line one at a time, following Thorn and Baron Oleander as they walked around the edge of the encampment to the southern side. As the Iron Wolf army marched on, more and more soldiers from the other forces gathered at the edge of the camp to watch them walk by.

The southern end of the camp was still the same soggy mess that Thorn had seen earlier, but he was unperturbed. Most of the nobles had left to give themselves enough time to get ready for the banquet that was coming up, but a few had stuck around to see how Thorn would react to the giant mud pit where the Iron Wolves were supposed to encamp.

"Are we supposed to pitch our tents there?" Mina asked Corvo in a low voice when the wet field came into view.

"Probably not. Rather, this is likely some sort of test. Haze the new guy and see how he responds," Corvo replied, his gaze flickering across the small group of nobles standing at the side.

"Baron, I'm not sure this area is going to be big enough for us." Thorn scratched his chin as he spoke to Baron Oleander. "We could expand toward the lake but that would force the patrols to go way out of their way."

"It's no problem, Earl Greymane. We did not anticipate the size of your force, and unfortunately, this is the last remaining spot in the camp."

The baron looked apologetic, but was quite insistent that the Iron Wolves settle down in the muddy field. Chuckling to themselves, the nobles on the side watched Thorn with naked curiosity, wondering how he would handle the slight from a lower ranked noble.

"Very well. Thank you for your assistance."

Giving the baron a small smile that did not quite reach his eyes, Thorn lifted his hand and gestured for Corvo, Mina, and Hasta to approach.

"We are going to be going to a banquet this evening, so get the army settled down. Feel free to expand as far as you want toward the lake, but maintain camp discipline. Apart from the patrolling battalion, everyone else is free to log to Fantasia, but make sure they are ready to muster whenever needed."

"Yes, my lord."

Saluting, Hasta hurried off to give commands, and soon, under the dumbfounded gazes of the watching nobles and soldiers, a massive camp was under construction. The players who were acting as porters took out long, ten-foot tall stakes from their inventory and began driving them into the ground at regular intervals. Thin canvas cloth was strung from stake to stake, creating an instant wall. While it offered little to no protection, the wall effectively separated the Iron Wolf camp from the surroundings. At four hundred foot intervals the players erected twelve foot tall watchtowers to allow them to keep watch against any possible attack.

"Hey, that's a slick idea. Who came up with that?" Thorn was just as impressed as the watching nobles as he looked around.

"Uh, a production player in the R&D department. I think she was named JoyfulFeather or something," said Mina.

"JoyFilledFeather," Corvo corrected. "When we announced that we were converting into a standing army, they started working on ideas for mobile fortifications. This is the safe mode. Then we have versions for various levels of danger that are more secure. They wanted to add a metal mesh to the canvas but there was no time, so for now it is more of a gesture than anything else."

"Still pretty cool." Nodding, Thorn looked at the massive space that had been enclosed by the canvas wall. "Now to do something about this ground. If I'm not up by the time of the banquet come over and nudge me, okay?"

"Nudge you?" Mina watched in confusion as Thorn walked to the center of the enclosed camp. "What is he doing?"

"Great question." Corvo's eyes narrowed as he stared at the Titan. "Guess we'll have to watch and see."

Arriving in the center of the camp, Thorn sat down with a squelch. The deep mud squirted from under him as his tremendous weight settled onto the ground. Taking a deep breath, Thorn crossed his legs and placed his hands palm up on his knees. Straightening his spine, he breathed out through his mouth, allowing his entire body to compact with the exhale. Taking a measured breath in through his nose, he focused on feeling the air filling his lungs as his diaphragm expanded. Holding the air in his lungs for a count of five, he expelled the air slowly over five seconds.

Hold the airless position for seven, breath in for nine. Hold the air for five, breath out over five.

Thorn quickly fell into his breathing rhythm, the countless hours of

practice he had from before Nova Terra allowing him to find the cycle almost instinctively. As the last conscious thoughts about his breath floated out with an exhale, Thorn turned his attention inward.

Inside his body, his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] and the [Earth Sense] ability activated, bringing the ground around him into sharp focus. Wherever his attention passed, the [Spiritual Sense of Earth] passed as well, giving him detailed information about his body and the large field of mud that he sat in. The soil composition, the water content, the location of the water table, even the temperature was laid out before Thorn with his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] activated.

As he breathed in, Thorn tried something new, sending his [Spiritual Sense] shooting down into his lower body, trying to drive it out through his crossed legs and bottom into the ground. Moving down, the energy in his body trembled and bounced back into his stomach. It was as if his skin formed an impenetrable seal that prevented his [Spiritual Sense] from leaving his body. Breathing out, Thorn pushed again, this time using a slow pressure rather than a swift movement like he had a moment ago.

Thorn had discovered that he could control the earth essence that was in close proximity to his body when he had fixed Legion Commander Kavalas' gauntlet, and earlier he had used it to harden the ground under his feet to keep himself clean. This time, Thorn wanted to use his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] to supercharge the ability. He hoped it would allow him to dry out large swaths of ground without having to walk over every inch step by step.

Trying again, Thorn kept a consistent downward pressure with his [Spiritual Sense]. A painful prickling broke out in his legs, like a thousand hair-sized needles were poking his skin from the inside out, but Thorn did not even twitch. Instead, he slowly increased the pressure, bearing with the pain. The stabbing sensation grew stronger and stronger until beads of sweat began to appear on his forehead and lip. Still, Thorn bore the pain with an unchanging expression until it felt as if his legs were being simultaneously boiled in oil and ripped apart by ants.

In for nine, hold for five, out for five, hold for seven.

Detaching himself from his pain, Thorn continued his breathing, all the while maintaining the downward pressure of his[Spiritual Sense]. The minutes ticked by one by one, and the small beads of sweat on Thorn's body began to grow into large drops and eventually rivulets of sweat that ran down his body, soaking his undergarments.

* * *

Outside of Nova Terra, in a large grey building, Julia Lee sat in a conference room, her eyes fixed on the doctor across from her. Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, the doctor glanced up, but the terrifying woman was still staring at him.

“So, uh, as I was, uh, saying, um…”

He looked back down at the paperwork, only to find that he had lost his place. Stuttering, he quickly scanned the page but was unable to pick up his train of thought. Across the table, Julia leaned forward slightly, annoyance evident in her face. Another doctor sitting at the table coughed lightly and interrupted the stammering.

“Ehem. What my colleague was saying was that the nanites have been cultured and are ready for large scale introduction. The select tests we have done have proven to have excellent results, and we feel comfortable that we could move to large scale introduction without any issue.”

“Ah, yes, yes. Thank you.” Regaining his train of thought, the stammering doctor rifled through his papers and pulled one out, handing it to Julia. “As you can see, the tests we have run have had a higher than average success rate. It has been really remarkable, in fact. Nanite bonding is often challenging as it takes a long time for the nanites to become accepted by the patient’s body. Frankly, some people are never able to make the adjustment. It is almost as if their mind cannot accept the connection and they reject the nanites mentally.”

“What do you mean, mentally? Isn’t this going to produce a physical change? Why are you talking about mental rejection?” Julia asked, carefully placing the paper on the table in front of her and fixing her intense stare on the doctor.

“Um, uh, well, the nanites are, uh…”

With a sigh, the other doctor took over the conversation.

“Nanites are effectively small robots, Ms. Lee. You might think of them as the smallest possible autonomous device, and as such they need power and direction. Their power comes from the bio-electric field created by the patient’s body, while their direction comes from a collective AI that is shared between the nanites and is tied into the patient’s mind.”

“And having an AI tied to your mind isn’t dangerous? I was told there was no danger with this procedure.”

Ignoring the growing frown on Julia's face, the stammering doctor jerked to his feet.

"The nanites are perfectly safe!" Realizing that everyone was looking at him after his outburst, he quickly sat back down.

"Explain."

"This is, uh, really no different than the technology that allows you to play Nova Terra. When...when you get in a pod or use a helmet, you are effectively tying an AI to your brain temporarily," the doctor said, straightening the papers in front of him nervously. "In fact, it is through our collaboration with Eve that we have been able to develop the nanites as we have. This AI is not independently intelligent or sapient like Eve is. Instead, it will function the same way the game mechanics work, allowing Xavier to control the nanites via thought, just like he controls his character in the game. While there were some issues initially with individuals rejecting the nanites since they essentially amount to a phantom limb, we have had good success tying the nanites to specific concepts introduced in Nova Terra."

It took Julia a little while to understand what the doctors were getting at, but when she finally understood it, her eyes widened.

"You mean you are going to build him a skill to practice with, so he can control the nanites? Huh, that is pretty smart. I assume that Eve is helping you with this?"

"That is correct. She has assisted us in adding an ability that will slowly unlock over the next two years, so another thirteen years in the patient's perception. This should be enough time for him to experiment and get used to interacting with the nanites. If you give the go ahead, we'll begin the infusion process."

Taking a deep breath, Julia looked down at the paper for a moment before speaking in a firm voice.

"Let's do it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Thank you, Ms. Lee. Your support really does mean the world to our research. Thanks to your support we have made unbelievable breakthroughs. In fact, we have been getting calls from all sorts of different companies asking us about the work we are doing and the products we are making. All of that is only thanks to your generosity.”

As Julia walked out of the facility, the Director of Research walked alongside her, constantly gushing about how much her financial support meant to the organization. Smiling politely, Julia walked as fast as she could but he stuck right with her.

bzzzt

A gentle buzz from her wrist caused Julia to glance down, but in the next moment her face paled as the blood drained from it. About to ask what was wrong, the Director of Research’s voice was drowned out by the wail of a siren. Instantly, his face blanched the same color as Julia’s and without a word he turned and sprinted back into the building and toward the elevator.

Rushing after him, Julia moved surprisingly quickly for someone in heels and a miniskirt, making it to the elevator only a step behind the director. As the elevator dropped below ground, the director pressed the small device located under his ear and spoke rapidly.

Arriving at their floor, the doors to the elevator had hardly opened when Julia slipped out and ran forward, dodging past some hurrying nurses and stopping beside an absolutely massive pod that lay on the floor in the center of a huge room. The focus of the huge room, the pod was easily four times the size of a normal full immersion pod and through the clear glass top Xavier's sleeping face could be seen. Large vats were lined up on the right side of the pod, tubes feeding nutrients and nanites into the pod and filtering waste out.

Looking down through the glass, Julia was almost shocked to see Xavier's face with the grotesquely stretched skin. She was so used to seeing his in-game face that she had almost forgotten what he looked like in the real world. Still, as ugly and giant as he might have been, he was her giant so when she rounded on the nearby nurses they hurriedly backed up.

"What is going on?! What is happening?"

"Ms. Lee, Ms. Lee, please wait. We are still figuring out exactly what is happening."

"Wait?! Are you crazy? I want to know what is wrong right now!" Julia snarled, her beautiful face warped with fury.

***

"Is he okay? Should we do something?" Biting her lip in concern, Mina glanced at Corvo before turning her attention back to Thorn who was still sitting silently in the middle of the muddy field.

The Titan's body had begun shaking, and veins were beginning to pop out in his neck like thick purple worms, making him look completely hideous. His skin had turned completely red and a faint haze of steam was beginning to rise from him, as if his sweat was being evaporated from his clothes. Corvo, who had never taken his eye off Thorn, nodded. Lifting his foot to take a step forward he suddenly froze, a surprised expression crossing his face.

"He's fine," Corvo said in a relieved voice, putting his foot back down on the ground.

"Are you sure?" Mina asked, looking at Corvo again. "That doesn't look fine to me. It looks like he is boiling alive."

“Yeah, he is good.” Corvo smiled with relief. The Avatar of Huginn flicked the top of Mina’s hat, causing it to fall to the side. “I’m All-Seeing, remember?”

Rolling her eyes as she caught her hat, Mina did not completely relax, but she did take her hand off of her wand.

“Should we get someone to heal him?”

“No, let him be. Suffering can be a really good thing in the right circumstances, and this seems like the best kind.”

“If you say so, Mr. All-Knowing. Hey, if you’re really All-Knowing, what am I thinking about right now?”

“As a professional, I pride myself on never prying into my companion’s secrets,” replied Corvo, putting his nose up in the air self-righteously.

“Hah, if you don’t know just say so. I won’t think less of you.”

In the center of the field, Thorn’s massive body had reached the limit of what it could take. No matter how much he suppressed the pain there was an eventual breaking point, even for him. Focusing internally, Thorn could feel the wall that was approaching and reluctantly began to back off the pressure. Right before he could begin his retreat, a blazing thought flashed across his brain bringing with it an overwhelming knowledge. In that instant, Thorn knew that he had to break through the wall. That knowledge blossomed and grew, becoming an overwhelming drive that ignited every fiber of his being into razor sharp focus.

* * *

All around Julia, the nurses, technicians, researchers, and doctors were running back and forth like their feet were on fire, trying to figure out what was going on. Finally, almost as annoyed as Julia, the Director of Research grabbed one of the senior doctors and dragged him to the side. After listening for a moment, he nodded and rushed over to Julia who was absolutely fuming.

“Ms. Lee, Ms. Lee, everything is okay. In fact, everything seems to be going very well.” Panting slightly, the director tried to give Julia a smile, but it withered under the 1000 year ice that was Julia’s stare.

“Does that look like everything is going well?” Julia’s well-manicured finger stabbed at the giant in the full immersion pod. The veins on Xavier’s body had begun to writhe, standing out clearly against his skin. “You’d better

have a really good explanation for this!”

Nodding his head frantically, the director stepped closer to the pod, gesturing for Julia to follow after him as he began to explain.

“For some reason, the patient has begun to forcefully integrate some of the nanites from the newly cultured nanite hive into his body. This was something that we expected to happen over a long period of time, but he seems to have taken to it faster than we anticipated. Additionally, his compatibility rate is growing quickly. All of this is really good news as it means that absorbing and incorporating the cultured nanites will be a quicker process. It is a more forceful method, and I imagine that it is also fairly painful, but if he can get through the initial pain he’ll have a greater degree of compatibility than we have seen in any other patients to date. We have some concerns about the patient’s pain tolerance but Eve is monitoring the patient in the game and will alert us if anything is wrong.”

“Uh, sir, you, uh, you should come and see this.”

Feeling a tug on his white coat, the director looked over in annoyance but the incredulous face on his subordinate made him pause. Together, he and Julia walked over to a large screen that showed Xavier’s body. One of the doctors had zoomed in on a spot on Xavier’s chest where a blue, pulsing light had settled. A faint blue haze covered Thorn’s image, and as she looked closer, Julia realized that they were, in fact, nanites.

“Is that..?” The director asked his assistant in a low voice.

“Is that what?” Julia’s voice entered the mix. “Tell me what is going on with my nephew, or so help me.”

“It’s a nanite colony. It breeds new nanites,” the director’s assistant said, her voice rife with excitement.

“And?”

“And that should not have formed naturally. Normally, at the end of the treatment we have to surgically implant a colony, but Xavier seems to have formed it naturally.” Letting out a sigh, the director’s eyes turned toward the massive pod. “Well, we’ve done what we can. From here on out he’ll have to work through it on his own. We’ll continue to monitor, but there isn’t much we can really help with.”

* * *

CRAAACK

The sound echoed inside of Thorn’s body as he mustered all of his focus to drive his [Spiritual Sense] into the barrier that kept it trapped within his body. With a sharp noise the barrier seemed to crack and buckle. Though it held firm, Thorn could sense a weakness that had not existed before. Honing his focus into a razor sharp spike, he drove it into the crack, causing a spasm of pain to arc across his body. Ignoring it, Thorn pushed with everything he had, as if he was trying to drive his body down into the ground along with his [Spiritual Sense].

BOOOOM

This time the sound was not contained inside Thorn’s body and radiated outward like a muffled thump. The mud surrounding Thorn was sent flying as a torrent of energy rushed out of Thorn in a spreading circle. Like a gushing fountain the energy poured out of Thorn’s legs, sinking into the ground around him.

ding

Spiritual Sense [Earth] - [25%]
You have discovered the spirit that fills all things and learned to control the spirit that fills your body. Those who wield their spirit are masters without parallel, as unshakable as they are unstoppable. As you grow in your control over this spirit you will gain additional benefits and abilities. By controlling this spirit in your own body you can protect yourself from outside influences and negative states of mind. You have unlocked the ability to project your Spiritual Sense outside your body. As your mastery of your Spiritual Sense increases, the distance you can spread your Spiritual Sense will grow. Due to your close connection with the earth your Spiritual Sense has gained an affinity with the earth element, becoming Spiritual Sense of Earth and allowing you to shape and control the earth element in your surroundings.

The energy that exploded from his body abruptly reversed and flooded back into him like a rushing tide. Following the returning energy came a deluge of earth energy from the surrounding ground that gushed up through his crossed legs into his abdomen and then into his chest. With a deep thud

the Stone Heart in his chest began to beat rhythmically. Each pulse drew more earth energy into his body, sucking it into the Stone Heart and hiding it away.

In for nine, hold for five, out for five, hold for seven.

As he continued to breathe, the earth energy in his body grew in density, swirling into his chest where it vanished into his Stone Heart. Though it seemed to disappear, Thorn could sense it inside of him, simply waiting for his command. As his body calmed down from the intense state of tension it had just been in, Thorn began to cast his [Spiritual Sense] out around his body. Where he could sense the earth immediately around his body before, his [Spiritual Sense] could now expand outside of his body to examine all of the earth within a clear one hundred feet.

Stunned by the size of the change, it took him a second to get used to the feeling of being connected to so much space. Taking a deep breath, his mind began to process all of the different pieces of information pouring into it. Roughly fifty feet behind him he could sense two figures standing on the ground facing him, one heavier and the other lighter. As his attention focused on them their figures began to grow clearer though the rest of the ground that Thorn could see faded away.

It took him a moment, but as he concentrated, Mina and Corvo’s figures became more and more distinct in his mind until he could see them clearly. By concentrating on the earth under their feet he was able to focus his awareness around them but at the expense of the rest of the area where his [Spiritual Sense] reached. Letting go of his focused attention, Thorn’s [Spiritual Sense] flowed back out until it once again covered the hundred feet around him.

This time, instead of focusing on anything in particular, Thorn concentrated on hardening the mud, starting with the ground right underneath his body. Retracting his [Spiritual Sense] until it only occupied an area of around five feet from his position, he began to manipulate the earth energy that remained in the mud. A warm feeling in his chest began to heat up his body as the earth energy that had just been stored in the Stone Heart began to flow down, connecting with the energy already in the earth.

As soon as the energy connected, the ground hardened, pushing him up and out of the mud as the ground became firm and smooth. With a thought, the surrounding five feet followed, the mud disappearing, leaving hard earth behind. A wide grin split Thorn’s face as he stood up and dusted his hands

off. Concentrating carefully, Thorn expanded his [Spiritual Sense] to ten feet and tested it again. Just like before, as soon as the earth energy stored in his Stone Heart connected with the earth energy in the ground his [Spiritual Sense] had permeated, he felt the mud disappear.

After careful testing he found that the larger the area of his [Spiritual Sense], the faster it drained the earth energy he had stored up in the Stone Heart. Settling on an area of just about twenty feet, Thorn began walking around the mud filled camp, hardening the ground as he walked. Though he had to rest a few times and meditate to restore the earth energy in his body, he got better and better at manipulating the earth energy in his Stone Heart and after about an hour, the camp had been completely transformed. The extra water that was squeezed out of the earth was channeled into a ditch Thorn created between the Iron Wolf camp and the main camp to keep the camp from flooding again. Running the ditch around the outside of the fabric walls, Thorn directed the water into the lake.

“Wow, that is something else. I’ve never seen a spell like that before, it was more like an aura than a normal spell. When did you pick up earth magic?” Mina asked when Thorn was done.

“Earth magic?”

“It’s not earth magic?” Mina’s eyebrows rose when she heard Thorn’s questioning tone.

“I’m not sure?” Thorn shrugged. “I don’t know how magic works. I don’t think it is magic, but it could be. I’ve got a way to manipulate earth energy, but I can’t really influence anything else.”

“Hm, so that is sorta like magic. I manipulate ice energy for my spells, but I do it through arcane chants or memorized rune paths.”

“Then it does sound like I’m doing magic, but with my, uh, will? It takes me a while though.”

The Iron Wolf army took advantage of the newly hardened ground to begin setting up their camp in earnest, and soon a well-ordered row of tents stretched from the main camp down to the lake. Even with most of the players logging to fantasia to pass the time, they still went through the process of setting up their camp to practice for when they were on Rasyn. While they could log into Fantasia from anywhere in the game, they could not log in or out during combat, so they would spend most of their time on Rasyn logged into the game. Watching the well ordered activity, Thorn could not help but feel gratified. He had initially been worried about how

disciplined the players would be, but their precision and professionalism reminded him how seriously they all took the game.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Icy blue, or black with silver trim?” Mina asked, holding up two different dresses for Corvo and Thorn to see.

“The blue one is a bit more formal, but I think I like black and silver better.”

“Yeah, its style fits better with your personality as well.” Thorn nodded.

“Great!”

Putting both dresses back in her inventory, Mina snapped her fingers, instantly equipping the black and silver dress. Spinning on her heel, she grinned as her dress swirled around her.

“Looking sharp!” Thorn said, giving her a thumbs up.

“Are you going to wear your armor? You are not going to change?”

“Nah, I think I look better like this. Unless you think I should?”

“If you want to make a good impression, I would.” Corvo nodded. “The duke was not wearing armor when he was inspecting the troops earlier, so I doubt that he would change into armor for the banquet. I would recommend something conservative but fashionable.”

“That makes sense. How about this?” Snapping, Thorn equipped one of

the sets of clothes that he had purchased in the capital.

“That looks good. Though you could probably swap out your shoes for boots. Maybe something a bit more, uh, rural? The shoes are probably not suited for the camp.”

“Got it.” With another snap, Thorn swapped his shoes out for some leather riding boots and then glanced at Corvo’s ragged coat. “How about you, Corvo?”

“Even if I changed, I’m keeping my coat on, so I’ll just end up looking like this anyway,” Corvo said with a shrug.

“Alright, let's get going,” Thorn said, looking over the others one last time.

The camp was much quieter than it had been when the Iron Wolves arrived, and as Thorn led Corvo and Mina toward the duke’s tent he could see the soldiers from the various forces settling down for their evening meal. The faint haze of smoke from the cooking fires in each camp drifted, lending a softness to the air. By the time they arrived at the tent where the banquet had been set up the sun had begun to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in blues and pinks.

“Hold.”

The soldiers at the tent’s entrance stopped Thorn’s group from entering. One of the soldiers, a scarred middle-aged man, raked an eye over Thorn’s attire, his face twisting into a subtle sneer.

“There are important events taking place here, you’ll have to come back later.”

Before Mina could react, she saw Thorn’s large hand drop in front of her, as if he knew exactly what her response would be. The Titan’s face remained placid as he looked down at the soldiers.

“That’s okay, we’re here for the party.”

The scarred soldier’s sneer deepened slightly.

“Are you on the list? If you ain’t on the list I’m gonna hafta ask you to leave.”

Hearing his disrespectful words, the other soldier blanched and glanced over at his scarred companion, only to be waved off. Emboldened by Thorn’s lack of response, the scarred soldier took a step forward, his hand resting on the hilt of the sword at his side. Thorn’s only response was an amused smile as he looked over his shoulder at Corvo.

“Is this one of those scenes where someone makes trouble for the new guy, trying to embarrass them?”

“It looks like it.” Corvo nodded seriously, his hand on his chin as he carefully examined the scarred soldier.

“Oooh, and next a group of nobles will arrive and see you being super humiliated!” Mina’s eyes lit up as she looked around.

Sure enough, the next moment a cluster of nobles arrived behind Thorn, Corvo, and Mina, chatting and laughing together. One of the nobles in the front nodded to the scarred soldier who smiled and stepped aside for the group. About to try and push past Thorn’s group, the nobles were stunned to see Thorn step in their way.

“Excuse me.”

“Hold.” Thorn’s deep voice rumbled through the nobles, stopping them in their tracks. “I don’t recognize you. Are you on the list? If you are not on the list then I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

A shocked silence settled over the whole area as the nobles stared at Thorn, mouths agape. Behind him, the scarred soldier frowned and opened his mouth to speak only to find himself completely frozen. Unable to move his head, his eyes dropped to a smiling Ice Witch whose slim hand was lightly touching his arm. Letting the silence grow for another moment, Thorn suddenly laughed loudly, his voice shaking the nobles out of their stupor.

“Haha, just joking, just joking.” Thorn patted the noble in front of him, nearly knocking the poor man down. “Come, the duke is waiting for us.”

Turning, he strode confidently past the scarred soldier whose body was shivering uncontrollably at the side. Mina and Corvo followed confidently behind Thorn while the rest of the nobles filed into the tent after them. Stepping into the tent, Thorn nearly ran into a flustered aide who had been hurrying out of the tent. Realizing that everyone in the tent had probably heard his loud voice, Thorn’s smile widened into a full grin.

“Earl Greymane, I was just wondering where you were.” The duke’s voice came from the opposite side of the tent.

“Please excuse my tardiness, my lord, I was making sure that my soldiers were settled. We ended up needing a slightly larger space than was allotted.”

“Understandable. It is not often that we see a force of your size.”

As Thorn walked through the tent, the crowd automatically parted, creating a clear path for him to where the duke stood. Carefully looking over the people who surrounded the duke as he walked over, Thorn saluted.

“I see you brought some of your companions, Earl Greymane. Why don’t you introduce us?”

“Of course, my lord. This is Mina, one of my officers, and Corvo, my tactician.”

“Officer, huh? Looks a bit small for that role.” A pretty looking noble woman standing to the side of the duke simpered.

A faint frost filled the air, but Mina managed to restrain herself. Feeling the chill, the duke’s gaze wandered over to Mina, taking in her bright red, curly hair before his eyes widened in surprise.

“A Witch of the Frozen North?”

This time it was Thorn’s turn to be surprised, though he could tell from the collective gasp that he was not the only one. Quickly running through his memory, Thorn was positive that he had never heard the title Witch of the Frozen North. The center of everyone’s attention, Mina straightened up to her full height and nodded to the duke.

“It has been some time since we have been graced with the presence of your order.”

Though the duke’s tone was respectful, Thorn could sense the edge in his words. His eyes narrowing, Thorn expanded his [Spiritual Sense], locking on to everything in the immediate vicinity just in case. As the formless energy spread around him, the duke’s eyes flickered to Thorn and he seemed to catch himself. Taking a small step back, the duke uttered a forced laugh and turned his attention away from Mina.

“Earl Greymane, I must compliment you. It is not everyone who is able to command one of the Witches of the Frozen North. Come, let us begin the banquet.”

With Duke Carlton leading the way, Thorn, Mina, and Corvo were soon seated at one of the tables spread around the room. While not at the main table, Thorn found himself seated with one of the other earls who had a holding in the Ironhold Duchy. Sitting on either side of Duke Carlton were the duchy’s two marquis and their retainers while the four earls, including Thorn, sat at two tables nearby. The rest of the tables were occupied by the viscounts and barons that had come to support the Ironhold Duke and the various officers who served under him.

Once everyone was seated, Duke Carlton waved a hand and a small army of servers began to bring out steaming piles of meats, savory pies, cooked vegetables, and other hearty foods. Wine and ale began to make their rounds as well, and soon the whole tent was filled with cheerful talking.

“Excuse me, can you pass me that duck? Is that duck?”

Hearing a voice from the end of the table, Thorn turned to look at the speaker. Short, fat, and bright red in the face, the person asking had his eyes fixed anxiously on a large plate of duck meat that Thorn was in the process of emptying onto his plate. Dressed in what should have been the latest fashion, his clothes were so sloppily worn that, for a moment, Thorn was not sure if he was a beggar who had slipped into the tent.

“Oooooh, I’ll take those pies, too.”

Somehow, the fat young man managed to keep an eye on the plate of duck meat while pointing out three different pies that were on Thorn’s side of the table. Bemused, Thorn was about to point out that there were pies at both ends of the table when he realized that the pies dishes in front of the fat young man were all empty.

“Uh, sure.”

Handing the plate of meat down the table, Thorn slid the pies down after it. Under his amused gaze the young man piled up the meat on his plate and then cut the pies into quarters, all the while gulping down his saliva.

“My name is Thorn. I’m…”

“Earl Greymane. I know, I know.”

Looking slightly annoyed, the fat young man waved Thorn away and began to shovel food into his mouth. As he was about to take another bite a delicate hand appeared behind him and slammed into the back of his head, causing him to nearly faceplant into his plate. A stern-faced woman in an officer’s uniform stood up and gave Thorn a bow.

“Please excuse his manners, Earl Greymane. This sorry excuse for a human is Bothswern Fitswirth Blaige. The seventh Earl of Scorchfrost.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Earl Scorchfrost.” Thorn nodded to the fat young man, who was cleaning the grease from his nose, before turning his attention to the stern-faced woman. “And you are?”

“Captain Falcher, my lord,” said the woman, giving Thorn a salute. “I act as Earl Scorchfrost’s aide and the commander of his army.”

Before Thorn could reply, a shadow fell over Thorn’s table and he realized that the volume of the conversation in the tent had dipped. With a small sigh he looked up at the three men who walked up to his table. All three of them had a hard look about them that matched their military uniforms perfectly.

“Well, well, well. Earl Graymane and the Earl of Scorchfrost. Who would have thought that you would both be at the same table?”

The man who spoke had a scar that split one of his eyebrows, granting him

a dashing and dangerous air. One of the officers next to him chuckled and smoothed back his thick blonde hair as he chimed in.

“Not that surprising really. Both come from worthless holdings in the north.”

“Yeah, nothing but tundra and mountains.” The third officer said, leering at Captain Falcher.

Her expression unchanging, the Captain’s hand dropped to her sword only to find a greasy hand in the way.

“Ignore them. Nothing good will come of fighting,” said the fat earl, continuing to shove food into his mouth.

“Haha, fat and a coward, I guess.” The blonde officer laughed.

“I told you. He’s got no backbone. You owe me five gold,” the scarred officer in the center said, holding out his hand to the blonde officer.

Watching the three officers with interest, Thorn sniffed slightly, a faint but familiar scent causing his eyes to settle on the scarred officer in the center.

“What about you, Earl Greymane? Do you have a backbone?”

“Corvo?” Thorn asked, completely ignoring the blonde officer’s question.

Looking up from the chicken he was working on, the Elf ran his eyes over the three officers quickly and nodded toward Thorn.

“I asked you a question, Earl. It isn’t nice to ignore someone, is it?” The blonde officer’s voice took on a slightly harder edge as he leaned over the table toward Thorn.

“It is even less polite to walk up without introducing yourself,” Mina said from next to Thorn.

“Oh, you’re absolutely right!” The blonde officer placed his hand on his chest as he pretended to be taken aback. “My name is Ritter. Major Ritter. This is Major Cline, and Lieutenant Colonel Rivera.”

“Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Rivera. Majors.” Thorn nodded toward them, smiling affably. “What can I do for you?”

“Oh, we just came to meet you.” Lieutenant Colonel Rivera said. “We were curious about such a famous person. You are quite famous, you know.”

“Would you like an autograph?” Thorn asked innocently, causing Mina to giggle even as the three officers’ faces hardened.

“An autograph? No, you don’t understand. I’m not here to suck up to a two-bit noble who bought his way into an earldom.” Lieutenant Colonel Rivera sneered and leaned forward. “I want to know what right you think you have to command us?”

“Command you? I’m sorry, I’m not following?”

“You don’t need to pretend, Earl Greymane. We have all heard about how you bribed your way into your position. Just because you have the money to buy a brigadier general position does not mean that the men of the Ironhold army will obey you. In fact, all your stars will earn you is disgust.”

“Brigadier general?” Looking at Mina and Corvo, Thorn was legitimately confused. “Please explain what you are talking about, I’m not sure what is going on.”

“Hah, so you’ll pretend to the end? I guess you really are a good fit for the Earl of Scorchfrost. Considering both of you are cowards, I am sure you’ll get along well.”

With a disdainful sniff, Lieutenant Colonel Rivera turned away from Thorn’s table. He began to lead the two other officers away when he heard Thorn’s calm voice.

“Mina.”

A flash of cold air rolled around the three officers as Mina appeared in front of them, three spinning ice orbs floating above her head. Shocked by the Ice Witch’s sudden appearance, Major Ritter started to step back, only to realize that his feet were encased in ice, locking him in place.

“The earl asked you gentleman a question.”

Mina’s tone was upbeat but the spinning orbs above her head had already begun to lengthen into razor sharp ice spikes that glinted dangerously. Gulping, Major Cline glanced at the spikes and then at Lieutenant Colonel Rivera.

“What is going on here?”

Baron Oleander appeared behind Mina, a deep frown on his face.

“We…”

“Oh, Baron, you are just in time.”

Thorn’s deep voice drowned out Lieutenant Colonel Rivera who had just started to answer. Standing up from the table, he gestured to the three frozen men.

“Maybe you would be so kind as to tell me what is going on here. Why are these individuals insinuating that I am their superior? That seems like quite the accusation to me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“This…” It took Baron Oleander a moment to find his words, though that did not stop him from shooting a dirty look at the three officers who had tried to make trouble for Thorn. “Earl Greymane, you have been assigned the position of brigadier general by the duke, making you responsible for one of the four main sections of the army.”

“Oh? Why haven’t I heard anything about this?”

“That’s, uh, that is a good question. Someone should have informed you at your camp earlier today.”

“Hm, Corvo, did anyone show up at our camp today?”

“Nope.” The avatar of Huginn smirked at Baron Oleander as he answered Thorn’s question. “We had no visitors. In fact, it was pretty strange, considering that the law says that a noble has to be notified within two hours of an official appointment if they are in the military camp where the appointment was issued.”

“I remember reading that.” Thorn tapped his chin as he thought for a second. “Section six thirteen. So as to prevent officers from being held liable for responsibilities that they are not aware they possess. Quite the handy rule.

Incidentally, Section six fourteen states that I do not have to accept my duties until I have the officially sealed appointment notice in my hand. As I still have not even seen that document, I'll have to apologize, but I can't bear the title of brigadier general."

"My dear earl, I'm sure this is just an oversight." Baron Oleander calmed down almost instantly, earning himself an impressed look from both Thorn and Corvo. "The appointment notice is a mere formality, I'm sure. I'll be happy to look into it to see what happened and where the confusion was. However, we shouldn't allow that to get in the way of the banquet this evening. Let me apologize on Lieutenant Colonel Rivera's behalf if he has said anything offensive."

Seeing that Oleander and the other three officers were backing off, Thorn waved his hand and Mina vanished from in front of them, appearing in her seat once more. Watching their backs as the four men walked away, Thorn returned to his seat. Beside him, the Earl of Scorchfrost had finally stopped stuffing his face with food and was watching the Titan, an unfathomable gleam in his eyes. Beside the fat earl, Captain Falcher sat down again, seeming used to her lord's strange behavior.

Apart from the short interlude with Baron Oleander and the three officers, the rest of the banquet passed without incident, and Thorn soon found himself back at his camp. While he was at the banquet, a soldier had arrived to give him his appointment, along with directions to attend a meeting in the main tent the next morning. Accepting the orders with a smile from the soldier who had been stopped at the entrance of the Iron Wolves' walled camp, Thorn sent him on his way and entered the camp.

"So, what do you think?"

Thorn, Mina, and Corvo were sitting in Thorn's tent along with Hasta and some of the other officers going over everything they had observed on their first day with the duke's army.

"I think that someone is out to get you," Corvo said. "Probably Baron Oleander, but also Lieutenant Colonel Rivera and his cronies. I was able to confirm that Rivera is part of the third prince's circle, which means that Oleander probably is as well."

"No wonder they're messing with you." Mina grinned as she recalled the hearing in the capital. "The third prince must still be really steamed about you getting one over on him."

"Hmm. Let's reach out to Esme and see if she has any information about

what is going on. We don’t want to get blindsided if possible. Try to get as much information as we can from our allies in the capital. This mission is too important to let petty rivalry screw it up.” Thorn tapped the armrest of his chair as he spoke. “Hasta, any news about the matter I asked you to check on?”

“Yes, my lord.” Hasta saluted Thorn. “They’ll meet us tomorrow.”

“Great. Alright, let's get some rest. I have a feeling it's going to get crazy from here on out.”

The night passed quietly for the largely empty Iron Wolf camp and the next morning found Thorn in the duke’s command tent. All of the officers were there for one final briefing before the army set off for Rasyn.

“Now that we have everyone here, let's go over the plan one last time,” Duke Carlton said, looking around at the gathered officers. “The Orcs have taken control of most of the island, but they still do not control the western mountains or the Elven forest on the northern side of the island. Even though they’ve been concentrating their attack on the forest, the new Elven queen and her allies have managed to awaken the forest which has effectively stopped the Orcs in their tracks. This is a huge boon for us, and I plan on taking as much advantage of it as I possibly can. Likewise, the Dwarves that control the mountains have been able to avoid the Orcs as well.

“There are a few different spots we can land so we’ll be splitting up our forces. The North and South dukes are launching their fleets to deal with the Orc armada, so we should be able to avoid any naval battles. We will split into five total armies, each one led by one of the generals I have appointed. One army will land on the northern shore of the island, one will land on the western mountain region, and the other three will go to the south. I will command the core force, landing on the southern shore. Each of the other armies will land where they are assigned. If you have a preference, please speak up now. If you don’t speak up, don’t complain later. Now is also the time to raise any issues or concerns you have regarding the army distribution.”

The tent was quiet for a few seconds before Lieutenant Colonel Rivera stepped out, causing a small commotion. Taking a moment to bolster his courage, the lieutenant colonel saluted the duke.

“Yes? You have an issue?”

“Sir, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I am not sure that Earl Greymane is the best option for the general of the fourth army. We have all

heard stories about his personal combat prowess and the Iron Wolf army that he commands certainly looks impressive, but my concern is that he does not have the necessary tactical experience. The position of general is more than simply being able to fight."

"I see." Duke Carlton nodded seriously, running a finger across his salt and pepper mustache. Looking around at the rest of the officers in the tent, he could see that many of them agreed with Lieutenant Colonel Rivera. "Hmm. How many people here agree?"

Casually looking around, Thorn counted seven nobles and officers who stepped out to support Rivera.

"All of you think that Earl Greymane is not fit for the role of general?"

"Yes, my lord. It is not to say that the earl will not be a good general some day, but right now he is still too inexperienced."

"I see." Duke Carlton glanced up at Thorn who seemed unperturbed. "What do you think about this, Earl Greymane?"

"I think that you already took my inexperience into consideration when you picked me, my lord."

"Oh? Explain what you mean."

"I have never been to war, my lord. So I have no experience commanding an army like this one. On the other hand, you've fought in countless wars and battles and there is no way you would make such a rudimentary blunder simply for the sake of getting on a small noble's good side. Instead, it must have been a calculated move."

"Oh?" The duke's eyes held a glimmer of humor as he looked up at Thorn. "Maybe you can tell me how it was calculated."

"Of course, my lord." Thorn's voice was as calm as a still pond as he began to list reasons. "First, you selected me as a general to take advantage of my army. Any noble who is made the commander of a force will do their best to maximize their contribution while downplaying the contribution of the other nobles under them, which means having their own army at the forefront. Given the nature of my force, it makes sense for them to be the vanguard against the Orcs. Second, you wanted to take advantage of the people I have around me. What does it matter if I lack the experience needed for this position if my officers are good? You assumed that considering the quality of my army, there is no way I would not have competent officers serving under me. To say nothing of one of the Witches of the Frozen North. Finally, you wanted to see who was in the faction that opposed me."

When Thorn’s last words echoed around the tent, the eight nobles and officers who stepped forward to protest Thorn’s position began to glance at each other nervously.

“And do you think you are up to this task?” asked the duke with a chuckle.

“By myself? Certainly not. But my team is more than capable.”

“My lord, I still don’t think it is advisable,” Lieutenant Colonel Rivera said, stepping forward.

“Stand down, Rivera. It is not up to you.” A frown crossed the Duke’s face as he glanced at the Lieutenant Colonel. “Listen well, everyone. I don’t condone blind obedience, which is why I am taking the time to explain my thoughts in this case. Earl Greymane was correct with his three guesses, but he actually missed the most important reason.”

Pausing slightly, Duke Carlton’s eyes scanned the tent.

“The number one reason is because he can fight. The war we face is unlike any you have ever fought, a war where the tactics and strategies we know well will come up against unrivaled ferocity and force. We fight an enemy that respects nothing but pure strength. The Orcs’ greatest champions will seek out the highest ranked among you and will grind you into the dust if they can. The moment you step onto the battlefield you will be hunted. Should you lose your head, the Orcs will fight all the harder. The truth is that our army’s strength is nothing compared to the might of the Orcs, and if we lose our generals we will fall even further behind. So, if any of you think that you can best Earl Greymane in one-on-one combat you are welcome to try.”

A deep chuckle spread through the tent, and every eye fixed on Thorn who waved his hand in pretend embarrassment.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh, it's just that the thought of any of you being able to beat me is amusing.”

“Do you really think you’re unbeatable?” His eyes blazing with anger, Lieutenant Colonel Rivera stepped toward Thorn.

“No, not really. I’m pretty sure that I’d lose to him, him, her, and my lord Duke Carlton.” Thorn pointed out two military officers and a noble from the crowd and then turned his finger to point at the Lieutenant Colonel. “But I could eat three of you for breakfast without breaking a sweat.”

The three people that Thorn had pointed out looked at each other briefly and then glanced at the duke who waved for them to continue watching.

“In fact, I’d be fine if you brought some of your friends, too,” Thorn continued, stepping forward until his finger was only an inch from Rivera’s

chest. “What do you say, Lieutenant Colonel? Want to take my spot as the general of the northern army?”

With a sneer, Lieutenant Colonel Rivera tried to push Thorn’s finger away, only to find himself unable to budge it in the slightest. His confusion gave way to a brief moment of horror but then the finger shifted, causing him to feel like he had just imagined it. Before he could respond, he felt two people step up next to him and stare up at Thorn.

“Since you are so eager to be made a fool of, it would be impolite of us to refuse, wouldn’t it?” Major Ritter said.

“That’s right. If you really want to fight we’ll keep you company,” Major Cline chimed in.

With all eyes on him, Rivera found it impossible to back down from the challenge that his two friends had accepted on his behalf so without any other choice he turned on his heel and led the way out of the tent. Chuckling, Thorn was about to follow him out of the tent when he heard Duke Carlton calling him.

“Earl Greymane, a moment if you would.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Come here, I want to introduce you to the other generals.” The duke motioned for Thorn to come over and then gestured to the three people that Thorn had pointed out earlier. “General Thiera, General Rensfaul, and Marquis Glettenberg are the other three generals for this campaign. It would be good for the four of you to become familiar with each other on the way to Rasyn as you’ll be coordinating closely.”

“Hello,” Thorn bowed at the waist to the three of them.

“No need for that, Earl Greymane. You outrank me quite a bit so you’ll only make me feel uncomfortable if you do that.” General Thiera was a middle-aged woman with a tough look about her and platinum blonde hair gathered in a bun on the top of her head.

“It’s true, a normal salute will be more than enough,” said General Rensfaul, brushing his long, faintly green hair back over his pointed ears.

“Well met, Earl Greymane. I’ve heard quite a bit about you, but it would seem that the rumors of your shy and retiring nature are exaggerated.” Marquis Glettenberg was the last to speak up, his dark eyes staring intently at Thorn’s face.

“Shy and retiring? I wonder who has been mocking me?” Thorn chuckled.

“Are you confident in beating Rivera and his gang?”

“In a friendly spar? I’d say about seventy five percent.”

“What about a real fight? They’re probably about as strong as an Orc champion, you know.”

“In a real fight I would crush them.” Thorn smiled, but his tone was absolutely certain. “If you don’t have anything else pressing, why don’t you come and watch?”

“That sounds good, I’m curious to know how you stack up.” This time it was General Rensfaul who spoke up. “After all, we can’t have a general who is not up to the standards of the Ironhold army.”

Together the five of them left the tent and walked into the center of the large empty space that the other officers had cleared for the fight. Noticing that some of the officers were hurrying off, Thorn’s brow furrowed slightly. Seeing it, Major Cline sneered.

“You are not getting cold feet, are you Earl Greymane?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“No, I’m just concerned about the impact to your reputation. How are you supposed to lead your men after you lose miserably in a three-on-one fight?”

Thorn looked down at the three officers with a wide grin on his face as soldiers continued to gather around them.

“Haha, our reputation? You are the one who is going to have no reputation after this fight.” Major Ritter jumped into the conversation. “Or maybe you don’t want anyone to come because you are concerned that your soldiers will see you ground into the dirt?”

Glancing at the posturing major, Thorn just chuckled and walked over to one side. After waiting for a few minutes the crowd of soldiers watching had grown large enough for Rivera’s taste, and he indicated that they could begin. Duke Carlton stepped forward and looked at both parties.

“This is a friendly spar, so don’t let me see you intentionally trying to harm each other. That said, if you want to convince everyone you’ll have to put on a good show. If Lieutenant Colonel Rivera, Major Cline, and Major Ritter can win, they’ll be able to nominate someone to replace Earl Greymane. If they lose, I don’t want to hear any more about replacing him,

alright?”

Seeing that both sides agreed, Duke Carlton took a step back and waved his hand.

“Begin.”

Immediately, Thorn spread his [Spiritual Sense], covering the three officers who had begun to rush toward him. Closing his eyes for a brief moment he could feel the vibrations from the officer’s footsteps rippling through the earth. Countless pieces of information filtered through his head, nearly overwhelming him as his [Spiritual Sense] fed him a torrent of data. Taking a breath, Thorn forcefully cleared his mind, allowing the bits and pieces of feedback to fall into his subconscious. A particularly strong ripple in his [Spiritual Sense] rose to the surface of his mind, alerting him to a change, and by focusing on it he could tell that Major Ritter was beginning to circle to one side.

Thorn’s eyes snapped open, focusing on Major Cline and Lieutenant Colonel Rivera who were still in front of him. Major Cline was in the front wielding a sword and shield, providing protection for Lieutenant Colonel Rivera who held a long cavalry lance in his hands. Major Ritter, also wielding a sword and shield like Major Cline, had circled all the way to Thorn’s left in an attempt to get behind him. Ignoring Major Ritter, Thorn stepped forward, closing toward the two men in front of him.

Watching from the side, one of the military officers next to the Duke frowned and asked quietly, “Isn’t the Earl going to equip a weapon?”

“Heh, if the rumors about him are anywhere close to true I don’t think he’ll need one,” Marquis Glettenberg said, smoothing his mustache.

“Is he really that good?” General Thiera watched Thorn closely, doubt clear in her eyes.

“Rumor has it that he killed Courdum the Stone King. By himself.”

“Oh.” General Thiera’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

Only two steps away from Major Cline, Thorn was about to speed up when a razor sharp lance abruptly stabbed toward his throat as Rivera took advantage of his long weapon. Lifting his hand, Thorn slapped it to one side, only to have it dart back toward his neck in the next instant. Using the thick armor on the back of his gauntlet to block it, Thorn was surprised to feel how much force the attack contained. With a loud screech, the lance’s tip glanced off Thorn’s armored hand, leaving a long white mark behind.

Major Cline took advantage of Thorn’s defensive position and lunged

forward with his shield held high in front of his body. A faint light covered the shield as he activated one of his abilities and smashed into Thorn's body.

[Shield Bash]

As soon as his shield hit Thorn, Major Cline knew that he was in trouble. His attack should have shaken Thorn, knocking him back and stunning him so that the others could attack him freely. Instead, Major Cline felt as if he had just run full force into a cliff. A painful feeling spread through his shoulder and arm and he desperately backpedaled to disperse the rebounding force he felt. Before he could take more than a few steps he felt his body jerk and then all he could see was a wide expanse of blue.

When Thorn sensed Major Cline's [Shield Bash] activating through his [Spiritual Sense], he instinctively activated his [Armor of the Earth], covering himself in a deep yellow light that fortified his defenses to an incredible degree. As the [Shield Bash] simply bounced off of his body, Thorn took a small step forward and reached out his hand, getting a firm grip on the top of Major Cline's shield. A flashing lance tip ripped through the air toward Thorn but he just ignored it, counting on the remaining second of his [Armor of the Earth] to defend against it.

Jerking Major Cline up into the air, Thorn spun around, the major flailing wildly as he was dragged along. With a heave, Thorn let go, sending the major flying. With one of the three officers out of the way, Thorn turned his attention to Rivera. Just before [Armor of the Earth] deactivated, Thorn took a big step forward, knocking aside the long lance as his foot lashed out at the shocked lieutenant colonel in front of him. Rivera tried to dodge to the side, but the speed of Thorn's attack caught him off guard and he took the hit on his shoulder. Already off balance, Thorn's kick sent him spinning head over heels into a nearby tent.

"That's two down," Thorn said, spinning to face Major Ritter who had circled all the way behind him, only to find the major standing well out of attack range, an ugly look on his face.

Without waiting for Ritter to come and attack him, Thorn began to walk forward, only to see the major back up so quickly that he ran into the watching soldiers behind him. A low wave of chuckles sounded through the watching soldiers and nobles, but none of those watching could blame Ritter for his action. Recognizing that the fight was over, the Duke stepped forward and raised his hand.

"Alright, we all know how this is going to end, so let's just call it here.

Earl Greymane has won the challenge, so I don't want to hear another word about this. Generals, we'll be meeting to discuss our assault routes. I want the entire camp ready to march in four hours."

"Yes, sir!"

A loud shout rang out as all of the assembled soldiers saluted the duke and then rushed off to pack up the camp. Thorn sent a message to Hasta, asking him to get all the players ready to go, and then followed the duke and the other generals into the tent.

"Okay, so I guess the rumors are true." Marquis Glettenberg looked over Thorn's massive form as if curious what it was made from. "Did you really punch Courdum the Stone King to death?"

"Eh, sort of. The real story is a little less exciting, but that is the gist of it." Thorn nodded.

"Haha, I'm sure it was plenty exciting. I heard that he was an unbelievably powerful mage."

"Alright, lets make our final plan." The duke rapped on the table to get everyone's attention.

"Sir, before that, can I say something?"

"Sure, go ahead," the duke nodded at Thorn.

"I actually think that Rivera had a point," Thorn said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "I don't know that I am really suited to be a general. I certainly have the combat ability, but I'm not experienced at all when it comes to war. If you are assigning me this position because you are confident in my abilities, I will do my best to live up to your expectations. But if you are doing this because of a request from any of the noble factions, I would prefer to serve under a capable general as a commander until I have more experience."

The silence that had fallen as Thorn spoke lasted only a second before General Rensfaul erupted into laughter. Holding his stomach, he doubled over, laughing so hard that he earned a scornful look from the marquis. General Thiera was unable to hold back her chuckles as well, but Thorn ignored the three generals and focused his attention on Duke Carlton who was looking at him thoughtfully.

"Sir, I don't mean to second guess your decisions, but there is also the matter of how I think about life."

A slight frown creased the duke's brow as he stared at Thorn.

"Explain."

“As you know, sir. I’m a traveler. Even if I were to die, I would simply be back the next day. The same is true for my troops, the Iron Wolf army.”

“So you are saying that you don’t want to be responsible for the lives of natives?” The Duke’s voice was soft and calm, but Thorn could sense by his narrowing eyes that Duke Carlton was displeased.

“Not at all, sir.” Thorn shook his head, choosing his words with care. “I’m saying that the best place for me and my army is in the thick of the battle. The Orcs are fearsome enemies, and we are the best option for blunting their sharpest attacks. I’m just not confident that I can coordinate the command of multiple forces if I am in the front.”

“Hm. What do you three think?” Duke Carlton looked at the other three generals.

“I think Earl Greymane has a clear view of it.” Marquis Glettenberg nodded.

“Commanding from the front can be done, but it is hard with an army made up of multiple forces.” Genera Thiera frowned.

“If you are going to let him be a commander instead of a general, I want him to serve under me,” General Rensfaul said with an eager look, earning him scornful glances from the other two officers.

“Absolutely not,” Marquis Glettenberg said. “The Earl is part of the noble faction so it makes the most sense that he would be with me. We need to keep the military and noble factions balanced.”

“Oh, come off it. You already have all the best-equipped troops. You don’t need any more help. He’ll be put to use best by my army.”

Ignoring the two bickering generals, General Thiera looked at Thorn and then down at the map on the table in front of the duke.

“The issue is that we will have to rearrange our attack if we assign Earl Greymane to any other army. Reassigning ten thousand elite soldiers is a big deal and could easily create a hole in our assault.”

“What if we send him with the main assault force and move the Ironbreaker infantry to one of the other paths?”

“No, they don’t have the mobility for either the western or northern attack path.” General Rensfaul shook his head as he tapped a slim finger on the map. “They need flat, clear ground to fight on. On top of that, who will we be assigning as the general if we don’t assign Earl Greymane to the position?”

“True, the balance is precarious as it is. We can’t assign another military officer, we need a noble. But anyone we assign will tip the balance toward

one of the princes, which we have to avoid."

As the generals discussed the issue back and forth, Thorn stood still, watching Duke Carlton who was sitting quietly as the conversation continued. Finally, when it became obvious that the generals were unable to come up with a good idea, the duke looked at Thorn.

"Tell me, Earl Greymane, what do you think we should do?"

"Sir, am I understanding that the problem is the political influence of the various factions involved? It can't be a noble affiliated with the struggle for the throne, and there are already two career officers, General Thiera and General Rensfaul?"

"That is a good summary. It misses some details but does capture the thrust of the issues. Marquis Glettenberg is neutral, as are you. There are not many who still fall into that category. Even Marquis Halpert is supporting the third prince right now."

"What about the Earl of Scorchfrost?"

"Bothswern?"

Duke Carlton seemed taken aback by the suggestion.

"Is Earl Blaige here?" General Thiera asked, her eyebrows lifting. "I assumed that he was not going to come."

"I think his mother made him," General Resfaul said with a chuckle. "If it was his dad I would be happy with that suggestion, but to my knowledge the young earl has even less experience than you do with fighting, Earl Greymane."

"Why would you suggest Earl Blaige?"

Meeting the duke's gaze directly, Thorn considered his words for a moment before speaking.

"Honestly, it is mostly a gut feeling. Earl Blaige is calm, careful, and not easy to intimidate. Furthermore, given who his father was, it is impossible that he did not have a military education. He should have at least a rudimentary understanding of strategy. So long as we assign him a competent enough advisor, I think he'll do well."

"And you are basing this on a single encounter with the Earl of Scorchfrost?" General Rensfaul asked, his skepticism plain on his face. "I bet he would have no clue what to do. Hah, he'd probably completely freeze the first time he came into contact with the enemy."

"Actually, that is a bet you'd lose." Duke Carlton's lips curled into a small smile. "Though it is not widely known, Earl Blaige is one of the highest

scoring graduates from the imperial academy. While it is true that he has no practical experience to speak of, he is a genius when it comes to theory. Maybe this is a good opportunity for us to let him put some of what he learned in the academy into practice."

"Sir, but who will we send with him? Any mistakes against the Orcs could be disastrous for us." General Thiera frowned. "Plus, if anything happens to him his mother will be furious."

"Who else but our immortal friends here? We'll assign Earl Greymane's Iron Wolf army to act as the vanguard for Earl Blaige, as well as assigning him some veterans. What do you think, Earl Greymane? Does that suit you? I'll be expecting big things from you and the Earl of Scorchfrost."

"Absolutely, sir. We won't let you down."

"Wonderful. Send someone for the Earl of Scorchfrost. It would be better to explain what is happening in person. Once we've finalized the reassignments I want everyone ready to go. The mages should be about finished setting up the Aether Gate, so we need to be quick. I'll give final orders when we embark for Rasyn. If there isn't anything else, you are dismissed to see to your troops."

The three generals and Thorn all saluted the duke and walked out of the tent to go back to their own sections of the camp. As Thorn was about to leave, General Thiera stopped him.

"Earl Greymane, please wait for a moment." Her eyes carefully scanned Thorn's face. "Earl Blaige is a, uh, special person. It will be vital that he stays safe, and that burden will rest on you. Please pay careful attention to him."

"You have my word, General." Despite his curiosity, Thorn simply saluted General Thiera as she walked away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“My lord, all units are accounted for.”

The sight of the Iron Wolf Army standing in well-ordered rows brought a smile to Thorn’s face. Though their armor was hardly uniform, every single one of the players radiated a tough confidence that put the other soldiers around them to shame.

“What about the Society of Roses?” Thorn asked, turning his head toward Hasta.

“Lady Athena informed me that they would be arriving within a few minutes. There was a bit of a delay due to some bandits, but they should be here soon.”

“Good. I’m going to report to the general. Have Athena meet me at the command tent.”

“Yes, sir!”

Giving Thorn a snappy salute, Hasta jogged off as Corvo wandered over with Mina. The Avatar of Huginn grinned at Thorn and gave him a thumbs up.

“I heard the Society of Roses will be joining us. That’s so great. I’d be

happy to volunteer to act as the official liaison between the Iron Wolf Army and the Society of Roses."

"Hah, you're only volunteering because they're all pretty," Mina said, giving Corvo a scornful look. "If they were not hotties you'd stay as far from them as possible."

"What? No way," Corvo said, putting his hand to his chest. "I just want to make sure that they are utilized to the fullest. If we're hiring mercenaries, we need to make sure that they are being used to the fullest extent."

"Sure, sure." Thorn waved his hand dismissively, getting in on the fun. "Hey, I wanted to mention that your comment about the Earl of Scorchfrost was really helpful. If you had not mentioned it I never would have thought that he was a strategic genius. He certainly doesn't have the look for it."

"He isn't the only one around here smarter than he looks," Mina said with a smile, causing Thorn to rub the back of his head.

"Eh, point taken. I guess I am the last person who should be judging others by their looks, huh?"

"Did you suggest that he take the general position?" Corvo asked, falling into place beside Thorn as they walked toward the duke's tent.

Mina, seeing Akira riding on Thorn's shoulder, used [Blink] to flash forward, appearing next to Akira and scooping her up as she sat in Akira's place. Riding on Thorn's shoulder as they walked through the camp, she listened with half an ear to Thorn and Corvo's conversation as she stroked Akira's soft fur.

"I did. And it went over well with the duke. Seems like there is some history that I don't know between the duke and the Earl of Scorchfrost. Or maybe his family."

"It's true. The duke and the old earl were buddies when they were young. They both served in the military under the old duke, so I imagine Duke Carlton has a lot of positive feelings for his old friend's son. The old Earl of Scorchfrost died nearly four years ago now, and my reports say that Duke Carlton has been trying to recruit the current earl for his army ever since. You probably did him an inadvertent favor by suggesting that Earl Blaige be a general."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Mina asked, giving Corvo a strange look as she scratched Akira's belly.

"All-seeing, all-knowing," Corvo replied with a smile, tapping the center of his forehead with his finger.

“And that really expensive spy network I am paying for?”

Wincing slightly at Thorn’s words, Corvo’s smile only slipped for a moment before it came back.

“And that really expensive spy network, of course.” Rubbing his nose, Corvo looked away from Thorn. “Out of curiosity, which of the bills did you see?”

“All of them. I stopped by the accounting department and happened to see the budget. I also noticed that we are spending a lot in the south. What’s going on there?”

“South? Ah, that's right.” Corvo winced again. “We’ve been, um, trying something. It is sort of a long game but it isn’t going so well right now. I moved some more resources that way to try and shore up the project, but we’ll see.”

“As long as you think it is worth it,” Thorn shrugged. “Money exists to be used, so if you need it then you need it. If there is anything I have more than enough of, its money.”

“Must be a nice problem to have.”

As the three of them approached the duke’s tent they began to hear loud arguing voices. Glancing at each other, they walked into the tent, only to find themselves in the middle of a shouting match.

“What do you mean you won’t do it?”

The duke’s eyes were narrowed and his face was grim. It was the most upset that Thorn had seen him since they had first met.

“I said I am not going to do it. Why on terra would I put myself in the face of danger just because you want to keep the political balance?”

Unlike the duke, Earl Blaige did not seem upset at all. Instead, he was completely unperturbed as he munched on a sandwich, somehow managing to speak clearly despite the food filling his mouth.

“You’ll do it because I told you to,” the duke said, his face growing dark with anger until he caught sight of Thorn coming into the tent. “Ah, Earl Greymane, let me introduce you to your commanding officer. This is Earl Blaige, the Earl of Scorchfrost. He will be, at your recommendation, leading one of the assault paths, which you will be part of.”

“Hello, Earl Blaige. It is a pleasure to meet you again. Allow me to introduce Mina and Corvo, two of my officers.”

“Hmph. So you are the one who came up with this terrible idea?”

“I certainly suggested it, but the duke was the one who made the

assignment.”

Thorn could not tell if Earl Blaige was really upset so he shifted the blame back to the duke.

“I am sure the two of you will get along great. Bothswern, why don’t you and Earl Greymane go and discuss the details of your force. I am assigning the 6th Ironhold Battalion to your command, as well as a company of my personal Storm Guard. You’ll be directing them personally.”

“Duke Carlton...” Earl Blaige finally stopped eating his sandwich when he saw that the duke was completely serious.

“No, no arguments. You came, which means you are under my command. I’m going to be giving you a mission that I cannot afford to have fail, so get your head in the game, kid. You have a lot to live up to, but I’m confident that you’ll do great. Now leave and carry out your orders.”

Realizing that the conversation was over, Thorn saluted Duke Carlton and followed Earl Blaige out of the tent.

“Ehem, sir? The Iron Wolf Army is ready for inspection.”

Spinning around, Bothswern Fitsworth Blaige glared up at Thorn, the sheer intensity of his gaze causing Thorn to twitch. Suppressing the desire to take a step back, Thorn forced himself to meet the Earl of Scorchfrost’s glare calmly until the fat young man sighed in defeat.

“Alright. Bring them to my camp, I’ll inspect them there.”

His shoulders slumped, Earl Blaige trudged off toward his camp, his feet dragging in defeat.

“Wow, I almost feel bad for him,” Mina said, shaking her head in amazement. “What on earth is so bad about being a general anyway? And aren’t you supposed to be impressing the duke? Why would you give up this great chance?”

Leading Mina and Corvo back toward the Iron Wolf camp, Thorn waited until they were out of earshot of the duke’s tent before replying.

“Actually, the duke didn’t want me to be a general.”

“What? No way, he insisted.”

“Sure, but that was just because of the political pressure that was put on him. I did some digging before we came and Duke Carlton is a proper military man. He hates people who jump rank. But the nobles who are supporting me pushed him into it.”

“Yeah, they completely overplayed their hand.” Corvo scratched his nose as he spoke. “Plus, he likes to promote those who have served him as a

reward. Earl Blaige is the son of the duke's best friend and he has been trying to get him to serve for a long time."

"Exactly. That, combined with the fact that Earl Blaige happened to have gotten great grades at the academy and is recognized as a competent commander, it just makes more sense for me to push him to the front. Even though I could impress him as a general, I haven't done my time, you know? I can still impress the duke by serving Earl Blaige well. In fact, not being a general means I'll be fighting in the front lines, so this makes more sense."

It took a moment for Thorn to realize that Mina had stopped walking and was staring at him and Corvo.

"What?"

"How on earth do you guys know this stuff?"

"Hah, you know all that money I spent? We picked up as much info going into this as possible. Trying to make sure we're not walking into any traps."

"But hold on, that doesn't explain how you knew some of those details." Mina frowned.

"Well, let's just say I'm not the only one around here who cheats." Thorn winked at the Ice Witch as he patted Corvo on the shoulder.

"Thorn!"

Turning around, Thorn saw his aunt leading a group of beautiful women toward him. Her eyes ran carefully over him, seeming to search for any injury on his body or discomfort in his expression.

"Hey! Thanks for coming."

Thorn wrapped Athena in a big hug, lifting her easily off of the ground. Slightly surprised, Athena quickly returned the hug. Putting her down, Thorn nodded to the other members of the Society of Roses.

"Hello, everyone. You're all looking as lovely as ever. How was the trip over here?"

"Hey, Thorn." Bluefire greeted the Titan. "Sorry we're late. We ran into an issue."

It was only after Bluefire spoke that Thorn realized that the members of Society of Roses looked like they had just stepped out of an intense fight. All of their armor was damaged to some extent and every single one of them bore some evidence of wounds. He had been so excited to see his aunt that he had not even noticed, but as he looked at her now he saw the same damage on her armor. Frowning, he looked over her carefully.

"What happened?"

“Oh, just some trouble with some bandits.” Athena waved her hand. “Nothing that you need to worry about. It will change our plans somewhat, but it's nothing big.”

“Corvo?” Thorn’s eyes never left Athena but his voice had gotten cold and hard.

“Thorn, it’s really not a big deal,” Athena protested.

“The Society of Roses was attacked by three hundred players on their way to the Ironhold Duchy. Nearly full wipe for the Society of Roses but they killed all three hundred. Looks like an ambush by a mercenary group that Ragnarok are sponsoring called New Dawn.”

Finishing his report, Corvo minimized the window he had been reading from only to find everyone except Thorn staring at him. Bemused, he gave a lopsided smile and shrugged.

“What? New Dawn is a front for Ragnarok?” Athena’s eyes narrowed and she glanced at Bluefire. “How on earth do you know that? Do you have proof? Bluefire, do we know anything about that?”

“No.” Bluefire’s voice was flat as she stared intently at Corvo. “We knew that they were targeting us, but we thought that they were part of Tower of Immortals.”

Shaking his head, Corvo pulled up the report and, after a quick search, added some information to it. Passing it over to Bluefire and Athena, he shrugged again.

“Looks like New Dawn is a cover for a lot of the people who were purged after Ouroboros left Ragnarok. Sylith is their backer. The misdirection is because there are a few high level plants in the Tower that work for Sylith too. Well, partly for Sylith. Turns out they’re pretty mercenary and my boss has deep pockets.”

Her eyes flickering back and forth, Bluefire read through the information that Corvo had given her and whistled in amazement. Suddenly she stopped and stared, her eyes resting on a list of all of the members of the Society of Roses who had been killed.

“What?! How did you..”

Patting her arm sympathetically, Mina chuckled.

“I have it on good authority that he cheats.”

“Something like that.” Corvo smirked.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Thorn’s face still wore a frown as he looked down at Athena.

“Why? What were you going to do? We crushed them way too fast. They were dead way before you could have arrived. Besides, we are more than capable of handling this. As Bluefire said, there has been a bit of a change of plans. With most of the Society logged, we won't be able to fulfill the contract we have with you. Besides, we’re going to be busy crushing some mercenaries over the next few weeks,” Athena said, her eyes hard.

“Actually, we’ll be doing the crushing,” Bluefire stepped forward and rested her hand on Athena’s shoulder. “You will be accompanying Earl Greymane to Rasyn.”

“What are you talking about, Bluefire?”

“We talked and all agreed that you need a vacation, Athena.” Bluefire gestured to the other members of the Society of Roses behind her. “You have been looking forward to playing with Thorn for a long time now and we are not about to let some scumbags with an agenda derail that. Spend some time with Thorn and we’ll deal with New Dawn.”

“That’s a great idea.” Thorn nodded. “Corvo, give the Society of Roses whatever help they need.”

Hesitating, Athena looked at Thorn whose frown had been replaced by a smile. Seeing the excitement in his eyes, Athena sighed.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, extremely sure. If we can’t handle it then we’ll let you know. But we are the Society of Roses, Athena. If we can’t handle this we don’t deserve our rank as the best mercenary group. You’ve taught us well, but now it is time to let us do what we’ve been trained to do.”

“Fine, fine. I get it. I’ll go with Nova Luna. It’ll be nice to just take orders for once.”

“Great!” Thorn’s grin widened even further as he slapped his hands together. “Well, we’ve got to get to the general’s camp, but Bluefire, anything you need just ask. Corvo has the details, but we’re happy to support you in any way.”

“Thanks, Thorn,” Bluefire replied, wrapping her arms around Athena. “Have fun, Athena. Try to treat it as a fun trip, okay?”

“Yes, mom.” Athena rolled her eyes in mock annoyance as she returned the hug. After giving each of the members of the Society of Roses a hug, Athena turned to Thorn and the group made their way toward the Earl of Scorchfrost’s camp.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

All of Thorn’s worries about not being able to find the Earl of Scorchfrost’s camp were blown out of the water before he had gotten even halfway there as the camp was completely surrounded by Iron Wolf players. Hasta had brought them to meet Earl Blaige so that he could inspect them before they all reported to the parade ground where the mages were preparing the Aether Gates.

The map Thorn had of the duke’s military encampment indicated that Earl Blaige’s camp only took up a small sliver of land tucked between two much larger camps belonging to different barons. Though he was legally allowed to bring the same number of soldiers as Thorn, Earl Blaige seemed to have brought a measly five hundred soldiers with him from the town of Scorchfrost. After arriving with a tiny force, he said nothing when the surrounding camps annexed his space.

The earl’s camp was currently packed with masses of players. The ease of player inventories had freed them from carrying their gear visibly, but according to what Thorn saw in the army-wide group channel, the entire Iron Wolf camp had been packed up in less than half an hour and the whole ten

thousand player force had walked through the camp to crowd around Earl Blaige's camp.

As Thorn pushed through the crowds of hurrying soldiers with Mina, Corvo, and Athena, he began to spot the colorfully armored Iron Wolf soldiers standing around. Curious, he wove around a group of soldiers and tried to get closer to Earl Blaige's land. A small Iron Wolf squad spotted him and stood up straight, their chest-thumping salute ringing through the air.

"Hello, Lord Greymane!"

The players' overly enthusiastic shout brought a smile to Athena's face even as Thorn grimaced. Carefully schooling his face into an impassive mask, he returned the salute and walked past them. Unfortunately for Thorn, the Iron Wolf soldiers' shout had alerted all the nearby Iron Wolf players who turned toward him to look. Seeing their employer towering over the crowd, they began to join in the saluting, creating a chain reaction as the sound continued to spread and new squads joined in.

Nearly overwhelmed from the cacophony of ringing metal and shouting voices, Thorn finally couldn't stand it anymore. Clearing his throat, he opened up the Iron Wolves channel and selected the send all button.

"At ease, soldiers. Please clear the way, I need to get to Earl Blaige."

Quieting down, the smiling soldiers all got out of the way and soon Thorn and his group were standing in front of the young earl. Earl Blaige was standing in front of his tent with his officers having a lively discussion. As he approached, Thorn realized that the earl was primarily arguing with the cold-faced captain who had introduced herself at the banquet the night before. Stopping at a respectful distance, Thorn waited for a good moment to present himself, but before he was able, the earl spun around.

It was as if the earl was a man obsessed. His eyes gleamed with a nearly fanatical light and his pudgy face was flushed bright red. Without waiting for Thorn to open his mouth, Earl Blaige rushed up to him and grabbed his massive hand.

"You're travelers? You have an entire army of travelers? How did I not know this? Why didn't anyone tell me this?!"

"I did tell you, at least three times!"

Strategically ignoring Captain Falcher's outburst, Earl Blaige pumped Thorn's hand up and down. Rather, he tried to. Finding that he could not move the Titan's hand at all, the fat earl gave up on his attempt and just patted Thorn's thick arm.

“You have an entire army of travelers! This is the greatest thing ever! Hahaha, we were absolutely doomed, but you just made victory possible!”

Gently extricating his arm from the earl’s greasy fingers, Thorn spoke softly so as to avoid upsetting the obviously crazy earl.

“Uh, just because we are immortal doesn’t mean that we can win in a fight against an entire army of Orcs. We still die, we just come back after a day.”

“Die?” Confused, Earl Blaige cocked his head to the side. “Why on earth would you die? No, no, we don’t win by dying. That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard. No, we’re going to split you up! Come on, we need to hurry to meet up with the duke. We need to talk to him before any of the armies start to leave!”

Breaking into a waddling run, Earl Blaige began to run out of the camp toward the marshalling ground where the duke had ordered all of the armies to present before they set off for Rasyn. With every step the earl’s body jiggled alarmingly, and after only a few steps he began to wheeze, but despite the obvious strain the earl continued to struggle forward. Exchanging a glance with Captain Falcher, Thorn was met with a cold shrug.

“Get the rest of the camp packed up and head toward the parade ground,” Captain Falcher said over her shoulder to the soldiers who were standing around. “Earl Greymane, my lord runs slower than most people walk, so, as degrading as it is, if you would not mind assisting him to the duke’s side, we would all be spared embarrassment.”

Sure enough, when Thorn glanced at Earl Blaige’s back, he realized the poor young man had not even made it ten feet. Though his arms were pumping and his breath came in bellows, the earl’s legs simply did not move faster than a slow walk. Turning his head away to try and hide his laugh, Thorn messaged Hasta, directing him to lead the army to the parade ground with Captain Falcher. Having gotten himself under control, Thorn looked back up to find everyone around him still shaking with silent laughter.

Biting his lip, he put his helmet on and took a few big steps forward, easily catching up with the struggling Earl Blaige. Reaching down, Thorn grabbed Earl Blaige by the back of his uniform, intending to lift him into the air, but the sound of ripping cloth made him rethink his plan. Looking around helplessly, Thorn saw nothing but laughing faces causing him to sigh in defeat. Earl Blaige was so focused on trying to run that he was completely oblivious to the commotion around him until he felt the earth fall away from his feet. Jerking his head up, it took a moment for it to register that Thorn had

picked him up.

Hoisting Earl Blaige up onto his shoulder, Thorn was thankful that his helmet covered his face completely, allowing him to hide his face which was almost as red as the puffing earl's.

"Please excuse me, Earl Blaige," Thorn said, doing his best to keep his eyes straight ahead as he took long strides toward the parade ground outside the camp.

"Oh, my, this is much better." The young earl breathed a large sigh of relief as he wiped the sweat from his face. "Thank you. Haha, I'm not suited for quick motion so this is a much better option! Quick, we have to get to Duke Carlton as fast as possible!"

Speeding up, Thorn quickly left the camp, a massive force of players streaming out after him in a giant wave. The armies of the Ironhold Duchy were milling around the parade ground, slowly assembling into their various groups. Each was dressed in the colors of the force they were from, and the parade ground slowly grew more orderly as the soldiers gathered around the flags that had been raised.

Spotting the flag that had been planted for the Iron Wolf Army, Thorn directed Hasta toward it while he carried Earl Blaige through the crowds to where the Ironhold Duke stood. Dropping the earl to the ground, the two of them walked over to the duke and the generals who surrounded him, as fast as the young earl's legs could take him.

"Earl Blaige, where are your troops? We are going to be leaving shortly."

"Hmm? My soldiers? Um, they're coming, but this is too important to wait," Earl Blaige said as he pushed past General Thiera. Nearly pouncing on Duke Carlton, Earl Blaige grabbed his arm and shook it up and down.

"We can win! We can actually do it! They are travelers, so we'll be able to win!"

Duke Carlton stared blankly at the fat and sweaty red face that had shoved itself close to his nose. A glance at the generals around him reassured him that none of them had any idea what the earl was talking about at all. Turning to Thorn for guidance, all he got was a shrug.

"Bothswern, what are you talking about? Just because the travelers come back after a day doesn't..."

"Doesn't mean that they can win against the Orcs, yes I know. The big guy already said it." Earl Blaige interrupted the duke impatiently.

Loosening his grip, Earl Blaige began to pace back and forth, gesturing

wildly as he spoke, his spittle forcing the surrounding people to dodge out of the way.

“Why are you all so obsessed with fighting? Is the only way to beat someone by direct conflict? No, the power of the travelers is not in their immortality, that is only secondary. The real power in war is not force but communication! Imagine what is going to happen when we get to the island. Each of the three forces will forge their way inland, following the plan that was set up and trying to meet their schedules. But what do we do when we find ourselves in trouble? What do we do when we are held up?

“The means of communication that we have require two mages with active circles. But how well does that work? It doesn’t work at all! We always have problems with communication. If the mages are not in safe, stable environments their spells won't work reliably. If their spells don’t work reliably, how are we supposed to be reactive? What happens when one of our armies gets ambushed? The mages can’t just stop in the middle of a fight to set up their spells!

“But now, we have a solution! The travelers are not only immortal, but they are naturally connected! By spreading them throughout the various forces we will be able to instantly communicate with each other! Just imagine, we can run an instantly reactive campaign! The sort of response times that generals dream of! We can coordinate! We can adapt! We can outmaneuver the Orcs and crush them with the weight of our tactical prowess!”

By the time Earl Blaige finished his rant he was practically screaming, causing the entire area to fall into pin-drop silence. Thorn was amused, but when he glanced around, he found all three of the other generals and the duke had their gazes fixed on him, a burning intensity shining from their eyes.

“You travelers can do that?” It was General Rensfaul who spoke, his voice barely a whisper. “You can communicate instantly over long distances?”

“Uh, yeah? All players, I mean travelers, can do that. You didn’t know?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Thorn found himself besieged by the three generals, each doing their best to pull him toward their personal force. It was only after the duke finally called them to order that they calmed down and stepped back. Grinning triumphantly, Earl Blaige pushed his fat body to stand in front of Thorn. Trying to cross his arms over his chest, he realized that he could not actually cross them because of how large he was, so he settled for placing them on his hips, making himself look like even more of a

ball.

“How did you learn about this, Bothsworth?”

“Ah, it is a poorly kept secret at the academy, sir. We had a lot of dealings with the travelers who set up shops in the capital city, and we just sort of figured it out over time. But normally travelers are so fickle they are not worth employing so we never did much with the information. You know, you hire them to do a job and they only do it once or twice if they do it at all? And then they run off to Terra knows where to find something else to do. Really strange when you think about it.”

“Ehem, yes, I see.” Slightly embarrassed by the young earl’s comments, Duke Carlton turned to Thorn. “Earl Greymane, I’m afraid I might have to change your orders once again. You see, such wondrous communication is a matter of immense advantage, and we would be fools not to use it. Glettenberg, call all the officers here, they will need a demonstration of this if they are to believe it and accept the travelers into their midsts. We’ll divide the Iron Wolf Army into four equal forces of twenty five hundred soldiers each, assigning them to each general.”

“What? Absolutely not!”

Earl Blaige protested, trying to draw himself to his full height. Unfortunately, all he managed to do was make the rolls of fat on his body jiggle.

“If you do that, you will cripple the effectiveness of an immortal combat force! You must keep the core of the army together and use them as a dagger to drive into the villainous Orc’s hearts!”

“But I thought you were not concerned with military strength,” General Thiera teased.

Lifting his head up righteously, Earl Blaige lifted his finger into the air as he replied.

“While the most important thing for a general is strategy, one must have the ability to crush the enemy if one wants to go to war!”

“Why is he speaking like that?”

Thorn tried to whisper to General Rensfaul who was standing next to him. Unfortunately, Thorn’s voice was naturally carrying and everyone in the area heard his comment clearly, causing the fat earl to cough in embarrassment as everyone began to laugh.

“The point is that you assigned the Iron Wolf Army to me, and while I’m more than willing to lend, say one thousand soldiers, to each general, I am

not willing to lend them all."

"Impossible. You can't keep all of them to yourself! We don't have enough travelers as it is, and you want to hog them?" Marquis Glettenberg shook his head as he turned to look at Duke Carlton. "My lord, the best use for the Iron Wolf force is spread evenly across the whole army.

"Are you crazy?!"

Earl Blaige flushed bright red again as he pointed a shaking finger at Marquis Glettenberg. Reacting quickly before the marquis could turn back around and see the finger, Thorn placed his hand over Earl Blaige's. While everyone seemed to treat the fat young earl with great leniency, disrespecting a higher ranked noble was a serious crime and Thorn thought it better to avoid it.

"Ehem, why don't we split the difference? I think four thousand troops is the lowest I can go and still maintain our core fighting strength. We could send two thousand troops with each of the other generals and leave the remaining four thousand under my command in Earl Blaige's army."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

After thinking over Thorn's suggestion, Duke Carlton agreed and Marquis Glettenberg left to gather all of the officers. Opening up a chat with Hasta, Thorn sent a quick message while they were waiting for the officers to arrive. Explaining the situation, he asked Hasta to split out two battalions for each of the other generals. The Iron Wolf Army was given their division assignments, leaving Thorn in command of the First, Second, Fifth, and Tenth battalions. Jumping back on the general chat, Thorn opened a voice channel and added everyone to it.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you for bearing with the confusion over the last few days. We are getting everything organized to best coordinate with the Ironhold Army, but the duke has been adjusting the plan as we go. I think we're finally set, but keep your eyes open for changes. We have been preparing for this moment for the last few weeks and I am confident that our preparation will pay off.

"Each battalion will receive instructions from your battalion commander, so listen for their direction. We will be divided into four groups and accompanying the four generals on this campaign. While we are technically

part of the Ironhold Army, I want to remind everyone that we are, first and foremost, representing Nova Luna and Fang Valley. I expect everyone to behave according to the standards of the Iron Wolf Army, which includes following the directions of the generals you are under.

"Corvo will be coordinating with all commanders so if you have any issues run them by him. We will primarily be tasked with acting as a communication network to strengthen the Ironhold Army's ability to maneuver and react so Corvo will be creating an official channel for army-related communication. Make sure you keep the channel open with notifications on. While our primary task seems to be communication, I want to be clear. We are the Iron Wolves, and we will destroy our enemies in battle. I fully expect that each of you end this war with a positive kill count. I don't want to hear that you sat in the back taking calls while our allies fought for their lives on the front lines.

"Finally, the enemy we are going up against is known for their strength, speed, endurance, and ferocity. They are famed for their skill with weapons and their thirst for battle. Some in this army might be afraid, but we are not. They may be strong warriors, but we have faced down and destroyed strong warriors before. They may be numerous, but we have met endless hordes in battle and emerged victorious. They might have Rasyn held in their iron grip, but we will shatter their hold and liberate the island."

As Thorn's warm, even voice rolled out through the channel, the players listening found themselves standing up straighter. His words were unhurried and his tone even, but they stirred a faint feeling of excitement in the chests of those listening. When Thorn was done speaking, Hasta's voice sounded over the channel, his crisp speech providing a clear counterpoint with Thorn's slow, deep tone.

"Iron Wolves, salute!"

Though the noise of a single individual saluting was negligible, when all ten thousand Iron Wolf soldiers abruptly saluted it caused a ripple to run through the rest of the Ironhold Army as all of the other forces turned to see what was happening. Pleased with the effect they had created with their salute, Thorn nodded to Hasta, who began to give out commands to the battalion commanders.

Under the eyes of the soldiers from other forces, the different Iron Wolf battalions began to split up, heading toward the banners representing the four different generals. After arriving next to the force that they had been assigned

to, they stood in formation, causing a chain reaction to spread out throughout the Ironhold Army as the other forces hurried to get into formation.

Within twenty minutes the whole army had been drawn up in formation, presenting an awe-inspiring sight. Though Thorn thought he had become inured to the sight of massive groups of players and natives in Moon Wolf Citadel, the sight of the Ironhold Army arrayed in neat rows under their colorful flags was enough to take his breath away. Casting one last glance over his own force, Thorn turned around to look at Duke Carlton and the four generals who had mounted a small platform facing the Ironhold Army.

Behind the duke a small army of mages were working together to open up the Aether gates, and a few minutes later the first of the giant portals began to open. As the portals grew, Duke Carlton held up his hand and began to address the troops.

“My fellow nobles, brave officers of the Imperial Army, devoted soldiers of the empire, today we embark on a task of monumental importance! Our friends, the Elves of Rasyn, have found themselves besieged, hunted, and enslaved by the forces of the Red Scourge. For too long have we remained silent as our brothers and sisters were dragged to the southern continent, relegated to a life of suffering and torture.

“No longer will this stand. The naval forces of the empire have attacked the Orcish fleets, cutting off their access to Rasyn, but the enemy has already established a presence on the island. It is our task, our duty, to drive them from the Elves’ land. Through the Aether Gates lie the ships that will take us to Rasyn. Follow your generals and bring victory to the empire!”

A chorus of loud cheers rang out, covering the army with an uplifted feeling. In high spirits, as if they could already imagine the enemy laid out before them, the generals began to lead their troops through the Aether Gates. Earl Blaige, while waiting for his turn, wandered over to where Thorn stood, a disgruntled look on his face.

“I can’t believe they took so many of your soldiers,” the earl complained to Thorn. “They could have just, you know, taken small groups. Maybe a thousand at most. But now we’re down a full six thousand immortal soldiers. Six thousand!”

“It’s not that bad, Earl Blaige.”

“Oh, call me Bothswern, or Bothy. That’s what all my friends call me.”

“I’m sorry, Earl Blaige, but protocol…”

“Yeah, yeah, military protocol requires you to call me by my military title

or noble rank, I know, I know. Stupid rule if you don't mind me saying. I mean, it is good for the troops. Unity of command principle, and so forth, but you're my equal or more. I have no desire to call you Earl Greymane all the time, so cut me some slack here, okay?"

"Very well, sir. You may call me Thorn."

"Thorn? Great. That's much better than earl this or earl that." Bothy grinned and wiggled his eyebrows at Thorn. "But judging by how quick you were to give up more than half of your force, I wonder what you've got up your sleeve?"

"Up my sleeve? What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't play shy, Thorn. I saw you talking to your commander and splitting up your forces carefully," Bothy said, gesturing behind him at the four battalions standing at attention. "The first, second, sixth, and tenth?"

"Fifth and tenth."

"Right, first, second, fifth, and tenth. Curious teams to take considering how armies are normally structured. I would have expected that you would have insisted on bringing the first, second, third, and fourth battalions, but you jumped around a bit. Which makes me suspect that you are hiding something."

Looking thoughtful, Thorn paused for a moment and then leaned down to whisper something to Bothy, causing the earl's grin to widen a few notches.

"Haha, I knew it. Amazing. This is going to be so great!"

When it was finally their turn, what remained of the Iron Wolf Army followed Earl Blaige and the rest of his forces through the Aether Gates. Stepping Into the swirling energy, Thorn felt the world twist around him followed by the soft salty scent of the sea filling his nose. The Aether Gates had transported them across the continent to the eastern shores of Northern Angoril, allowing them to cut down their travel time by months.

Like a giant's fingers, huge wharfs jutted into the sea from the shore, surrounded by a forest of masts and sails. At Earl Blaige's direction, Thorn was about to lead his four battalions down one of the wharfs when a notification popped up in front of his eyes.

ding

Hati's Honor

You have found yourself facing Duratan, Avatar of Skoll, the Sun Wolf. Brave and fiery, the Sun Wolf protects the world during the day, fighting against evil and destroying those who threaten the world's peace. As the all-around worse brother, Skoll has gotten full of himself and needs to be reminded why Hati is, as the older brother, always better at fighting.

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Reward: Increase Hati's Favor
Failure: Decrease Hati's Favor

Slightly confused, Thorn turned to look at Corvo just in time to hear the Avatar of Huginn mutter to himself.

"Oh no, not this block head."

"Thorn! Avatar of Hati! Step forward and accept my challenge!"

The shout was loud enough that it drew the attention of the entire Ironhold Army, causing everyone to stop what they were doing and look back to where Thorn stood. It took a while, but Thorn finally spotted the person who had shouted at him standing on a little rise on the northern side of the harbor.

"Come, meet me in fair combat and let us demonstrate the glory of our god!"

Duratan was an Orc with a shock of blonde hair that spread from his head like a mane, reminding Thorn of a lion. Seeing an Orc standing on a nearby hill, the Ironhold Army suddenly surged with activity, but Duke Carlton's booming voice halted everyone in their tracks.

"Hold! The Avatar of Skoll is not our enemy."

"What an idiot," Corvo muttered under his breath, as he watched Duratan begin jogging down the hill toward them. "That is Skoll's avatar. And he is a real blockhead. He gets fired up way too easily and then tries to fight everything that moves. The only way to beat him in a challenge is to beat some sense into his head."

"Well, conveniently, that is probably what I am best at."

Thorn grinned, flexing his fingers. Getting out his helmet, he called out to Duke Carlton, his voice carrying easily over the army.

“My lord, Duke, permission to dispatch this challenger.”

“Go ahead, but keep it short. We have a time table to keep.”

Duratan has requested a formal dual. Would you like to accept?	
Yes	No

“Yes, sir!”

Settling his helmet on his head, Thorn clicked ‘Yes’ and began to stride toward the approaching Orc. Seeing his big figure coming, Duratan threw back his head and laughed, speeding up from a jog into a full blown run.

“Come! Let us match our might!”

Sprinting toward Thorn, the Orc launched himself into the air, his arm drawn back as he got ready to punch. Taking two quick steps forward, Thorn lashed out with his own fist, slamming it toward the airborne Orc. Just before they collided, Thorn thought he saw a small smile on Duratan’s face and then a bright light filled up his vision. Closing his eyes, Thorn felt his fist hammer into something impossibly hard that left his fist shaken. From the pressure on his fist, Thorn could tell that he had sent the Orc flying, but something about the situation felt wrong to him so he immediately summoned his [Armor of the Earth], covering his body with a warm yellow glow.

Hardly had he thought about it when an arrow made of energy slammed into his chest. The impact radiated through the magical barrier that surrounded him, and it was everything Thorn could do to keep from stepping back. Excitement grew in Thorns chest and a wide grin began to form on his face as he opened his eyes to face Duratan.

Over thirty feet away, the Avatar of Skoll stood rubbing his arm, a look of surprise and excitement on his face. Standing at nearly seven feet tall, with two thick tusks that jutted from his jaw, Duratan had a savage appearance, but the intricate armor he wore was anything but. Delicate golden filigree drew a sun motif across his broad chest and down his arms. On his left arm was a thick golden gauntlet radiating a golden light in the shape of a bow. As Thorn watched, Duratan held up his arm and the bow shrank back down, taking the shape of the small round shield that he had used to withstand Thorn’s attack.

“Huh, you’re as tough as you look, aren’t you?” Duratan said, throwing his head back to laugh. “But no problem. I’ve cut down taller trees before. Let's go again!”

Without responding, Thorn brandished his claws and charged forward, his massive boots causing the earth to shake under his feet. As he ran, he triggered [Wolf’s Rage], causing his body to burst forward with increased speed. At first, Duratan was excited to square off against Thorn again, but as the raging Titan began to get close his broad smile began to waver. When Thorn was only twenty feet away the Orc thought better of trying to stop Thorn head on and leapt to the side to try and get out of Thorn’s path.

Unfortunately for him, Thorn was ready and he activated [Predator's Leap], instantly moving himself diagonally, shooting toward Duratan. Realizing he could not escape, the Avatar of Skoll roared, the echo of a wolf’s growl mixing in with his voice. The sound spun toward Thorn in a concentrated cone, forcefully halting his advance as [Predator's Leap] was nullified. Ignoring the stun effect, Thorn snapped a front kick, using the incredible reach of his legs to close the remaining distance.

BOOOOM

The impact of Thorn’s boot slamming into Duratan’s shield sent tremors through the earth and lifted a cloud of dust around them, obscuring them from view. Taking two steps back to settle himself, Thorn activated his [Spiritual Sense of the Earth], sending his [Spiritual Sense] pouring out of his body and into the earth element in the air. As information flooded into his head he could see the shape of a blade slashing toward him through the cloud of dust. Summoning his tetsubo, he caught the incoming blade of golden light on his metal weapon, halting the attack in place. Hearing Duratan’s surprised grunt, Thorn located the Orc in the dust cloud with his [Spiritual Sense] and stepped forward, lashing out with his tetsubo, only to cleave air as Duratan jumped backward.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Even before the dust had completely settled, Thorn had charged forward again, his tetsubo swinging. Duratan met him with a flashing golden blade formed from the golden energy coming from his gauntlet. The weapons clashed, sending showers of sparks flying. Spinning his tetsubo around, Thorn slammed it down again, only to find the golden broadsword intercepting it once more. With a flick of his wrist, Duratan sent the point of his blade stabbing toward Thorn's gut, but the Titan was able to drop his hands, deflecting the attack with the pommel of his tetsubo.

Back and forth they fought, exchanging attack after attack in rapid succession. It didn't take Thorn long to realize that the Avatar of Skoll was a much better fighter than he was, and if it was not for his greater strength and speed he would have been defeated quickly. As it was, he focused on maximizing his strength advantage by staying close. The memory of the arrow at the beginning of the fight was burned into his head and he knew that allowing Duratan to create space was a death sentence.

“You fight well for a big guy,” Duratan commented as he and Thorn traded attacks. Using his blade to defuse the force of Thorn’s swing, he grinned widely. “Most people your size are clumsy and slow.”

“You have fought other people my size?”

“Haha, of course! I am Duratan, the Sun Wolf! I have fought almost everything in Angoril! In the far north lies a kingdom of Elemental Giants who are even taller than you!”

“Well, remind me to ask you more about that after I beat your head in!” Thorn growled, sending his tetsubo toward Duratan’s knee.

The Avatar of Skoll laughed as he blocked, causing the blow to glance off of his blade and bury itself in the ground. Just as he was about to unleash a vertical cut, Thorn’s attack pattern shifted, catching him off guard. Squatting slightly, Thorn threw his palm out at the Orc’s chest, trying to knock him off of balance.

With a thought, Duratan converted his greatsword back into a shield, blocking the palm strike. The force of the attack drilled into him, but just as it hit he jumped backward to lessen the force of the blow. As he flew backward through the air, his golden shield morphed into a massive bow, a glittering golden arrow appearing in his hand. Drawing it back, Duratan was about to release it when he saw that while he was shifting his weapon a gigantic siege crossbow had appeared in Thorn’s hand.

A rapid calculation ran through his head as he tried to figure out his chances of survival if he was hit with a bolt the size of a short spear, and Duratan quickly decided he didn’t like his chances. The golden glow in his hands flickered and streamed down to his feet where it pooled, two glittering wings forming off of his boots. Planting one foot in mid-air, he pushed off, sending himself shooting to the side as the bolt from Thorn’s arbalest ripped through the air where he had been half a second before.

The fluttering wings on his ankles allowed Duratan to step on the air as he shot back toward Thorn. Opening his mouth to issue another battlecry, the shadow of a giant eye appeared, a burning sun in its golden pupil. The eye fixed itself on Thorn, causing a sense of crisis to wash over him.

[Moon’s Reflection]

Not a moment too soon, Thorn’s body turned incorporeal as a beam of pure flame shot out of the center of the eye, leaving a mangled trail of burnt earth as it swept over Thorn. The flame burned the earth hungrily around Thorn, forcing him to keep [Moon’s Reflection] activated for a full four

seconds before he could get out of it.

As his body began to come back into focus, he saw that Duratan already had another arrow locked onto his chest. Groaning, Thorn activated [Shadow Dash], trying to close the distance toward the Orc while hoping that he could avoid the arrow. Calmly breathing out, Duratan released the arrow, sending it hurtling toward Thorn. Almost too bright to look at, the tip of the arrow carried a wisp of the fire from the small sun that Duratan had summoned earlier. The light from the arrow washed over Thorn, forcing his body out of its half shadow state and canceling his charge.

Gritting his teeth, Thorn summoned his tetsubo and slammed it into the side of the arrow, barely managing to change its course from his chest to his shoulder. The arrow bit into his armor, stabbing through the metal and chain, piercing the padding and plunging into his flesh. A howl of pain burst from Thorn's lips, carrying with it a bizarre vibration that forcibly increased his healing ability while shaking Duratan into a stupor.

Though the stupor did not last long, it was still enough time for Thorn to get close to Duratan, his palm slamming down on the Orc. Once again, Duratan managed to get his gauntlet transformed into a shield in time to block Thorn's blow, but this time Thorn's palm strike morphed into a grab, fixing the shield in place as he drove a knee into Duratan's other side.

A crunch sounded as Duratan did his best to block the knee strike, his face twisting in pain, but Thorn was by no means through. His other hand darted forward, nailing Duratan in the solar plexus. Another fast jab kept the Orc off balance as his leg swept around. Jerking the Orc off of his feet, Thorn tossed him over his shoulder, slamming his body into the ground with an earth shaking thump.

Dropping down to the ground after him, Thorn used his weight to pin Duratan to the ground as he rained fists and elbows down on the unfortunate Avatar. After a few minutes of struggling to get free, Duratan finally threw his hands up.

"I give, I give!" Groaning, he rolled over as Thorn let him up. "Oof, you win."

ding

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Mindful of the soldiers watching them, Thorn helped Duratan to his feet, gentle healing light landing on both of them as the Iron Wolf support players restored their health. Getting his first good look at the Avatar of Skoll, Thorn realized that he carried a humorous look in his eyes and radiated a considerable amount of casual charisma.

"I only won because of my weight. Plus, why do I have the feeling that you went easy on me?" Thorn said quietly as the two of them walked back toward the army side by side.

"Heh, well, unlike you, I have no appearances to keep up." Duratan winked at Thorn. "Plus, I need a favor from you and I can't go asking for it after I beat you up, can I?"

"Ah, so you did lose on purpose." Thorn sighed in defeat. "How would you have solved my grapple at the end there?"

"Haha, I have to keep some secrets. But it would have been close either way. For someone who has only been playing the game for a little while, your fluidity is off of the charts. Most people don't get that comfortable using and swapping skills until they've been playing the game for years. Anyway, I want to come to Rasyn with you. There is an Orc there I need to find. Since I let you beat me up, what do you say you let me hitch a ride?"

By this time, Thorn and Duratan had reached the Iron Wolf Army who all cheered for Thorn's win. Only Corvo, Mina, Athena, and a few of the other top players were quiet, their eyes fixed on Duratan. Even Thorn could feel it standing next to him. It was as if, for all the Orc's charisma and easy

openness, he was an incredibly dangerous flower.

“Hello, Corvo! How have you been, buddy?”

Duratan stepped forward and tried to slap the Avatar of Huginn on the shoulder, only to miss when Corvo jumped back, turning into a crow that flew over to perch on Mina’s hat.

“Don’t touch me, you oaf. The last time you hit me you nearly broke my shoulder.” Corvo muttered under his breath as if he was afraid to let the large Orc hear him.

“Hello, everyone. I am Duratan, the Sun Wolf! I’m glad to make your acquaintances.” Looking around, he spotted Athena and grinned widely, stepping forward and slamming a thick fist into his chest. “Hello, fair lady! You must be Athena, the War Goddess. You are even more beautiful than the rumors say.”

“Hello, Duratan.”

Athena gave him a small, sweet smile, causing him to stare blankly at her for a moment until a gentle cough from beside him jerked him back to his senses. Entirely unembarrassed, he looked around again and then turned his attention back to Thorn.

“So, what do you say? Can you give me a ride?”

“I don’t see why…”

“No, absolutely not.” Corvo spoke up from where he was perched on Mina’s hat, his voice firm. “This is a military exercise. We can’t bring unrelated or civilian personnel along. The logistics of taking you along are just too much, there is no way we can do it.”

“Don’t beat around the bushes, Corvo.” Duratan faced the bird squarely, obviously used to negotiating with the Avatar of Huginn. “What do you want? But don’t try my patience.”

Hopping off of Mina’s hat, Corvo turned back into his regular Elven form in a flurry of dark purple feathers. Looking up at the Orc, he suddenly grinned and pointed his finger over Duratan’s shoulder.

“I’m not the one you should be negotiating with. He is.”

Spinning around, Duratan found himself staring at Thorn’s chest and his eyes slowly tracked up to rest on Thorn’s face. It was not often that the Orc found himself dwarfed, but Thorn had a way of making others feel like they were tiny. Coughing, Duratan softened his tone a little bit.

“So, what does it take for me to catch a ride across with you?”

“Honestly, it's not a huge deal, you just need to be part of my forces. I’m

an earl, and as long as you are attached to my army, I can bring you along."

"Huh, sounds simple. But you've got featherface over here advising you, so there has to be a catch somewhere." Duratan jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Corvo.

"No catch, but you will have to sign an employment contract with me. All the positions in my army are professional, after all," Thorn said with a grin.

"The contract is a standard professional player contract, with a term of two years."

"Two years?"

Falling silent, Duratan stared down at his hand, counting something on his fingers. Coming to a decision, he looked up and nodded.

"I can do two years, but I have some special terms. I need to be free to pursue Avatar-related quests, and I need you to help me find an Orc while we're on Rasyn. And once we find him, you need to help him. Other than that, I'll take whatever Corvo's terms are."

"You're looking for an Orc on Rasyn? One of our enemies? I'm not sure it's a good idea to be helping our enemies," Corvo interjected from behind Duratan.

"Quiet beaky, I'm negotiating with your boss, not you."

Slowly stepping around Duratan, Corvo looked up at the Orc, his eyes unsmiling as tension filled the air. Resting his hand on his rapier, Corvo spoke in a chilly voice.

"If you're looking for a few more holes keep it up buddy. We haven't tangled in a while so maybe you need a reminder."

As the tension mounted, Thorn sighed and stepped forward, forcing both avatars to take a step backward.

"Alright, gentleman, calm down." Thorn looked between them as he spoke. "Duratan, if you are signing on, you need to respect Corvo, and his position in the guild. Corvo, do you have an issue with Duratan being offered a contract?"

It took Corvo a little while, but finally he took another step back and shook his head with a sigh.

"I'd really like to, but no, he would be a great addition to the team."

"Thank you. Duratan, if you want passage to the island without signing a contract you are welcome to ask any of the generals, or Duke Carlton. I'd be happy to introduce you. The only way you can come with us is if you sign on. You can take as much time as it takes for us to board our ship to think about

it.”

“Haha, what is there to think about? It's only two years, right? That’s what, three months in real time? Easy.” Noticing the strange looks he was getting, Duratan stopped. “Wait, you don’t mean two years in real time? Fourteen years in-game? Are you crazy?!”

Shrugging, Thorn turned away and waved to the battalion commanders.

“Let’s get everyone loaded up.”

As Duratan stood there and chewed on his finger nervously, the Iron Wolf Army walked past him and began to get on the ship. At first, Thorn was concerned that the whole force would not fit on the ship, but each ship turned out to be much bigger than they looked on the outside. With a full six decks below the water line and five above, the ships were absolutely massive and the whole army under Earl Blaige only took up two ships. The size of the ships combined with the fact that most of the players could simply log into Fantasia while the ship traveled promised quite a comfortable ride.

Once everyone was loaded, the orders were given to cast off and the ships began to ready themselves for the trip. Standing on the deck with Earl Blaige and the rest of his officers, Thorn could see Duratan back on the shore, trying to come to a decision. Finally unable to stand it any longer, a golden glow lit up around Duratan’s feet and he ran down the wharf and jumped on the ship at the last moment.

“Fine, you win. Give me the stupid contract and I’ll sign my life away. How bad could it be?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Ugh, this is so bad!”

Groaning, Duratan dropped his head into his hands. He was sitting in the hold of the ship that Thorn and the four Iron Wolf battalions had boarded, staring at the contract that Corvo had given him.

“Why on earth did I agree to this?”

“You don’t have to, you know. You have not signed anything, so feel totally free to reject the contract,” Corvo said, shrugging. “If you’ve got any hesitation it is probably better to just not sign. After all, if you do, you’ll be stuck for quite a while in game. The terms are generous, but the penalties are just as heavy.”

“Hah, you’d love it if I didn’t join. Besides, I’m in the middle of the ocean with a giant, multiple avatars and four thousand players who would beat my head in. I might be incredibly buff and handsome, but I’m not an idiot.”

“False on all counts, actually.”

Chuckling, Thorn rapped on the table to draw the two avatars’ attention.

“Enough squabbling. Duratan, are you going to sign it or are you going to swim back? We are not that far from shore, but if you hesitate any longer it is going to be an extra long swim.”

“Ugh, fine.” With an annoyed sigh, the Orc pressed his finger down, his name appearing on the last page of the contract.

“Wonderful, welcome to the team. I’ll leave you to Corvo who will introduce everything you need to know about Nova Luna. I’m going to see what the plan is for when we arrive in Rasyn.”

Smiling at the two avatars, Thorn stood up and left to find Earl Blaige. Duratan’s eyes did not leave Thorn’s back until he was out of sight, and even then they dropped to the thick table top where a dent could be seen in the hardwood. Following his gaze, Corvo let out a sigh of his own.

“I don’t know what you are planning, Duratan, but, as one avatar to another, make sure you don’t get on his bad side.”

Stretching out his hand, Duratan’s fingers slid over the table top, feeling the depression.

“Was that a threat or an unconscious action?”

“Maybe a bit of both? Who knows.” Corvo shrugged. “Just watch yourself and you’ll be fine. His face is even more deceiving than yours.”

“Hah, and he’s been playing for how long?”

“A bit more than a year? Something like that. Believe me, you’ve only just scratched the surface, but you’ll get used to it.” Corvo’s lips curled up slightly as he chuckled. “Thorn is something else entirely. And he is growing at an unbelievable rate. When I met him he wouldn’t have been able to take even three hits from you, and not even a year later you have to pretend to lose to avoid getting your face stomped on.”

“Looks like the next few years will be exciting!”

Grinning widely, Duratan tried to slap Corvo on the shoulder, only to miss when Corvo dodged backward. Undismayed, the Orc picked up his copy of the contract he had signed and put it away in his inventory.

“How many of us have gathered?”

“Including Thorn? Me, you, Josephine, and Peregrine. Josephine and Peregrine are not with Nova Luna officially, but I don’t expect that will last very long. Chances are, the game won’t let them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something is happening, and Thorn is at the very center of it. He is like a giant star, anyone who gets close gets sucked into his orbit.”

“Have you been able to discover what is happening?” Duratan frowned.

“No, the only thing I see is war.” The humor drained from Corvo’s face and his finger tapped nervously against the table. “A war on a scale that you can’t imagine.”

Emerging from the lower decks, Thorn walked carefully up the steps to the quarterdeck where Earl Blaige was standing with the ship’s captain. The fat earl held a spyglass and was looking around with great interest. Hearing the stairs creak alarmingly, he swung himself around to see what was happening, the spyglass still held up to his eye.

“Ahhhh!”

With a sharp shriek, Bothy dropped the spyglass and stumbled backward, badly startling the ship’s captain. Holding his hand to his chest, Bothy gave an embarrassed cough and shot a glance at Thorn after he had recovered.

“Ehem. Yes, Thorn, yes. Thank you for coming. I was just learning all sorts of fascinating things from the captain. It seems the ship uses some interesting magical runes that allow it to shorten the distance between ports. If you look into the distance you can see some of the distortion that the magic causes. I was just looking at it until I saw the most frightening nose.” By the end of his sentence, Bothy was practically muttering under his breath, but Thorn still caught the words with his sharp hearing. “But don’t worry about that. Come, follow me to my room. We have an attack plan to discuss.”

Waddling over to the stairs, the fat earl began to carefully make his way down them, holding tightly to the rail to avoid from rolling down. Waiting patiently for him to finish descending, Thorn looked out at the horizon where Bothy had been looking with his spyglass. Though Thorn could not see as far, he could still see a faint haze on the horizon where the water and sky seemed to blend together. Noticing his gaze, the captain smiled and handed him the spyglass that Bothy had dropped.

“I don’t quite understand it myself, but the enchanters tell me that the runes bend the distance around the ship, allowing it to go extra fast even when it seems like we’re going at normal speed.”

“Interesting. Is that why we don’t feel a lot of wind?”

“Yeah, it's like a marble or something.” The captain scratched his beard and shrugged. “That's what they tell me at least. Who knows how they do it. I guess that’s why they call it magic, huh?”

Thanking the captain, Thorn handed the spyglass back to him and followed Bothy down the stairs and back into the captain’s cabin. It took

some effort for Thorn to squeeze through the narrow doorway, but once he sat down on the floor it was not too bad. The cabin was richly decorated with carved wood and wrought iron fixtures, but all of the furniture had been piled on the bed to make room for the massive wooden desk that had been pulled into the center of the room.

“The duke has given us our orders, but has not restricted how we carry them out. We have been assigned to the northern side of Rasyn. This is where the Orc forces are concentrated the most, but we have the cover of the forest, so it will be the most suited to smaller battles, which favors us. Our objectives are threefold.”

Listening intently, Thorn looked at the large map of Rasyn spread out on the table as Earl Blaige tapped on the large forest in the north.

“First, we need to harass the Orcs to prevent them from committing their forces to the center of the island. Their main camp is in the northeast peninsula, above Ilha Caelora. From our reports, they have been trying to clear the forest, with limited success. It seems the Elves are resisting fiercely. Second, we need to secure the northern side of the island as a beachhead. It is the easiest spot to land troops, so we need to take control of the three bays before the Orcs know what is happening. That will make bringing reinforcements much easier.

“Third, and most importantly, we need to rescue the Elves who are under siege in Thilvena. Thankfully, the city is hard to pin down, so the Orcs have had no choice but to spread out. Every time it changes position, they have to find it again, which has kept it from being conquered. Still, if we are going to win we’ll need the Elves on our side, which means breaking the siege and joining up with them.”

Shuffling through his notes, Bothy found a few pieces of paper and scanned them before handing the stack to Thorn.

“This is the note we have received from one of our contacts inside Thilvena. It isn’t much to go on, but we should be able to devise our initial plan from that. While you read over that I’m going to gather the other officers so we can plan our landing.”

Nodding, Thorn began to read the paper while Bothy squeezed out of the cabin.

Your Excellency, Duke Carlton,

Sadly, this letter brings no better news than the last. If anything, our situation grows more dire by the hour. I and my queen are heartened to hear that you are on your way. I only pray that you are not too late. The Orc forces are even stronger than the stories of them portray. Each is a match for two or three regular soldiers, and as skilled with weapons as any of our weapon masters. To make matters worse, we have begun to see an increased number of magic users who wield a deadly black fire that consumes the life of anything it touches.

As my last letter detailed, the occupation of Ilha Caelora has expanded to the forest on the peninsula. Thankfully our tree shepherds were able to arrive in time to wake the trees, so the Orcs' progress is slow. Still, they are relentless, and no doubt will eventually consume everything in their path. Though we have managed to stall the main force, roving warbands have gotten around our blockade and have managed to approach Thilvena itself.

Our queen has been forced to move our city regularly to try and avoid the besiegement, but it has taken a toll on her and cannot be maintained forever. The northern coast has been occupied by Orc scouts and our rangers report that they have begun construction on a large harbor in the Twin Bay.

We eagerly await your reinforcements.

Respectfully,

General Ayred Wyn

Placing the letter down on the table, Thorn's brow furrowed slightly. Though the letter seemed quite casual, Thorn could sense the tension hidden behind it. One by one, Thorn thumbed through the rest of the papers, reading over the various reports that had been compiled about the situation on Rasyn. The more he read, the grimmer his face became. Once he was done he carefully stacked the papers together and closed his eyes, his finger tapping on his knee as he began to think through what he had just read. A few minutes later Thorn opened his eyes when he heard Bothy come in with the rest of the officers.

"Alright. We've been assigned to the north of the island. The duke is

going to be assaulting the south with the main force. We also have a force that is going to be attacking from the mountains on the western side of the island to try and put pressure on Maandell which has been seized by the Orcs," Bothy said, pointing to the city on the map. "We'll be landing up here in the forest.

"However, in order to disembark our whole army, we need to take control of one of the bays and turn it into a real harbor. According to the intelligence we've received, the Orcs have already started working on a harbor to try and bypass the forest blockade that the Elves have established. We will be landing a party further west and then will take control of the Twin Bay, using the Orc's work as a foundation for our own. Thorn, I'm going to give this job to you. As our vanguard, we are counting on you to take the Orcs by surprise. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes." Thorn's deep voice rumbled around the cabin. "Will I have my full force?"

"I'll leave that up to you."

As the large ship continued to race toward Rasyn, Bothy outlined his plans one by one, carefully laying out the structure of the entire campaign. The more he listened, the more impressed Thorn became. Despite his sloppy appearance, the fat young earl's mind was meticulous. With contingency plans for every occasion, he layered his subordinates' orders like a mason laying a strong foundation. Listening carefully, Thorn tried to absorb as much as he could.

He had long realized that this sort of strategic thinking was a weakness of his. Thankfully, there were plenty of smart people around him that he could rely on, allowing Nova Luna to flourish. Still, if he could, he wanted to shore up his weaknesses, even as he polished his strengths. The briefing lasted for almost three hours, but Thorn was so engrossed that it seemed to pass by in a flash. When they were finally done and he had squeezed back out of the door and onto the large open deck, he called for his own officers to join him.

Stretching his arms, Thorn looked ahead of the boat to where the mountainous shore of Rasyn's western side had appeared. The strange bubble that allowed the ship to move quickly distorted the mountains, at times making them stretch high into the sky and at others making them shrink down. Behind him, on the quarterdeck, the captain called out a command and the sailors began to scramble about on the sails, getting ready to drop them.

"Excuse me, sir. I need to lay out the line for the mainsail," a sailor said as

he tapped Thorn politely on the arm.

“Hm? Can I help?”

Surprised, the sailor hesitated for a second as his eyes looked Thorn up and down.

“Uh, sure. Yeah, just hold this rope. We need to lower the sail uniformly, so we have to balance it with the other side,” said the sailor, gesturing to the other side of the boat where a line of sailors was holding onto another rope.

“Sounds good. Just let me know when I need to start letting it out.”

Excited to be helping, Thorn held the thick coarse rope and waited for the sailor’s signal. Seeing that everyone was ready, the first mate gave a command and the sailors who had climbed up the mast undid the ties that held the mainsail up. Thorn felt the slight jerk as the rope in his hands went taut. Glancing over, he saw the other row of sailors had begun letting their side drop slowly, so he began to let his rope out, matching their pace.

As the big sail lowered, sailors guided it into rough folds, keeping it stacked in place. Curious about its effect, Thorn looked out toward the horizon where he was surprised to see that the warped bubble had disappeared. The ship was still sailing forward quickly, but the magic that had allowed them to shorten the distance had disappeared as soon as the mainsail began to come down. Once the sail had been tied down, Thorn handed his rope off and turned to talk to the players that had gathered.

CHAPTER FORTY

The salty ocean breeze ruffled Thorn's hair as he looked over the players who had gathered around him. The commanders from the four battalions who had come with him stood together, talking quietly as they waited for Thorn to give them their orders. Next to them, Athena and Mina chatted together, all the while shooting mischievous glances at Thorn. Ignoring their giggling, Thorn looked around for Corvo but was unable to spot him.

"Is Corvo busy still?"

"Uh, he started playing some super complicated version of chess with that Orc, and they're still playing," Mina said with a shrug. "Want me to go get him?"

"No, no need. I'll send him his orders. Alright, lets go over the plan."

Gesturing for all of them to step closer, Thorn shared his map to show them the spot where they would be landing.

"We'll be sending our force out first. While the rest of the army lands, we will be advancing into the forest. Our primary job is to sweep the area for Orc

scouts and take them all out. The second objective is to seize the Twin Bay port that the Orcs are building. We'll need to move as quickly as possible to keep the Orcs from realizing what we're doing. I want to split into two groups. The First, Second, and Tenth battalions will be advancing with me toward Twin Bay. The Fifth battalion will be responsible for clearing the Orcs."

As Thorn was explaining, the hurried sound of footsteps sounded, causing everyone to look up. Slightly disheveled, Corvo and Duratan appeared on the deck, both looking quite embarrassed. Corvo froze for a second when he saw everyone's eyes on him, but Duratan kept walking, forcing the Avatar of Huginn to catch up. Arriving next to Thorn, Corvo bowed low as he apologized.

"I'm sorry, my lord, I lost track of time."

"Did you win?"

"Pardon?" Corvo's brow furrowed as he raised his head.

"Did you win your game?"

"Oh, of course I won." A slightly proud expression flashed across Corvo's face.

"Good. I was just explaining how we are going to deploy. I am going to have you and Duratan stay with the Fifth battalion. You'll be responsible for coordinating all of our battalions as well as making sure our forces are able to eliminate the Orc scouts. Duratan, you can help him. Athena, you'll be with me and the Titan company."

"Sure, sounds good." Athena nodded.

"We don't have a ton of information, but I want everyone ready to go before we land. We'll be forming our attack plan once we get to the Twin Bay. The Fifth battalion will land first and the other battalions will follow. Getting ashore by boat will take too long, so we'll be swimming."

Acknowledging Thorn's orders with a salute, the battalion commanders hurried off to get their troops organized. Staying by the railing, Thorn watched as the shore got closer and closer. The thick forest reached to the very edge of the shore, revealing only a short beach that led down into the water. Soon the ship began to slow and the other sails lowered as the players began to file up onto the deck.

Mina and the rest of the Titan squad arrived and gathered around Thorn. A fluffy red figure dashed out of the hold behind them, swiftly scurrying up onto Thorn's shoulder.

“There you are, did you find anything interesting in your exploration?”

[Yes, master! This big boat is really interesting. The wood smells really good, like magic. And the food was good as well. I found where they kept the fruit and I didn’t have time to finish it all so I brought it with me.]

“Oh? Cool. Wait, what did you do?” Distracted by the players bustling around him, Thorn was only listening with half an ear so it took a moment for Akira’s words to register.

[It was delicious, so I put it in my pouch for later. That way it won’t spoil and I can eat it later when I am hungry again.] Quite proud of herself and her forethought, Akira rubbed her tails against Thorn’s face.

Chuckling, Thorn waved to Bothy, who had climbed the stairs back up to the quarterdeck. Seeing the earl nod, Thorn swept his gaze across the players of the Fifth battalion who were standing by the edge of the ship.

“Fifth battalion, we are counting on you to clear the way. We’ll regroup near Thilvena.”

Taking a deep breath, Thorn was surprised at how nervous he was. With a wave of his hand he signaled for Corvo to go ahead.

“Fifth battalion, deploy!”

After giving his command, Corvo sprinted forward, easily jumping up onto the ship’s railing and launching himself out over the water. A flurry of purple feathers wrapped around him and his body blurred as he shifted into his raven form. Behind him, Duratan rushed forward as well, his golden bracer swirling around him as it transformed into wings on his boots. Leaping up onto the railing, he launched himself into the air as well. Unlike Corvo who was flying freely in the sky, Duratan charged forward, the wings on his feet allowing him to step on the air.

The players of the Fifth battalion followed behind them, rushing to the side of the ship and launching themselves off. Those with movement abilities that allowed them to move through the air flew above the water, but most of the players simply dove from the side of the ship, landing in the water and swimming toward the shore.

As soon as the last of the players from the Fifth battalion jumped down, Thorn nodded to the commanders of the First, Second, and Tenth battalions who led their forces forward. The whole process was quick and within a couple of minutes all four thousand players had left the ship and were about halfway to the shore. Up on the quarterdeck, Bothy held on to the railing and grumbled to himself, completely jealous of the player’s abilities. Once all of

the players were off the ship, Thorn waved to the earl and put on his helmet.

“Want to race?”

Squeaking her agreement, Akira jumped down from his shoulder and dashed toward the side of the ship. Abruptly speeding up when she got to the edge of the deck, she turned into a red streak that flashed down the side of the ship and across the surface of the water. Faint flames streamed from her tail as she sprinted, wrapping her paws in an ethereal energy that propelled her forward.

Breathing out, Thorn activated [Shadow Dash], his body blurring as he rushed toward the edge of the ship. Worried that the rail would simply snap under his weight, he activated [Predator’s Leap] before he reached it, launching himself toward the shore. Despite his efforts, the force of his foot landing on the deck left a shattered board, but Bothy just ignored it and waved for his other officers to start disembarking their troops.

Flying through the air like a meteor, Thorn took a moment to examine where he was going to land. The ship had stopped almost five hundred feet away from the shore and Thorn’s leap was not enough to get him all the way there. Grinning, Thorn curled up his body into a ball as he flew over Akira, landing in the water with a thunderous splash. Plunging down into the depths, Thorn felt the earth below him and his [Spiritual Sense] automatically activated, letting him know that he was about one hundred and fifty feet from the shore.

Hissing in annoyance at the giant waves that Thorn had caused, Akira zigzagged across the top of the water, continuing to sprint toward the beach. In the water under her, Thorn rotated to get his feet under him. He ignored the silt that his landing had kicked up and pushed off, sending himself shooting through the water like a missile. Using the ground for leverage, Thorn charged up toward the beach, bursting from the water like a behemoth. Laughing with enjoyment, he stomped through the waves and up onto the small beach, the other players giving him a wide berth. Looking around, he spotted Mina standing with Heidi and Athena. Akira was relaxing comfortably in Athena’s arms, getting her stomach rubbed.

“Well, that was fun. Alright, let's get ready to go,” Thorn said, flicking some water from his fingers.

Within a few minutes all of the players had arrived at the shore and Corvo led the Fifth battalion away. The other three battalions spread out across the shore, waiting for Thorn’s command. With one last check to make sure that

everything was in order, Thorn opened up his map and set a path to Twin Bay. Sending it to all of the other players, he activated [Pack Travel] and rushed into the forest, three thousand players streaming behind him.

On the boat, Bothy watched them leave and shuddered slightly, drawing a curious look from the officers around him.

“I’m just glad they’re on our side,” Bothy said, waving for the officers to continue with what they were doing.

The forest that surrounded Thorn and the Iron Wolf Army reminded him of Fang Valley, and even with his size Thorn had no issue traveling through it. If anything the Elven forest was even older than the forest in the valley. Each tree was huge, towering over the Iron Wolf Army, the emerald green leaves forming a solid canopy above them. Light filtered through the thick leaves in spots, preventing it from being completely dark.

With their travel skills active, the Iron Wolf Army covered ground at a tremendous rate and it was only a few hours later that they arrived at the rally point that Thorn had set. Waving for everyone to stop, Thorn sat down and concentrated his mind, focusing on his connection with Akira. With a shudder his vision changed as he borrowed her senses to scout out the Orc camp. Akira had run up ahead, stopping at the edge of the forest. Below her, Thorn could hear the ringing of axes as the Orcs worked to clear more of the forest.

A shiver ran through the branch that Akira perched on as one of the nearby trees creaked and began to fall. Slamming into the ground with a loud crack, it was immediately stripped of its leaves and branches by a swarm of bare chested Orcs skillfully wielding hand axes. With an axe in each hand, the Orcs were like machines, cutting away any protrusions and processing the felled tree into a smooth log.

With the branches cleared, another Orc appeared with a thick chain and a hammer. Slamming a spike into the end of the tree, the Orc looped the chain around it and began to tug it down the hill toward the harbor, his massive muscles practically bursting under the strain. A guttural roar sounded as he dug his feet in and pulled, digging a furrow down the hill as he moved the log. As he picked up speed, he passed an Orc carrying a chain climbing up the hill to get the next log.

Down below the hill the Orcs were hard at work constructing large wooden piers on either side of the peninsula that jutted into the ocean between the two bays that gave Twin Bay its name. Countless figures

swarmed the half-built harbor, the sounds of hammers and axes mixed with the guttural yells of the Orc workers. Carefully watching the scene from Akira’s point of view, Thorn examined the Orc forces, trying to identify the threats.

[Akira, can you spot any Orc soldiers?]

[Master, what do Orc soldiers look like?]

Scratching his head, Thorn opened his eyes and gestured for Mina and Delmore to come closer.

“It looks like there are no soldiers at the harbor. That seems really strange to me. Unless maybe they are hiding out in the woods.”

“No soldiers? Then who is building the harbor?” Delmore asked.

“Uh, Orcs?”

For a moment Thorn and Delmore stared at each other blankly until Thorn’s brain caught up.

“Ooh! Those are the soldiers? They looked more like workers to me.”

“Ah, yeah.” This time it was Delmore’s turn to scratch his head. “Orcs are incredible builders. They do for buildings what Dwarves do for smithing. That is one of the things that makes them so dangerous. They bring their infrastructure with them wherever they go. The Orcs you saw do double duty as a construction force and a combat force.”

“I guess I just assumed that they would be using the slaves that they were capturing,” Thorn said, closing his eyes to reestablish his link with Akira. “But I don’t see any slaves anywhere. If all the Orcs are soldiers then we have a serious fight on our hands, so the best thing we can do is hit them before they know we are here. Tell everyone to get ready, we're going straight in."

"Are you sure that rushing them is the best idea?" Mina asked.

"If we can trap most of them on the peninsula, we can limit the number we are facing at once, drastically cutting down on their effectiveness and hopefully preventing any of them from escaping. I want the Tenth battalion to focus on clearing scouts and the loggers, while I'll lead the First and Second battalions to assault directly."

"Got it."

As quietly as they could, the Iron Wolf Army got ready. Splitting into two groups, the Tenth battalion faded into the trees, spreading out to surround the Orc loggers. The Tenth battalion was primarily made up of players with some sort of stealth ability so it was not long before Thorn had lost sight of them

completely. The other two battalions waited quietly in the dim forest for the players of the Tenth battalion to get into position. Opening his hand, Thorn summoned his tetsubo, resting the thick end against the spongy ground.

"Get ready," Thorn said over the team channel. "When we go we're going to go fast. No heroics. I want at least two players on every Orc so find yourself a buddy. Tanks, get ready to establish a defensive line at the edge of the peninsula. There are three half-finished stone buildings we will use to anchor our line, you'll see them when we break the tree line. Alabaster, give the word when you are ready."

After a moment more of silence, the assassin's voice drifted into Thorn's ears.

"We are in place, sir."

"Excellent. Let's not wait around. All units maintain silence until my signal."

Beginning to stride forward, Thorn lifted his tetsubo up onto his shoulder and broke into a run. Behind him, the Iron Wolf Army poured through the woods, their faces grim and their weapons ready.

At the edge of the forest, one of the Orcs paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead when his eye caught a leaf trembling above him. Curious, he reached out with his axe, resting the blade against the tree he had been cutting into. Faint vibrations traveled through the axe blade and up the handle, causing his eyes to widen. Lifting his head to yell, his mouth had just started to open when a thin wire settled over his neck and stabbing pain shot through his side and back. As his world darkened the Orc could see the flash of blades in the sun, cutting down his brethren. By the time he hit the ground, all feeling had faded from his body, and the last thing he saw was a giant boot landing in front of his unblinking eyes.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

When Thorn broke through the treeline he could see Orcs falling all around him as Iron Wolf players attacked from the shadows. As formidable as the muscular Orc soldiers were, they were no match for the players and the edge of the forest was soon dyed red. Stepping over the body of an Orc that Alabaster and EphemeralWhisper had just cut down, Thorn lifted his tetsubo and pointed it down the hill toward the half-built harbor.

“Iron Wolves!”

Behind Thorn the rest of the Iron Wolf Army charged out of the woods, their voices echoing across the bay.

“KILL!”

Like an unstoppable wave, all two thousand players poured down the hill into the unsuspecting Orc workers. Those Orcs unfortunate enough to be caught on the hill were buried under a deluge of flashing spells as the Iron Wolves rushed past them, not even stopping to pick up the coins they dropped. Taken by complete surprise, it took a moment before the Orc

workers realized what was going on. Throwing their tools down, they rushed to pick up their weapons. Yet before they could arm themselves, they were met with a wall of flashing steel.

At the front of the wave, Thorn was the first to reach the scattered Orcs at the bottom of the hill. Arriving in front of a worker who was still staring at the players who had just appeared in frozen shock, Thorn swung his tetsubo. It was a testament to the amazing training of the Orc soldiers that the Orc managed to bring the hammer he gripped up to his chest to try to block Thorn's attack, but his efforts proved futile as Thorn's weapon smashed through his defenses, sending him tumbling over the heads of the workers behind him.

"Iron Wolves!" Thorn roared, reversing his swing to cut down another Orc.

"KILL!"

Bursting forward as they shouted, the DPS players rushed into the Orc workers, attacking with all their might. A few steps behind them, Heidi and SoulSeeker organized the tanks into a wall and hurried into position. Establishing a line all the way across the peninsula that thrust out into the Twin Bay, the tanks began to push forward under Heidi's direction, cutting down any Orcs that slipped through the DPS players' mad rush forward, and slowly squeezing the Orcs into a smaller and smaller space.

At first, the DPS players made good progress, pushing almost a third of the way down the peninsula. Thorn was still at the front, hammering away at any Orc in his prodigious range. Blocking an attack with the pommel of his tetsubo, he spun around, sending out a spinning back kick that obliterated the attacking Orc. Using his spin to sweep his eyes across the battlefield, he saw that the speed of the DPS players' assault was beginning to flag as the Orcs increased in number. As more and more Orcs rushed over, the DPS players no longer outnumbered the Orcs, and while they were generally a match for the Orcs one on one, they were not able to take them down nearly as fast.

"Vanguard, pull back!" Thorn's voice rang out in the team channel, causing an immediate reaction.

Executing all sorts of skills, the Iron Wolf DPS players disengaged with the Orcs they were fighting and rushed back through the tank line which approached behind them. Though startled by the abrupt change, the Orcs were natural fighters and stormed forward, trying to chase down the players they had just been fighting. Jumping backward, Thorn took his place next to

Heidi, his eyes scanning the incoming wave of Orcs.

Most of the Orc workers had dropped their tools and picked up axes, scimitars, or warhammers. Though most wore no armor at all, Thorn could see the odd pauldron here or set of greaves there. Sprinting forward, the Orcs roared out a battlecry of their own as they slammed into the Iron Wolf tank line with a sickening thud. Two of the largest Orc warriors came straight for Thorn, attacking him together. One Orc armed with two axes slashed at Thorn's side while the other, wielding a massive warhammer, tried to bring it down on Thorn's head.

Sweeping his tetsubo in a tight arc to knock the two axes aside, Thorn reached up and caught the head of the hammer in his hand, his foot lashing out at the same moment. The toe of his boot nailed the war hammer-wielding Orc in the chest, caving it in and sending him flying, his warhammer still held tightly in Thorn's hand. With a flick of his hand, Thorn tossed the warhammer up into the air and caught the handle, bringing it down on the axe wielding Orc's shoulder with a crunch. As the now crippled Orc staggered, an [Ice Spike] flashed past Thorn's shoulder and stabbed into the Orc's mouth, silencing his bellow of pain.

Like a wave breaking against a stone wall, the charging Orcs slammed into the Iron Wolf tank line, their advance halted completely as the players activated their invulnerability skills. As soon as the Orcs bounced off, Heidi raised her sword and brought it down on the Orc in front of her, her voice lifting above the din of battle.

"Strike!"

Acting as one, the tanks unleashed their counter-attack, their swords, maces, flails, axes, and warhammers smashing into the Orc line, causing them to stagger back. Each a skilled fighter in their own right, the Orcs were able to block the counter attack for the most part, but the real danger came from the spells and missile weapons that flew over the tanks' heads. Waves of fire, spears of lightning, frozen blades, and a thousand other attacks crashed into the Orcs who were busy trying to ward off the players in front of them.

Threading their way through the spells came arrows, their points glinting with elemental colors. Slipping past the Orcs' defenses, they plunged into their bodies, exploding with a flurry of elemental effects. The arrows destroyed the Orc formation, allowing the spells to land with maximum impact.

“Vanguard, forward!”

Following Thorn’s command, the DPS players dashed forward, cutting through the few Orcs who survived the rain of spells. Charging deep into the Orc formation, the DPS players worked together to cut down as many Orcs as they could. Attacking in groups of three to four allowed them to use their primary attacking abilities in rotation, overpowering their enemies with ease. As they advanced, spells and missiles rained down around them, forcing the Orcs in front of them into a defensive stance, which allowed the Iron Wolf players to maintain their forward momentum.

Thorn maintained his position in the tank line, keeping a careful eye on the Orcs rushing toward the attacking players. He could see a thick block of Orc soldiers forming up in the distance. It looked like they were surrounding a particular Orc who held a tall staff or spear, but they were just too far away for Thorn to see them clearly.

“Tanks, forward!” Heidi shouted, taking a step forward with her shield raised in front of her.

Mirroring her, the rest of the tank line advanced as well, pushing forward into the peninsula. With nearly 900 tanks from the three battalions, the Iron Wolf tank line stretched all the way across the base of the landmass. In front of them, the half finished buildings of the harbor stood in well ordered rows. A wide road ran down the center of the peninsula, splitting off to each of the six piers jutting out into the twin bays.

“First Battalion, take the road. Second Battalion, lock off the right side, Tenth Battalion tanks, take the left.”

Hearing Heidi snapping out commands to the different battalions even as her eyes raked across the charging Orcs, Thorn could barely suppress his smile. At first, he had been nervous about putting a player that he had just met in such an important position, but after watching the Society of Roses try and recruit her, he knew that there would be no issues with her abilities. Despite being new, Heidi had quickly solidified her position as the best tank in both Nova Luna and the Iron Wolf Army. A combination of a pleasant, humble attitude and overwhelming competence had blown any complaints away.

Turning his attention back to the group of Orcs in the distance, Thorn saw the figure in the middle lifting its staff and a sense of danger ran through the back of his mind. The figure was too far away for his [Spiritual Sense] to reach, so Thorn closed his eyes and focused on his connection with Akira.

[Akira, can you see what is going on in the center of the peninsula?]

[Of course, master!]

[Only if you won't get caught.]

[Master, I am the best Ailuridae. The big dumb slow Orcs couldn't catch me if they wanted to.]

A furry red streak flashed past Thorn's shoulder as Akira launched herself toward one of the half-finished buildings. Scrambling up the stone side, she dashed across a long piece of timber and jumped to the next building. Accelerating until even Thorn had trouble following her form, she jumped from building to building, working her way down the peninsula. Within a few moments she had arrived near enough to the block of Orcs to see what was going on.

The Orcs who had gathered were all thickly built, their bulging muscles making the Orcs charging toward the Iron Wolf Army look small. Holding their position in a solid formation, these Orcs appeared to be a bit more disciplined than the other Orcs, though Thorn could still detect some of their impatience from the way they fidgeted with their weapons. Standing at the center of the formation was a smaller Orc who was dressed in a long, ragged robe and carried a tall staff with a beast skull rattling on the end. The smaller Orc was twisting and turning in a strange dance, bizarre sounds drifting from his throat to mix with the rattle of the beast skull.

[Akira, can you keep an eye on him? I think he is up to something dangerous.]

[Should I attack him, master?] Akira wiggled her body in excitement. [I could just burn him all up!]

[Hold on, we're going to come up to attack that group. Once they're distracted, you can attack.]

Opening his eyes, Thorn looked down at Heidi who stood next to him.

"One of the shamans is ahead and he seems to be summoning something big. I'm going to take the Titan Squad to deal with him. Stay here to run the tank and DPS line. Try and push up as fast as possible. The sooner we can end this, the faster we can get our spawn point established."

"Got it." Heidi nodded and immediately began to reorganize the tanks and DPS players to accommodate the change.

"Titan Squad, to me."

Close to one hundred players swarmed toward Thorn, quickly forming up next to him. As he lifted his tetsubo to order the charge, Athena called for

him to wait.

“Hold on there, Thorn. Give me a second to work my magic.”

Lifting her hands, Athena placed them together in front of her chest, as if she was praying. A glowing red halo began to spread from her feet, spinning around like the petals of a flower. Faster and faster the petals spun, until they formed a blur under her feet. Suddenly the petals began to spread out around her, filling the air with glowing red flowers. As the flowers passed through the players around her, they began to attach to them, spinning around them and covering them with a red glow.

Changing the position of her hands, Athena began a different prayer and a bright yellow glow began to form at her feet, repeating the same process that the magical red flowers had taken. Within less than a minute, there were three different colored flowers rotating around each of the players in the Titan Squad. Done with her prayers, Athena drew her sword and lifted it in front of her chest. Crossing her other hand across her blade, she tapped her gauntlet against the metal, causing a chime to ring out over the players under her buff.

The three rotating flowers, one red, one yellow, and one blue, pulled together in front of each player, linking together with a green vine made from energy. As the vine spiraled around each player, long thorns sprouted from it, giving the magical buffing spell a fearsome look.

“There we go. Strength, endurance, and mana buffs with an added damage reflection. We’re good to go.”

Marveling at the sudden strength and energy that filled him, Thorn smiled thankfully at his aunt.

“You heard her, soldiers. Our goal is the Orc shaman in the middle of the peninsula.” Lifting his tetsubo, Thorn pointed it forward. “Titan Squad!”

“KILL!”

Energized by Athena’s spell, the Titan Squad rushed forward. With Thorn at point they smashed through the Orcs like a river bursting from a dam. Athena and SoulSeeker flanked Thorn, their shields held up at an angle to knock any Orcs that survived the spinning tetsubo to the side. Mina ran between them, right behind Thorn, her three icy orbs rotating at full speed, a constant torrent of [Ice Spikes] pouring out of them.

Each step Thorn took shook the ground, knocking dust from the half built structures around them. Spreading his [Spiritual Sense] into the ground in front of him, Thorn used the earth element to harden and smooth it, giving the squad a solid path to follow. Each step carried him forward a tremendous

distance, causing the Titan Squad to have to sprint to keep up. Between Athena's buff, [Pack Travel], and the smooth ground they were rushing over, the Titan Squad stormed forward at an unbelievable speed.

As they closed in on the group of large Orcs, Thorn could see them beginning to react. The biggest of the Orcs let out a guttural roar, calling for the surrounding Orcs to rush toward the advancing players, trying in vain to slow them down. Though more and more Orcs rushed into the Titan Squad's path, the sheer momentum of Thorn and the players behind him could not be stopped. His whirling tetsubo turned into a meat grinder, ripping apart any Orc foolish enough to get close.

Seeing that it was not helping, the big Orc roared again, causing the regular Orcs to step back. Gathering half of the larger Orcs around him, the big Orc lifted his double-handed axe and roared, igniting a crimson glow that surrounded him. As the veins on his neck and arms began to swell, the Orcs around him threw back their heads and echoed his roar, causing the crimson glow to swirl around them as well. As the glow sprang up around each of them, it began to link together, growing into a towering flame that reached into the sky.

A ferocious grin spread across Thorn's face as he saw the Orcs begin to charge forward. Picking up speed, he lifted his tetsubo and let out a roar of his own.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Despite the burning excitement that filled him, Thorn found his mind operating at an unbelievable rate. His [Spiritual Sense] enveloped his mind, keeping it clear and cool in the midst of the adrenaline that coursed through his body. The world seemed to slow down around him, everything in his vision jumping into sharp relief. A million details were laid out in front of him, but rather than being overwhelming, Thorn found it simple to shift his focus from one detail to the next. As his foot landed on the dirt road, countless new details flashed through his mind and a clear plan began to form.

The Orcs who had ignited their ability swelled in size, already muscular bodies becoming even more exaggerated. Roaring challenges, they charged toward the incoming Titan Squad, their weapons raised high.

Keeping pace behind Thorn, Mina flicked her wand, sending a stream of [Ice Spikes] toward the incoming wall of muscle. The razor sharp shards of ice whizzed past Thorn’s head, crossing the distance to the advancing Orcs in

an instant only to bounce off without doing a thing. Thorn's eyes narrowed slightly as he saw the red glowing haze that surrounded the Orcs eat away at the sharp points of the [Ice Spikes], turning them into little more than ice cubes.

Annoyed, Mina flicked her wand again, a short chant spilling from her lips. The three rotating ice orbs above her shivered and then lined up above her head. Spinning quickly, the frost aura that streamed from the ice orbs gathered together, forming a spinning [Ice Spear] floating above her head. Another flick of her wand and the [Ice Spear] shot forward toward the chest of one of the enraged Orcs. This time the glowing crimson aura failed to blunt the attack, forcing the Orc to lift his axe to deflect it.

"Ranged attackers, engage!"

Not bothering to use the private channel, Thorn's deep voice carried easily over the din of the battle. Reacting as soon as they heard his voice, the Titan Squad's ranged players began to throw their attacks toward the Orcs in front of them. Reacting just as quickly, the Orcs raised their weapons, doing their best to block the attacks that peppered them. Relying on the rage aura that surrounded them and their muscular bodies, they simply endured the attacks that they could not block, doing their best to power through.

Swatting aside a frost covered arrow, the largest Orc roared a challenge at Thorn and lifted his axe high into the air when the ground suddenly sank under his foot and he tumbled forward, the charging Orcs behind him falling into the hole that had abruptly appeared. While the ranged attackers had thrown out their attacks, Thorn had spread his [Spiritual Sense] forward, seizing the earth element in the ground under the charging Orc's feet and pulling it downward, causing the earth in front of them to become soft.

Caught off guard, the front row of Orcs tripped, half falling as they tried to catch themselves. Though they did not fall completely thanks to their powerful athletic ability, the Orcs were forced to slow their charge as they piled up. Taking advantage of the confusion, Thorn gave the command for the Titan Squad to engage, and all around him the tanks used their charge abilities.

[Shadow Dash]

His form blurring, Thorn launched himself over the hole that he had created and into the midst of the Orcs' disrupted line, appearing in a burst of shadow even as SoulSeeker and Athena broke into the Orc's formation. Arriving next to an Orc in the middle of the group, Thorn reached out, his

large fingers wrapping around the surprised Orc's throat. Razor sharp claws sliced through the Orc's skin, sending blood flying as Thorn squeezed. With no space to swing his tetsubo, Thorn relied on his razor sharp claws to rip through the Orcs surrounding him.

It took a moment for the Orcs to realize what was happening, and by the time they did three more of their members had fallen to Thorn's claws. Counter to his expectation, the enemies who surrounded him did not back off, and instead, driven into an even greater fury by the blood of their companions, they attacked Thorn fiercely. Accepting their attacks, Thorn relied on his thick armor for defense, gouging and kicking any enemy that got close.

A widening circle of bodies began to form around him as he fought, each of his blows laying out an Orc. Catching an incoming scimitar, Thorn snapped it in half while delivering a backhanded slash to the Orc wielding it. Formed into a blade, his hand sliced through the Orc's chest with ease, his [Quicksilver Claws] granting his metal gauntlets supernatural sharpness.

Jerking backward, the Orc fell to the ground, blood streaming from the nasty gash on his chest. Showing no hesitation, Thorn stomped forward, his heavy metal boot falling on the Orc's prone form. Expecting to feel the resistance of the Orc's hard bones, Thorn felt nothing at all as his foot slammed down into the dirt. Surprised, he glanced down, and saw that the Orc had managed to roll out of the way. About to go after the injured Orc, Thorn felt a sense of acute danger from his side.

Out of the swirling melee the large blade of an axe slashed toward Thorn's ribs, forcing him to summon his tetsubo to block. The huge Orc behind the attack was still a head shorter than Thorn but the power in his arm was obvious from the sheer speed of his slash. Even with the hyper awareness from his [Spiritual Sense], Thorn was barely able to get his weapon out in time. With his body already tilted forward to chase down the Orc he had just injured, the force of the axe attack sent him stumbling.

Rather than try to catch himself, Thorn threw his weight behind his fall to try and escape the next attack that he knew was coming. Tucking his shoulder, he rolled over, his massive body smashing into an unfortunate Orc who was nearly crushed under his weight. Stabbing his hand down to finish the job, Thorn came up into a crouch. His [Spiritual Sense] spread around him, alerting him that another axe attack was about to reach his back. Spinning on his heels, he leaned forward, his tetsubo across his chest.

DIIIIIIIINNNNGG

The sound of the axe blade and the tetsubo meeting rang like a bell across Twin Bay. This time, Thorn had been ready for the attack and his body did not move even an inch, stopping the large Orc in place. Grinning under his helmet, Thorn surged into action.

[Wolf's Rage]

Wielding his weapon with one hand, Thorn used it like a sword, stabbing forward with the spiked end of his tetsubo. Caught off guard with how fast Thorn was moving, the big Orc barely got far enough out of the way of Thorn's thrust to avoid losing his head. A large crimson cut appeared on his cheek, only adding to his savage look. Backpedaling, he tried to create some space, but Thorn simply took a half step forward and flicked his wrist, sending his tetsubo into the big Orc's shoulder with bone crunching force.

Releasing a roar of pain, the big Orc forgot all about trying to escape and launched himself at Thorn with abandon. Lifting his large axe over his head, he intended to slash Thorn in half, but before he managed to bring the axe down Thorn had taken another step forward, his lowered shoulder slamming into the Orc's chest. Thorn's body check knocked the air out of the big Orc and lifted him into the air. Unfortunately for the Orc, Thorn's other hand reached out and grabbed his leg.

Spinning around, Thorn flailed at the surrounding Orcs with the large Orc tightly gripped in his hand. After battering everyone around him away, Thorn turned in another circle and launched the big Orc at one of the mostly finished stone buildings. The resulting explosion of wood, stone, and mortar as the second floor of the building collapsed peppered the Orcs with debris, managing to shock most of them out of their rage.

Not wanting to waste even a second of [Wolf's Rage], Thorn charged into the Orc lines, continuing to disrupt them. All around him, the members of the Titan Squad who had accompanied him joined in, and soon the path to the still chanting Shaman was clear.

"Stop his chant!" Thorn roared, his burning eyes fixed on the Shaman.

The few Orcs who surrounded the Shaman gulped at the sight of nearly 100 players charging at them, but they still lined up to block the way. These Orcs were armed with axes and small metal shields, and their bodies, while still largely bare, had pieces of armor strapped here and there. Even as he charged forward, Thorn could not help but appreciate the level of training that these Orcs showed. Far from a mindless group of savages, the Shaman's

guards concentrated their defense wherever Thorn seemed to be going.

“I’ll break the line, you take down the Shaman!”

“Got it!” Mina replied, staying just a step behind Thorn.

As Thorn came within reach of the Orc guards, the two Orcs directly in front of him darted forward, using a shield bash to stop his charge in place. Despite being knocked back by the force of the impact, they still managed to halt him in place. As more Orcs tried to move forward to engage him, Athena and SoulSeeker intercepted them, guarding Thorn’s right and left sides. Behind him, Mina cast [Ice Pillar], focusing it under her own feet.

Rising into the air on the top of the growing pillar of ice, Mina opened her mouth, uttering an arcane command as she pointed her wand at the dancing Shaman. The three ice orbs spinning around her head shot out in front of her, forming a slowly rotating triangle. As each orb rotated it released a constant barrage of razor sharp shards of ice that shot down at the Shaman.

Just as it looked like the magical attack was going to skewer the Shaman, a red and gold flecked shield of energy appeared between the ice spikes and the Shaman. With the sound of breaking glass the ice spikes shattered one after another, not even causing the shield to ripple. Pausing his chant long enough to cackle gleefully, the Shaman lifted his staff and rattled the head. Thick, noxious red smoke began to pour from the eyes of the skull, rapidly filling the area with a disgusting smell.

“Ahahaha, your filthy magic will not work on me, witch!” Showing a mouth full of rotting teeth, the Orc Shaman grinned at Mina. “The holy sun empowers me and it protects me from your pitiful powers! Ahahaha! I shall summon the sun and it shall burn all unbelievers to the ground!”

“Shut it, wacko.”

Her eyes narrowing, Mina began to speak rapidly. The arcane words spilling from her lips hung in the air, formed from icy energy that cracked as it encountered the air. Dark clouds began to form at a rapid rate, pelting the area around the Shaman with freezing rain. Another flick of her wand summoned a swirling wind that turned the heavy, half-frozen raindrops into razor sharp blades that spun into a cyclone.

Once again, the red and gold shield appeared around the Shaman. Each swirling drop that hit the shield produced a high pitched *ting*, as if it had been shattered, before disappearing. No matter how the cyclone spun, the shield protected the Shaman completely. It was only after the storm dissipated that the red and gold shield finally faded away.

Still cackling, the Shaman aimed his staff at the Orcs around him, surrounding them with trails of smoke that began to burrow into the Orcs' eyes and mouths. As the Titan Squad watched, the Orcs who ingested the smoke began to grow, pulsing red veins squirming under their skin as their bodies began to swell. Frowning, Mina flicked her wand, casting [Sub Zero] on the Shaman to try and disrupt him, only to see the red and gold shield shimmer into place again, completely blocking the effect of the stun spell. Unwilling to give up, Mina summoned a thick ice spear and launched it at the Shaman, only to pale when it shattered as easily as the ice spikes had moments before.

"Thorn, I think that's a spell immunity shield. I won't be able to take him down!"

His eyes narrowed, Thorn glanced at the shielded Orc Shaman, his mind spinning with ideas as he tried to come up with the fastest way to bring the Shaman down. The Orc guards in between them were growing into hulking monstrosities and Thorn could not help but think they would be taller than him before they were done growing.

"Tanks, fill my gap. I'll take him down." Athena's crisp voice jerked Thorn from his thoughts.

Before he could respond, Athena had darted forward, leaving Thorn no option but to step into the gap to prevent the line from being broken. As the other Titan Squad tanks filled in, he could see Athena weaving her way through the Orc lines, getting closer and closer to the Shaman.

[Last Blossom of Fall]

Spinning and dancing like a falling leaf blown by an autumn wind, Athena drifted between the Orc guards. Sometimes she moved to the left or right, or even stepped rapidly back. Despite her erratic movement, she got closer and closer to the Shaman with each moment, leaving the bewildered Orc guards behind her. Finally, only a single Orc stood between her and the Shaman, a hulking brute of a guard whose eyes glowed red from the smoke that he had inhaled.

Completely calm, Athena lifted her shield and advanced rapidly. With a deafening roar, the Orc lifted his axe to strike down at Athena's head, bringing it down as he blocked her path with his shield. Taking a quick step, Athena abruptly dashed forward diagonally, her shield only an inch from the Orc's. Seeing her get so close, the Orc grinned in triumph and bashed out with his shield, intending to knock her back. Despite how close they were,

the Orc felt no impact, causing no small amount of confusion.

When he looked down from his great height he could see that his shield was now only half an inch from Athena's, yet no matter how he moved, he could not seem to close that distance. Floating back as the Orc extended his arm, Athena maintained that sliver of air between them, never letting the shields meet, even as the air that his shield bash had moved swirled around her. Once the momentum of the Orc's shield bash had been emptied the Orc who was completely confused started to step forward. It was then that Athena made her move.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

With her shield only half an inch from the surprised Orc guard's shield, Athena started to draw away as he stepped forward, maintaining the distance with astounding precision. Bringing the hilt of her sword to her waist, she abruptly moved her shield to the side and stabbed forward, the tip of her sword heading straight for the Orc fighter's small shield. Just as those watching thought that her sword would bounce off the Orc's shield, he twisted it to the side, following the trajectory of Athena's shield, as if the shields were tied together.

The silvery blade slipped past the edge of the shield and angled up, sliding neatly into the large Orc's throat. As quickly as it came, the sword retreated as Athena spun away, leaving the Orc to clasp futilely at his throat as he fell to his knees. As the blood dripped down onto his chest, the Orc guard knew that his life was ending and reached out desperately for Athena's back. Neatly sidestepping his outstretched hand, Athena continued her rush toward the Shaman, her expression focused.

Seeing that Athena was only a hundred feet away and closing quickly, the Shaman sneered. He lifted his staff and murmured a gutteral phrase as he shook the skull on the end. The skull's two eyes that had been spewing the foul smelling red smoke glowed intensely for a moment and then the skull's mouth let out a cackle of its own. The screeching laughter rang across the battlefield, causing everyone who heard it to wince in pain. With the staff directly in front of her, Athena bore the brunt of the attack. Staggering slightly, she nevertheless continued her charge toward the Shaman.

Perturbed that his attack did not stop her, the Shaman reached into a pouch at his waist. Pulling out a handful of small glittering stones, he threw them up into the air. As the pebbles rose, the thick red smoke swirled around them in thin tendrils that looked like squirming snakes. When the pebbles reached the apex of their rise, the Shaman screamed out a command and the smoke around the pebbles began to swirl even faster. Thin cords of smoke combined, growing thicker and thicker as they linked the glowing pebbles together.

All of the smoke that had not already been absorbed into the Orc guards rapidly gathered, twisting into a huge humanoid shape that plunged down to the ground, landing with an earth shaking thump halfway between the Orc Shaman and Athena. Rising to its full height, the four meter tall smoke elemental lifted its arms into the air, as if it was letting out a silent scream. Towering over the entire battlefield, the smoke elemental took a ponderous step forward, leaving a corroded pit where it had just been standing. Reaching out, the smoke elemental rested its hand on one of the half finished buildings as it took another step. Within moments, the stone wall had begun to crumble as the red smoke corroded it away.

"Athena!"

Worried about his aunt, Thorn was about to activate [Predator's Leap] when her calm voice came through the chat, dousing the raging anxiousness that was running through his veins.

"Calm down, kid. I've been doing this for longer than you've been alive."

Still charging forward, Athena appeared completely calm, her eyes fixed on the cackling Shaman who had planted his staff in front of him. The glowing eyes of the staff had returned to spewing red smoke into the air, but this time it was feeding directly into the smoke elemental who seemed to be growing by the second. The Shaman used his other hand to caress a rough amulet that he wore on his chest. Formed from a dark stone, the misshapen

amulet had the shape of a crudely carved sun. As the Shaman stroked it, a faint red glow awoke inside, slowly growing in intensity.

Now only ten feet from Athena, the smoke elemental raised one of its massive arms, bringing it down on her head with descriptive slowness. Even though it appeared to be moving at a snail's pace, Thorn could tell how fierce the attack was even from a distance. Seeing Athena standing in the smoke elemental's way worried him and he had to once again suppress the urge to run to her rescue. Swallowing, Thorn forced himself to focus on his task, trusting her words that she would be okay. Blocking an attack aimed at SoulSeeker, he swung his tetsubo around in a wide arc, clipping two Orc Guards who were sent spinning.

As the giant fist of the smoke elemental fell toward her head, Athena brought her sword up to her chest. The pommel of her sword, which held five petal shaped gems, began to light up, casting a rainbow glow over her armor. The green gem was the first to light up, the gentle light spilling out of it and filling Athena's surroundings. Within an instant, it had formed the shape of an ethereal flower bud around her.

Thorn watched anxiously as the smoke elemental's fist slammed down on the top of the green bud, enveloping it in a thick blanket of red smoke. Inside the green bud, Athena slung her shield onto her back and gripped her sword with both hands. Lifting it up until the hilt was in line with her eyes, she breathed out and closed her eyes, ignoring the corrosion appearing at the edges of the green bud that surrounded her.

A soft red and yellow light began to shine on Athena's face as the two red and yellow gems on her sword's pommel lit up. The light shimmered and spread from her, flowing down to her feet where a red and yellow halo rotated around her. All across the battlefield, the Titan Squad players who had accompanied Thorn to go after the Shaman felt a slight tug and the red and yellow petals that spun around them detached suddenly.

Like a stream of flowers being dragged down a drain, the slightly jagged red petals and the sharp, smooth yellow petals flowed toward the green bud that was surrounded by smoke. Flying through the air, they disappeared into the smoke elemental's arm, sinking through the translucent green bud and fixing themselves to the halos at Athena's feet. The more petals that connected to the halo, the faster it spun until, with the final petal, it was nothing but a blur. Athena's eyes snapped open, seeming to fix themselves on the Shaman despite the fact that she could not see him.

The Orc Shaman could sense Athena's gaze and the feeling of danger it brought caused him to speed up his actions. By this point the amulet around his neck was beginning to emit a blinding yellow light and an intense heat that burned the Orc Shaman's skin. Rather than stop, the burning of his flesh seemed to excite the Shaman who broke into a frenzied chant, all the while stroking the amulet faster and faster.

Athena took a step forward, her body lowering into a charging stance as she raised her sword over her head. The tip of her sword poked through the top of the bud, slipping outside of the green energy's protection. The instant that it appeared, the green bud began to split open and Athena moved. Spreading like a new bloom, the red and yellow petals erupted out of the bud, their spinning leaves dicing through everything in their path. The grinding petals began slashing through the corrosive red smoke that made up the smoke elemental's arm, dispersing it as the elemental tried to jerk its arm away.

Enraged by the loss of part of its arm, the smoke elemental started to lift its foot to smash Athena, but before it could, she charged straight into its other leg. Red and yellow flashing petals churned up the smoke like a massive fan, blowing it apart and causing the Smoke elemental to stumble. As it fell, Athena charged further into it. A faint series of popping sounds rang out as the glowing pebbles floating in the chest of the smoke elemental were ground to dust under the relentless spinning of the petals.

With the destruction of the first glowing stones, the smoke elemental began to destabilize further, collapsing in on itself. As it fell, more of the floating stones came into contact with Athena's red and yellow spinning flowers, exploding into dust that was quickly swept away along with the smoke. Within a few seconds the smoke elemental was gone, leaving a clear path to the now panicking Orc Shaman.

Letting out a screech, the Shaman gripped the burning hot amulet that was around his neck and gave a sharp tug. Ignoring the fact that the skin on his hands was burning up, the Shaman ripped the amulet from his neck and thrust it toward Athena. A concentrated spurt of magma erupted from the amulet, growing as it shot out over the forty feet that separated Athena from the Shaman.

Keeping her composure, Athena's eyes flickered as she examined the spinning flower around her. The red and yellow flower petals had lost some of their luster and the whole formation was rotating slower than it had been

initially. Trying to judge if it would be enough to deal with the Shaman, Athena decided not to risk it. Lifting her sword above her head, she spoke softly, commanding the red and yellow petals that spun around her to fly up.

Stacking against each other, they formed a large blade of energy around her sword, lengthening her reach significantly. Behind her, the blue petals that were still rotating around the Titan Squad players detached and shot toward the blade. For a moment, the battlefield was once again filled with swirling flowers, this time blue. Taking a decisive step forward, Athena slashed down at the incoming gout of magma.

The blue flower petals spun around the sword, attaching themselves to the front edge and point of the blade as it struck down. With a blinding flash the blue edge of Athena's flower petal blade cut into the magma, splitting the stream in half. Undeterred, the blue edge separated from Athena's blade, shooting forward toward the Shaman. Unable to respond in time, the Orc Shaman could only watch in shock as the flower petal blade cut through his fire spell like a hot knife through snow.

As the blade approached his chest, the red and gold shield that had blocked all of Mina's spells appeared around him. This time, it only lasted for a brief second before shattering under the force of the powered up slash. Athena's attack cut through the Shaman's chest, bisecting him neatly before continuing to cut the partly finished building behind him in half. Without enough time to even scream, the Shaman died, leaving stunned silence in the wake of the attack. As a lull fell over the battlefield, Thorn did not waste the opportunity.

"All players, all out attack!"

Issuing the command through the team chat, Thorn tightened his grip on his tetsubo and scooped up the large axe that the leader of the Orc Guards had dropped. Storming forward, he charged into the Orc lines, the two weapons combined with his long reach and unbelievable strength reaping the lives of the remaining Orcs like a combine. The rest of the Titan Squad gave him a wide berth, not wanting to get caught up in the whirlwind of his attacks.

Back at the entrance to the peninsula, Heidi led the rest of the Iron Wolves to charge forward, going all out against the shaken Orcs. With both their commander and their elite troops dead, the Orc workers did not last long against the Iron Wolf assault. Soon the Iron Wolf players under Heidi's command caught up to the Titan Squad, and with the two forces working together, the remaining Orcs were pushed into the tip of the peninsula.

“Tanks, keep the line steady! I want melee DPS on the left. Ranged DPS, focus the enemy down one at a time!” Snapping out commands, Heidi organized the Iron Wolf players as they cut down the last few Orcs. “Take it slow and steady, we don’t want any casualties.”

When the last of the Orc workers fell to the combined blaze of six fireballs, she let out a sigh and sheathed her sword. Resting the pointed edge of her kite shield on the ground, she waved to Thorn and Athena who were watching.

“I’m still mad she joined Nova Luna.” Athena said with a laugh as she returned the wave.

“Yeah, we picked up a gem.” Thorn agreed. “Heidi, is the harbor clear?”

“Yes, sir. I had the last sweep done and this was the final group of enemies. With them gone, the harbor is ours.”

“Great, I’m going to report our victory, but let’s start doing an inventory of what we need to repair and what we need to finish. I want to get a spawn point up here as soon as possible. Otherwise, we’ll be in trouble once we start losing soldiers.”

“Yes, sir!”

Slamming her fist into her chest in a warrior’s salute, Heidi flipped her shield onto her back and hurried off to give directions to the Iron Wolf players. Under her direction the players rushed to determine the extent of the damage that had been caused to the harbor while Thorn called Corvo.

“Hey, boss. What’s up?”

“We’re clear here.”

“Already? You were not messing around, huh?” Corvo shook his head. “We have cleared the scouts around here, but we can’t find a good spot to stage a camp. The forest is much denser than we thought it would be.”

“Probably an Elven defensive measure,” Thorn mused, scratching his chin. “The Orcs were almost done with building the harbor here at Twin Bay, so we could probably use this as our base. We caused some damage with our attack, but once we’ve fixed it up, I don’t see why we wouldn’t fit.”

“Makes sense. I’ll pitch the idea to the Earl. How long do you think it will take to get everything in order?”

“With players working on it? We can probably be done by the end of the day. I’ll get everyone working on defenses.”

“Great. It’ll take us about six hours to get down to you, though the ship might be faster,” Corvo said. As Thorn watched through the video screen,

Corvo activated [Raven Form]. The image shifted from Corvo to his vision as he transformed into a bird and launched himself into the air, flying back toward the ship.

“How did your scouting go?” Thorn asked.

“Smoothly. Almost too smoothly.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Orcs don’t seem to have come this far north. To my best guess they are stuck searching for Thilvena every time it moves, which is keeping them further south. We found a few pockets of scouts, but they were poorly organized and just attacked our teams as soon as they saw us. Not very scout-like if you ask me. It almost feels like the game is trying to give us the space to set up so that we are well established for the fight. We should probably gear up for a long campaign.”

“Got it. I’ll let everyone else know. Oh, if you happen to run across a strange looking guy with a box on his back, let me know. One of my friends should be wandering around here somewhere looking for me.”

“Strange guy with a box on his back? Is that Alph? The guy you met down in the Elven tomb? Sure, I’ll tell everyone to keep their eyes peeled.”

“Great, talk to you soon.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Closing the call, Thorn walked through the half built buildings to where Athena and Mina stood with Delmore and the rest of the Titan Squad.

“Corvo is going to talk to the Earl about using the harbor as our staging point. I want to get the harbor finished as quickly as possible. I also want to establish defenses in case there is a counter attack,” Thorn said, gesturing to the buildings around him. “Let’s do an inventory to see what we are working with and then we’ll split into work groups.”

“Got it,” Delmore said, nodding. “What sort of defenses are you thinking?”

“We will use the instant wall that we set up back at the camp in Angoril. We can support the back of it with dirt and reinforce it with logs. I’ll be responsible for handling that. Once I’m done with the defenses we’ll work on the buildings. Oh, and we’ll need to make sure that the main pier is done as well. The ship we came over in has a serious draft.”

“Draft?”

“The part of the hull below the water line,” Athena said, clearing Delmore’s confusion. “Thorn, where do you want me?”

“Do you still need to rest? That was quite the attack you launched.”

“No, I’m good to go. That attack borrows strength from the group I’ve buffed so it isn’t that draining.”

“Great, you can help Delmore handle the teams rebuilding the harbor. Focus on buildings that can bunk soldiers and the warehouses for supplies.”

Once everyone had their orders, the Iron Wolf Army got to work and Thorn brought two hundred players with him to set up a wall around the harbor. With only a single exposed side to the south, Thorn focused on a barrier that would protect against attacks from the forest. The entrance to the peninsula had three large stone buildings that had already been erected, so Thorn focused on reinforcing them while the other players strung the instant wall they had brought from the valley between the buildings.

Forming the defensive wall in a concave shape, the players began sinking the posts they carried in their inventory before stretching out the cloth wall across them. While they did that, Thorn used his command of the earth to add an extra layer of thickness to the outside wall of each of the buildings. After he had reinforced the three buildings, Thorn began raising walls of dirt on either side of the cloth wall that the other players had stretched between them. Using his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] to permeate the dirt, it was not hard to lift the dirt and pack it tightly together. Apart from an opening ten feet wide in the wall for a gate, the rest of the harbor was soon separated from the thick forest by a nearly ten foot tall wall.

For the gate, Thorn took a few of the logs that the Orcs had already cut and nailed them together. Two thick tree trunks were sunk into the earth to act as doorposts and the gate was hung from them with thick chains. Once they had finished, Thorn left a few players to watch the wall and rejoined Delmore who was just about done with his audit.

“What did you find?”

Delmore’s whiskers twitched as he passed a list over to Thorn.

“This is a list of the buildings that we found. Most of them just need to be finished up. We damaged six buildings that will need extensive repairs or will need to be rebuilt entirely. It looks like the Orcs were just about done with the harbor which is great news for us. Of the five piers, all but the two closest to shore have the depth for big seafaring ships. We also found a lot of supplies. There were enough supplies to build two watchtowers, one on either side of the bay’s entrances. There is also enough food to outfit an army. But check out the back of the page. You’re not going to believe this.”

Reading quickly over the list of seized supplies, Thorn flipped the page over, his eyes widening as he saw what Delmore was talking about.

“Aren’t those the material for…”

“An Aether Gate, yeah. It looks like they stored about eighty, maybe eighty five percent of the material that is required for an Aether gate.”

“What do we still need?”

“Just the stone to build the frame. And a Void Gem of the right size. Or a bunch of fragments.”

“Stone is no problem, but where do we find Void Gems?” Thorn asked, his brow wrinkling in thought.

“Void Gems? Like this one?” Grinning widely, Athena walked over, holding a glistening purple shard of crystal.

“Yes, exactly like that one.” Thorn said, his eyes brimming with excitement. “Is that big enough to power the gate?”

“No, it is just a shard. We’ll need at least three more if we want to connect it to the Aether Gate in the capital. Or five more if we want to connect to the valley.” Delmore said, carefully examining the stone in Athena’s hand. “Can I ask where you got that?”

“Off the Shaman’s body. He dropped this and his staff.”

“Hmm. Hopefully, the other Shaman have more of them. It looks like we’ll need to go hunting once Corvo and the others get here.”

“Well, keep this one safe.” Athena said, putting the gem in Thorn’s big hand. “We still need some wood for repairs, so get on that.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Snapping an exaggerated salute, Thorn led the wood cutting team back to the forest while the rest of the players followed Delmore and Athena’s directions to repair the damaged and half finished buildings. Due to his height, Thorn had trouble cutting trees at the bottom, but the players with him were able to fell the nearby trees quickly. Standing nearby, Thorn simply grabbed the trunks when they were close to falling, keeping them standing upright. Using the large battle axe he had picked up in the battle he trimmed the branches and then threw them down the hill into the bay.

After tossing five large tree trunks into the bay on the western side of the peninsula Thorn switched to the other side, tossing logs into the eastern bay while the players down below collected the five he had already tossed. Using the hooks and chains that the Orcs had abandoned, the players dragged the floating logs out of the bay, quickly building up a massive stack. Once

enough wood had been harvested, Thorn helped move stone and wooden beams to the houses and buildings still being worked on. The players worked incredibly swiftly and it wasn't long before most of the harbor was finished.

Carefully handing a massive beam up to a team of players standing on the walls of the harbor office, Thorn heard someone calling his name and looked over his shoulder. Athena was leading Earl Blaige through the swarms of working players, with Corvo and Duratan in tow. Waving for them to wait, Thorn finished lifting the beam into place, making sure it was snug before he let go.

"Hello, sir."

"This is impressive, Thorn. I never would have imagined that the Orcs were this far along." Said Bothy, looking around at the finished buildings.

In only a quarter of a day the harbor had transformed completely. What had been a half finished shell was now almost completely finished. From the thick wall that Thorn and his team had erected at the entrance to the harbor, to the tightly packed buildings on either side of the large main street that ran down the center of the peninsula, it looked more like a finished town than a work site. Many of the players, finished with their assigned work on the buildings, had taken to improving other parts of the harbor, lending it the air of a city. Even the wide dirt road had been dug up and the players were transporting stones from a nearby pit to make a cobblestone street.

"It was only about half done when we captured it." Thorn said, looking around proudly. "We just work fast."

"Wasn't that just earlier today? Five or six hours ago? Goodness, you do work fast." Bothy smiled, slapping his stomach in excitement. "Well, finish up what you're doing and meet me in the Harbor Master's house. That is going to be our command center. We've captured an enemy stronghold and they don't know it yet. We need to move fast to maintain our advantage."

His body still jiggling, Bothy turned around and waddled away, heading for the new command center, leaving Thorn behind him staring in astonishment. When he finally tore his sight away from the Earl's incredible form, he realized that all of the nearby players had stopped what they were doing to watch Earl Blaige walk away as well. Coughing loudly, Thorn ordered the players to get back to work and chased after the Earl.

Once everyone was settled in the command center, Bothy spread out his map of the island and placed a pin on Twin Bay.

"This is now our foothold on Rasyn. From here we will carve our way into

the Orc lines, disrupting them as much as possible." Grinning, Bothy tapped the pin on the head. "If you want to know the truth, we were not supposed to be anything beyond a distraction. The Duke's orders were to land in the north and do everything we could to force the Orcs to focus on us while the Duke's forces retook the rest of Rasyn. But I don't think any of us imagined quite how effective your troop would be, Thorn."

"Thank you. I hope we've demonstrated our value beyond sending messages."

"Oh, you have." Bothy's eyes gleamed with excitement. "You combine an immortal fighting force with instant communication with a full-on engineer's division. Is there anything you can't do? You better tell me now because I've got some ideas and if there is something you are bad at I need to know."

Taken aback by the intensity radiating off of Bothy, Thorn looked at the other players in the house. Corvo, Athena, Mina, and Duratan all stared back at him and shrugged or shook their heads, causing Bothy to laugh happily and slap his belly again.

"Great, great, oh this is so great. Alright. Pay attention, because we are going to blow this campaign wide open! First, we now hold the harbor and have cleared the northern part of the forest of scouts. The Orcs will realize that something has happened soon, so we'll need to be swift in our actions. This bay is too important for the Orcs to ignore so we need to anticipate a counter attack. The work that has been done on the wall is good, but I want more defenses built up. Lets strengthen the wall and also add a second layer. In fact, if there is any way to dig a moat in between the two walls let's do that. We can use the bay water to fill it. We also need to get the two towers up as fast as possible. The material is here so that will be our next priority. I want one on the southern point and one on the end of the peninsula. Any attack will come from that direction so guarding the northern point is not as important.

"After we have fully locked down the harbor, we will need to establish contact with Thilvena. The Elven capital is still standing, thankfully, but it has been moving every day to keep the Orcs from being able to breach it. We don't know what the conditions in the city are like, but I am willing to bet it isn't pretty. Not only do we need to be able to get in contact with the city, but we need to have them stay in place long enough so we are able to coordinate our attacks against the Orcs. This leads us to our first problem. An army of Orcs large enough to siege the city is combing through the forest trying to

find it. I suspect that we'll face a serious fight once the Orcs realize we are in the forest. They really like swarming, so that is what we should anticipate.

"Speaking of swarming, more and more Orcs are trying to come up from their camp outside of Ilha Caelora every day. The latest intelligence we have suggests that the Elves have mobilized the forest to fight against the Orcs and are keeping them largely contained by forcefully attacking their camp, but we need to be careful of the reinforcements heading north to join the siege. Our second problem is simple. Our spies are reporting that the Orcs have been keeping their troops around Thilvena supplied by running a supply line up the coast. That needs to be cut before we'll be able to do any real damage to the Orcs who are sieging. Whew. Talking so much makes me thirsty."

Mopping his red face with a handkerchief, Bothy picked up a cup and took a big drink.

"Where do you want me and my men?" Thorn asked, looking at the map carefully.

"Well, that's the million gold question, isn't it?" Bothy placed his cup down on the table and wiped his forehead again. "Honestly, I'd like you everywhere. Realistically? I think the best thing to do would be to put you in charge of raiding the Orc supply line. My troops are good, but they're good at pitched battle. They don't move nearly as fast as you, and they don't hit nearly as hard. The Orcs have six supply camps along the coast they use to pass goods. You'll need to hit each one, wipe it out, and then get to the next before they are alerted that there is a problem. It'll be a grueling, two days of travel and fighting with next to no rest."

Pausing, Bothy sighed and took another drink. Placing his cup back down, he looked at Thorn.

"I know it's not fair to ask such a thing from you, but from what I've seen, you travelers don't need to sleep, so you are the only ones who could even have a chance of succeeding. Honestly, this is a risky course of action. But if we are able to succeed we will not only take a huge amount of pressure off of Thilvena, but we'll actually take a huge amount of pressure off of the other generals as well."

"What do you mean?"

"With their supply lines cut, the Orcs will either have to break through the forest's blockade or pull their forces that are spread across Rasyn back to the northern forest to deal with Thilvena. Given that they have not managed to cut through the forest yet, chances of them moving their troops from

Shaylathemar and Maandell are really good. It will take them at least a week to make the adjustment, and any adjustment they make will lessen the burden on our other forces. Like I said, it's risky, but the potential payoff is huge. What do you think? Are you up for the challenge?”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Gazing down at the map, it took Thorn a few moments to think through the pros and cons of what Bothy was suggesting. The benefits were easy to see. By cutting off the Orcs' supplies, their siege of Thilvena would be greatly weakened, opening a window for the Northern Angoril forces to act. With their supply chain disrupted, the Orcs would be forced to focus on reestablishing it, giving the Northern Angoril forces time to establish a connection with Thilvena and provide the Elves support. It would also lessen the burden on the other fronts as the Orcs redirected their forces to protect their supply efforts, potentially relieving pressure on the Duke in the southern plains and the army in the western mountains.

Though Thorn was largely caught up in the war against the Orcs, he had not forgotten his primary objective for getting involved in the war in the first place. It had been some time since he had gotten the [Heir to the Ironhold] quest, and his main goal was still to complete it. Opening up his quest window, Thorn took a look at the requirements he still had to complete.

Heir to the Ironhold
Advanced in age yet heirless, the Ironhold Duke is looking for someone to carry on his impressive legacy. After spending the prime years of his life fighting alongside the emperor, the Ironhold Duke was tasked with controlling the forges of the empire. Now ready to retire and live out his days in comfort, the duke wants an heir that can protect the empire from external and internal threats. Requirements: Meet the Ironhold Duke: 1/1 Impress the Ironhold Duke: 1/3 Become an Earl: 1/1 Prove your strength in battle: 0/1 Reward: Title: Ironhold Duke Area: Ironhold Duchy

Two of the conditions had been met before they had even stepped foot on Rasyn, and Thorn had even managed to impress Duke Carlton once when he suggested that Bothy take the position of General of the northern attack route. With only a few requirements left to meet, Thorn was inclined to take the risks if only to have the chance to demonstrate his ability to the Duke.

On the other hand, the risks of engaging the Orcs directly were enormous. Though the forces under Bothy were certainly strong, the Orc presence in the forest completely dwarfed them. Attracting the Orcs' attention was bound to be a double edged sword. On the one hand, it would ensure their contribution, on the other, it was questionable whether they could survive the full weight of the Orc army. The fight for the harbor had clearly shown Thorn just how dangerous the Orcs were.

Despite their victory, the Iron Wolves had not had an easy time fighting through even the basic Orc soldiers, to say nothing of the elite guards that had surrounded the Orc Shaman. It had taken Athena, one of their strongest fighters, to cut down the Shaman, and she had only been able to because she had a way to deal with the smoke elemental. Even now, Thorn was still trying to think of a good way to deal with the corrosive smoke when he encountered it in the future. Imagining a full battlefield with dozens of Shaman made

Thorn shiver. Sighing, Thorn lifted his eyes from the map and looked around at his team.

“What do you all think? Is it worth taking the risk?”

“Risk? What risk? We should crush the enemy wherever we find them.” Duratan said loudly, smacking his chest with his fist for emphasis.

“Eh, I dunno, it’ll be a really tough fight. And honestly, right now, we’re probably just a pain in the Orcs’ necks. Not enough of a threat for them to make a concentrated effort to wipe us out, but enough that they’ll divert some resources to deal with us.” Corvo bit his finger lightly as he thought through the problem. “The supply camps are laid out in a row along the coast. If we start at the top, we’ll face stiffer and stiffer resistance as we get closer to the Orc’s main camp. But the chances of us being able to sneak past the camps to start from the south is pretty low.”

“What are you so worried about? Let’s just go crush them!”

“Listen, meathead, not every problem should be solved through brute force. If we get this one wrong the whole might of the Orc army is going to wipe us out.”

“Enough,” waving his hand between Corvo and Duratan, Thorn turned his attention to Mina and Athena. “What do you two think? Is the risk worth it?”

“I don’t have any idea what you are all talking about.” Mina shrugged. “Just point me at something you want frozen. I don’t do all this planning stuff.”

“Fair. Athena?”

It was a moment before Athena answered. Before she did she studied the map carefully and then gave Bothy a careful look. Once she had finished thinking through the problem, she rested her finger on the closest Orc supply camp.

“This camp is at least a two days trip from here. Each of the other camps is about a day apart. Without a way to cut travel time down there is no way this plan will work. We’ll need at least a thousand players to deal with the camp, but moving that many people without being seen will be impossible unless we can outrun the Orcs by a large degree. There must be a piece of information I’m missing.”

“Ah, yes. Thorn?” A smile bloomed on Bothy’s face as he looked at Thorn.

“We have about fifteen hundred players who meet that criteria.” Thorn nodded seriously. “If we go, we’ll be splitting our force into pieces.”

“If we can solve the speed problem, I don’t see an issue with it. Passivity never sits well with me though, so I find myself agreeing with Duratan and Earl Blaige. We have the initiative, so it is better to try and keep it. If we can dictate the tempo of this fight, we should be able to inflict serious damage on the Orc forces before they can react. And at worst, we’ll just respawn here.”

“Alright. Let’s do it.”

Standing up quickly at Thorn’s words, Bothy nearly knocked over his glass in his excitement. Grinning sheepishly, he rubbed his hands together, sending ripples through his body.

“Great, great! This is the plan. We’ll divide the army into three groups. Thorn, you’ll be leading the first group of one thousand five hundred soldiers who will deploy to attack the Orc supply camps. We’ll send another group of one thousand scouts out into the forest to locate Thilvena’s position and to give us an idea of how the Orc forces are laid out. The rest of the troops will stay here to guard the harbor against the Orc counter attack.

“Hopefully, by focusing their attention here we’ll be able to give you the space you need to sweep the camps. Remember, our goal is simply disruption, so don’t worry about wiping out the Orcs entirely. As long as we burn or destroy their supplies our objective will be achieved. While you are doing that, I’ll focus on building the defenses of the harbor. I’ll turn this place into a fortress that will take a million years for the Orcs to conquer!”

“Good, because I have a feeling we’ll need some thick walls after we burn down the supply camps.” Thorn’s voice was serious as he carefully studied the map, committing the route to memory. “They’re bound to be annoyed and will probably try to crush us completely when they realize what we are doing.”

“Hah, no problem. I’m the best at defensive battles.”

Bothy slapped his chest, trying to imitate Duratan, but only succeeding in sending waves through his round body. Noticing that he had not managed to produce the effect that he was trying to create, he coughed into his fist and looked at Thorn seriously.

“Thorn, I don’t think I need to mention how important this whole campaign is. Not only to the Elves, not only to the empire, not only to the Duke, but to me personally. Normally, I would not be so, uh, aggressive, in my strategy, but this is an opportunity that comes only once in a lifetime and if I cannot seize it I have a feeling that I will regret it for the rest of my days. This is my opportunity to follow in my father’s footsteps, an opportunity to

prove that his choice to establish me as heir was correct. An opportunity to break out of the pathetic reputation that binds me.

"I know that travelers have a reputation for being flighty and non-committal, but I have seen something different in you and your troops. Still, I need your assurance that you and your forces are in this for the long haul. My plans will only work if we have your full support. If you cannot give me that commitment then that's fine, we'll just need to adjust our plans accordingly. If you are willing to commit to seeing this campaign through to the end I'm willing to reward you and your men out of my own pocket.

ding

See It Through to the End
Bothswern Fitswirth Blaige, the seventh Earl of Scorchfrost, has asked for your help. Presented with the opportunity to succeed his father's powerful military legacy, Earl Blaige has chosen to embrace it. Having assumed command of the Northern Incursion force of the Northern Angoril Empire, Earl Blaige has taken control of the Twin Bay and established a beachhead. Recognizing the opportunity to press his advantage against his enemies, Earl Blaige is determined to forge a legacy of his own and has asked the Iron Wolf Army to commit itself to seeing the battle through to the end. Regardless of the outcome, the Blaige household will reward all those who take part. Rewards: Variable

Accepting the quest, Thorn placed his fist over his heart and bowed his head slightly.

"Earl Blaige, we embarked on this expedition to free Rasyn from the grip of its enemies and we will not rest until that object is achieved. We will not shirk our duty."

"Thank you, Earl Greymane." Bothy returned the formal bow to Thorn. "Your commitment and dedication shall not be forgotten."

After finalizing the last few details of their plan, Thorn was about to go out and gather up his troops when a soft alert drew everyone's attention.

ding

Twin Bay Harbor
Seized from the invading forces of the Red Scourge, the Twin Bay Harbor has been completed by the forces of Northern Angoril. As the general in charge of the Northern Incursion force, Earl Blaige has been granted ownership of the harbor. City building quests have been unlocked. The following amenities are available: Empty Temple [1] (Spawn Point not activated) Empty Store [3] Empty Forge [1] Empty Shipyard [1] Empty Barracks [1] Empty Warehouse [5] Empty Houses [45]

“Ah, it looks like the harbor has been finished up.” Thorn said, scanning over the announcement. A detail caught his eye and he smiled. “Earl, I noticed there was an empty temple that the Orcs were working on. Do you have any plans for it?”

“Um, no, not particularly, what are your thoughts?”

“Well, I would love to dedicate it to Hati, the god I serve. I have a few priests among my people who could serve there, providing services to the soldiers and establishing a place for us travelers to resurrect.”

“Sure, that sounds great. I’ll leave it to you.”

Catching Duratan giving him a dirty look, Thorn just grinned at the other avatar and gave a shrug.

“Thorn, you should see this.” Corvo’s voice intruded on Thorn’s thoughts.

“Hmm? What’s up.”

“Some of our scouts are reporting movement among the Orcs to the North. It looks like a group of Orcs is chasing a player toward the spot where we landed. They have not caught him yet, but they’re getting closer.”

“Any clue who the player is?”

“No positive ID, but the reports say he is throwing bottles of strange colored liquids at the Orcs who are chasing him.”

“Alph!” Thorn’s eyes lit up. “Let’s mount a rescue party.”

Striding out of the Harbor Master’s house, Thorn opened up the Iron Wolf team chat and began to send out commands.

“I want all Charging Wolf Army players to gather up at the gate within ten minutes, we have a mission. Players from the First, Second, Fifth, and Tenth battalions, you’ll be getting your new assignments from Corvo.”

“Thorn, we need to go now if we are going to save him. He is about an hour and a half away, even with the Charging Wolf Squad.” Corvo said from beside Thorn.

“Got it. Can you scout for us? Charging Wolf first team, follow my mark. All other teams, gather up at the gate as fast as possible and set out as soon as you’re gathered. Mina, you’ll be with me. Duratan, Athena, you’ll be riding with the Charging Wolf Squad. Find a friend to pair up.”

Scooping Mina up and putting her on his shoulder, Thorn ran for the gate. As he ran he focused his mind internally, calling Akira through their bond. A few seconds later a red streak appeared, flying from rooftop to rooftop. Reaching the end of a building, Akira launched herself out into space, landing neatly on Thorn’s head as he sprinted by. Approaching the gate, Thorn did not bother to open it and simply jumped over the wall.

“Akira, take Mina.”

As he flew through the air, Thorn tossed Mina up and away from his body. Giving an affirming squeak, Akira blurred and dashed under the falling witch, transforming into her large battle form. Once he was sure that Mina had a solid seat, Thorn stretched his body out and activated [Wolf’s Form], transforming into a bus-sized, midnight black wolf. Landing softly on the ground with an unbroken stride, Thorn dashed forward, disappearing into the forest in an instant. Behind him, the soldiers who were guarding the wall glanced at each other, their eyes wide.

“Was that…”

“I think so? It looked like Earl Greymane. But also a giant wolf.

“Yeah. That was cool.”

Shade fell over the two guards, causing them to look up as many dark shadows blurred through the air past them. Turning around in amazement they saw a steady stream of players rushing toward the wall.

“Quick, quick, open the gate!”

As the players got close to the wall they each activated an ability, causing their shadows to grow and distort as massive wolves climbed out of them. Swinging onto the huge wolves’ backs, the players quickly chased after Thorn, disappearing into the forest in an instant.

“Lady Athena? You’ll be with me.” Heidi ran over, pausing slightly to

activate [Moon Wolf Ally]. As her shadow began to grow she turned to Duratan. “Sir Avatar, you’ll be riding with SoulSeeker. He should be- oh, there he is. Team Four, gather up!”

Without waiting for a response, she strode toward the gate where her team was forming, a huge wolf following behind her. Once her team was all accounted for, Heidi swung herself up onto the giant wolf’s back and reached down to help Athena up. Athena had barely settled behind her when the wolf crouched slightly and launched itself forward, the rest of the wolves and their riders following behind.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The trees flashed by, vanishing from Athena's sight almost as soon as they appeared. Seated behind Heidi on a nearly twenty foot long giant wolf as they sprinted through the forest, she could not help but tighten her grip on the tank's armor. Despite the lack of saddle, the giant wolf seemed to have no trouble keeping them on its back, its soft brown fur providing a comfortable seat.

"Are these the, uh, Children of the Moon that you met recently?" Athena asked.

Turning her head slightly, Heidi nodded.

"Yes. We unlocked a companion quest after we defeated Mayari. A bunch of us focused on grinding it before we had to leave the valley."

"Companion? So not battle pets?" Athena asked, her brow furrowing a little bit.

"Yeah, they're still technically independent. Once we established a close enough relationship with the race, largely thanks to completing the quest that Thorn got, we were able to build a relationship with a particular wolf. This is Beautiful Wind, but she goes by Beauty for short."

“I noticed that she came out of your shadow? If she isn’t a battle pet, how did you call her?”

“It’s a bit strange, really, she shares some similarities with a battle pet, but there are some differences as well. Here, let me show you the ability.”

Opening up her status screen, Heidi shared the ability with Athena.

Shadow Pact - Beautiful Wind
You have established a Shadow Pact with a Giant Wolf, Beautiful Wind, of the Children of the Moon. Using your shadow as a medium, you can open a portal to the Edge of the Abyss, allowing your bond to join you. Continue to improve your relationship with Beautiful Wind to form a permanent connection. Current Standing: Strong Bond Abilities: [Mental Link] [Shadow Call] [Pack Link]

“The [Mental Link] ability is similar to battle pets, though we can’t track each other, we can only talk through it. And we have to be able to see each other for it to work. [Shadow Call] is what allows her to use my shadow as a portal to the shadow world. And [Pack Link] puts us into a pseudo-party. It just makes it so that I belong to any party she is part of and she counts as being in any party that I am part of. Otherwise, she is an independent NPC. We have a [Strong Bond] right now, but there is another level higher that I am working toward called [Blood Bond] that will make our relationship permanent. Even with the [Strong Bond] if I neglect the relationship it could fall to [Weak Bond], [Fractured Bond], or even [Broken Bond].”

“Interesting. You said that you need to get a positive relationship with the Children of the Moon before you can work on bonding?”

“Yup. Like I said, Thorn’s quest put everyone who participated in it in a positive relationship with the Children of the Moon which was a major help. It seems like they’re naturally aloof and you need a lot of quests to get into their good graces. We got a major leg up by defeating Mayari.”

“Of course you did,” Athena sighed. “I guess that’s what you get for

hanging around Thorn. I would love to get all my girls a wolf like this, but it sounds like it would be quite the undertaking. What do you have to do to maintain the relationship with Beauty?"

"We have to Guard the Abyss. It is an ongoing quest that takes place in an independent space. Sort of like the Battlefield of Flame and Shadow. It takes about two days each month. So far I've only gone in once, but from what some of the other bonded players are saying, it's a full quest zone with multiple mini-quests."

Hearing a notification, Heidi paused and opened up her chat, quickly reading over the messages.

"Alright, the whole squad is mounted and moving. Hold on tight. We're about to pick up speed."

"We're going to go faster!?" Athena asked in disbelief.

They were already moving faster than she had thought possible in Nova Terra, and now Heidi was telling her that they were going to speed up even more, leaving her in shock. Despite her skepticism, Athena strengthened her grip on Heidi's waist. Through the trees she could see other Children of the Moon keeping pace with Beautiful Wind, the players on their backs keeping their heads low.

At the front of the pack, a black wolf the size of a bus sprinted forward, slipping through the forest like a shadow. Seeing Heidi's message that all of the teams had joined the race toward Alph, Thorn lifted his head and activated [Improved Pack Travel]. As the howl echoed through the woods, the other Children of the Moon trailing behind him took up the cry, adding their voices to the call.

As the sound filtered into the Children of the Moon's large furry ears their bodies shimmered slightly, gaining a slightly shadowy quality and they burst forth with an increased speed. The riders on their backs found that the forest that was already flashing past appeared to desaturate slightly, the trees blurring into mere shadows that disappeared too quickly to grasp.

Together the Charging Wolf Army sprinted through the forest with Thorn at the head. Pushing himself to move as fast as he could, Thorn quickly realized that he was nearly outpacing Corvo's bird form high above them. In fact, if it was not for the fact that Corvo got to share in the [Improved Pack Travel] bonus, the avatar of Huginn would have been left in the dust. As it was, Thorn had to slow down slightly to keep from widening the distance between himself and the other Children of the Moon too much.

After close to an hour of running Corvo finally spotted Alph and the pack adjusted directions slightly. A few more minutes of rushing got them close enough for him to see what was going on and he marked Alph's position on the map.

"It looks like there are three groups chasing Alph. Fifty or so Orcs who are surrounding him, or at least, trying to. A group of one hundred Orcs trying to cut him off, and then, wow, a huge group streaming in from behind. Oh, man, there have to be a few thousand at least."

"Don't worry, we're only here for pickup. We are not going to engage in a large fight today. In fact, if we can avoid it, I don't want to tip our hand. First Team, you're with me. All other teams, stand by. Avoid engaging if at all possible!"

Wheeling above the forest, Corvo got closer to where Alph was fighting off the Orcs while trying to run away. The alchemist was easy to spot from the trail of devastation that he had left in his wake. The trees around him were reduced to rubble, little left but the charred stubs of trunks.

"There he is! It looks like he is about to get captured! Oh wait, the Orc that grabbed him is on fire. Now he is on fire. Uh, now everyone is on fire. Oh, and he is gone. Wait, where… Ah, there he is. Um, now everyone is freezing. Are you sure we want this guy near us? Oh goodness, they're all melting."

"Yes." The determination in Thorn's voice was clear. "He is a walking super weapon. We absolutely want him with us. How close am I?"

"Six hundred feet. Five hundred feet. He is just over the two hills in front of you. Three hundred, two hundred, he is on my mark!"

[Predator's Leap]

With two hundred feet left to travel, Thorn gathered his legs under himself and launched into the air. Just before his feet left the ground he canceled his [Wolf Form] and activated [Predator's Leap], instantly tripling his jumping distance. Flying through the air, he easily cleared the hill between him and Alph, hurtling down toward the Orcs who surrounded the alchemist.

Realizing that he was traveling way too fast, Thorn waited until he was just about to land and activated [Armor of the Earth], the golden glow that surrounded him turning his body into the equivalent of a boulder.

BOOOOM

The impact of his landing sent a shockwave through the gathered Orcs, throwing them aside. Unable to stop his momentum, Thorn was thrown

forward, carving a deep gouge in the earth as he went tumbling head over heels into the forest.

“Oh, hey Thorn!”

Seeing Thorn smash through the battlefield and disappear into the forest on the other side, Alph smiled widely. Looking at the Orcs who were trying to figure out what had just happened, he pointed a finger at them and laughed.

“Oooh, you are all in trouble now.”

The Orcs around him were quite wary of getting too close, and when Alph lifted his hand to point, they all flinched backward, scrambling to get out of the way in case he was about to throw one of his bizarre potions. Realizing that he was not attacking, they turned their attention to the massive furrow that Thorn’s body had carved into the earth. The trail disappeared into the forest and as they watched, they saw a shape moving in the darkness of the trees.

Emerging from between the trees, Thorn was quite the sight. His impressive wolf helm with its glowing eyes and the thick armor that covered his body would have been much more intimidating if it were not for the leaves and twigs stuck all over it. As it was, he looked more like a construct that had been left outside for too long rather than a dangerous killing machine.

“That was a great entrance, but next time you should consider the angle a little closer.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.” Thorn replied, summoning his tetsubo.

[Shadow Dash]

Blurring as he charged forward, Thorn dashed past the first Orc attack, the Orc warrior’s axe slipping through his body like a stick through water. The second Orc managed to hit him, but Thorn’s Dwarven armor held strong and the attack glanced off without doing any damage. Arriving in front of Alph, Thorn’s tetsubo swept wide, knocking the closest three Orcs back. Grabbing Alph, Thorn never stopped moving, continuing his charge up the hill, and out of the Orcs’ circle.

“Corvo, where is the other group of Orcs?”

“They’re north of us. Wait. they just started heading our direction. We have to get out of here quickly if we don’t want to get bogged down in a full fight!”

“Got it. Mina, a bit of help here?”

Before Thorn finished speaking he could feel the temperature starting to plummet. A thick cloud abruptly formed over his head, large flakes of snow beginning to fall down toward his head. As he burst through the storm and emerged from the other side he heard Mina's voice speaking an arcane command, causing the wind to begin to swirl. A few Orcs who were hot on Thorn's heels were caught up in the storm as the wind began to whip, the large snowflakes transforming into razor sharp ice blades.

Only hesitating for a second, the Orcs who were chasing Thorn and Alph plunged into the storm, relying on their tough skin to weather the storm of ice. Sliced by the swirling ice and battered by the frozen wind, they still managed to force their way through the storm, only to be met with an inferno of fireballs on the other side. The abrupt temperature shift caused them to lag, allowing the fireballs to explode around them. A few unlucky Orcs were incinerated instantly, while the others were tossed backward into the ice storm they had just struggled out of.

[Master, did you see that! I call that Tons of Fireballs Attack! It's not as many as my All The Fireballs Attack, but it is more than my A Few Fireballs Attack!]

"Great, it was great." Thorn had not turned his head to look, but he had still been able to feel the heat from the explosion on his back. "Mina, Akira, we're retreating."

"Uh, Thorn? You have enemies coming in fast. A Shaman and maybe ten guards. They are going to be on you in about fifteen seconds."

"What? Where did they come from?!"

"Looks like some sort of haste spell. Ten seconds."

"Akira, take Alph, I'll block the Shaman."

Tossing Alph toward Akira, Thorn turned to engage the incoming Orcs. Within a few seconds they had appeared, coming up the hill toward where Thorn stood waiting for them. Noticing Thorn, the Orc Shaman lifted his staff, calling for the group to halt. Unlike the last Orc Shaman that Thorn fought, this Shaman looked more like a wizard. Wearing a neat robe rather than a ragged cloak, the Shaman in front of Thorn lacked the fanatical look of his peer, his muddy brown eyes giving him an aged, tired air. Even the Shaman's staff gave off a completely different feel. Though it bore the same sort of skull that the other Shaman wielded, it was chipped and broken, as if it would fall apart at any moment.

"Ah, you are a new one. A traveler? What are you doing here?"

The Shaman’s voice was as wrinkled and aged as he was, yet a feeling of danger swept over Thorn as the Shaman spoke. His eyes narrowing, Thorn carefully examined the Shaman, watching for any sign of a threat. Despite towering over the Orc, Thorn remained cautious, especially when he saw how the huge Orc guard behind the Shaman had not shifted an inch.

“Just picking up my friend.”

Thorn’s deep voice caused a gleam of light to appear in the Shaman’s eyes, only for it to vanish into the muddy depths in the next moment, leaving Thorn wondering if he had imagined it.

“The Mad Alchemist is your friend? A good friend to have, certainly.”

“Thorn, you need to get out of there. The Orcs are starting to surround your position.” Corvo said through the team channel.

“What’s my best path?”

“Unfortunately, straight through the Shaman. I’ll try to mark it out for you. Do you want to order everyone to engage?”

“No, hold off. We need to avoid a mass fight as much as possible.

“Tell me, traveler. Do you know anything about an army nearby?” The Orc Shaman’s question jerked Thorn’s attention back to the threat in front of him.

“Army? What army?”

“Haha, well, it is no surprise if you are not familiar with it. They like to skulk around in the shadows rather than fighting directly like good warriors do. You, on the other hand, look like a powerful warrior who would not slink through the shadows. Why don’t you come back to my camp with me? The Red Scourge is always looking for powerful warriors.”

“Maybe another time. You’ll have to excuse me, I have a couple of issues to deal with.”

“Oh?” The Orc Shaman raised his eyebrows, his muddy gaze looking Thorn dead in the eyes. “What if I insist?”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Despite the tension that Thorn felt, his mind remained surprisingly clear. Orc soldiers were quickly circling him and he knew that he had to move quickly if he wanted to get out of this in one piece. The Orc Shaman noticed that his attention was elsewhere and took a step forward, his staff lifting slightly. The motion, though slight, sent a shiver through Thorn as his senses went into overdrive.

“I’m sorry, to disappoint, but I will not be coming with you.” Thorn shrugged, tightening his grip on his weapon.

“How dare you disobey Lord Arhtu?!”

Furious, one of the Orc guards stepped forward aggressively. Thick, knotted muscle covered his shoulders and he stood at nearly seven and a half feet tall. Two razor sharp tusks jutted from his bottom jaw, giving him a powerful, brutish look. Seeing that Thorn did not move, the Orc guard strode toward the Titan, half of his companions advancing behind him.

Despite the Orcs closing in Thorn’s attention remained fixed on the

Shaman who stood quietly in the back. Having crushed a few dozen Orcs at least as big as the Orc guards walking toward him back at the harbor, Thorn was not concerned about them at all. Instead, there was something about the unassuming, tired looking Orc Shaman at the back that was setting off warning bells in his head.

"Thorn, we need to go! Your only way out is past that Shaman, but that path is closing quickly. You only have about a minute and a half before you are completely surrounded!"

Hearing Corvo's voice over the team channel, Thorn's gaze hardened.

"I'll break out now."

"Great, we will run interference for you."

"Cancel that order." Thorn's voice was grim. "Have everyone pull back. Do not, under any circumstance reveal the Children of the Moon."

"What? Why?"

Before Thorn could respond a deadly sense of crisis washed over him, prompting him to dive to the side. Rolling to his feet, he glanced back, only to see a strange black spike protruding from the earth where he had just been standing. The spike began to deteriorate, crumbling back down to the ground where it flowed back to the Orcs who had been walking toward him. Thorn's sharp gaze noticed that it split and melded into the shadows of the Orc guards. Despite knowing that the attack had come from the Shaman, Thorn was not able to do more than throw a glance his way before the Orc guards were on him, their axes cutting toward him with the sound of split air.

Blocking the first attack with his tetsubo, Thorn stepped to the side and jabbed down with the pommel of his weapon, deflecting the second attack. Sweeping the end of his weapon past his knees, Thorn lifted his tetsubo over his head in one smooth motion, bringing it down on the Orc guard who had unleashed the first attack. With a crunch the thick metal end of his tetsubo smashed through the Orc guard's defenses, crushing him down to the ground.

Dropping his shoulder, Thorn took a quick diagonal step, ramming his shoulder into another Orc and sending him stumbling backward. Unlike most of the enemies that Thorn had fought, the Orcs were only a bit more than a foot shorter than him, allowing him to demonstrate his martial arts with full effect. Stepping back to avoid a hacking axe, Thorn gripped his tetsubo near the pommel with one hand and began to wield it like a sword, cutting down the Orc guards with ruthless efficiency.

Though the edge of his weapon was blunt, the thick metal ridges ringing

the head possessed immense ripping power in Thorn's hands. Given the Orcs' general lack of armor, each of his attacks left a prodigious wound, if it did not simply kill an Orc outright. Moving like a whirlwind, Thorn had soon downed all of the Orc guards who had advanced apart from one who was still five or six feet away.

As his eyes landed on the remaining Orc guard who had advanced, Thorn's sense tingled again and he dove to the side, a spear of pure darkness ripping through the place where his chest had just been. Beyond the remaining Orc guard, the Orc Shaman held his staff high with a trembling hand. A ball of darkness spun in the cracked mouth of the skull that rested on the end of the Shaman's staff.

Murmuring an arcane command, the ball of shadow lengthened, spinning into a point and elongating into a spear that shot toward Thorn soundlessly. Just before it left the staff, Thorn felt his senses shake again and he dropped from his crouch, flattening himself on the ground. Whizzing over his head, the spear of shadow disappeared into the forest behind him, quickly vanishing from his perception. Without waiting for another attack to charge, Thorn lunged forward, his claws leaving a massive gouge in the dirt as he propelled himself up. Crossing the distance to the remaining Orc guard in a flash, the end of his tetsubo stabbed forward, burying itself into the Orc's stomach with such force that it nearly ripped him in half.

[Wolf Lord's Howl]

An eerie howl burst from Thorn's helmet as he raised himself to his full height. A flick of his weapon sent the disemboweled Orc tumbling to the side. Raising his weapon above his head, Thorn jumped forward, flying straight toward the Shaman.

"Protect Lord Arhtu!"

"Stop him!"

Shouts broke out from the few remaining Orc guards who stood around the decrepit looking Orc, but despite their encouragement, the other Orcs who had gathered to surround Thorn cowered back in the face of his intimidating aura. Completely ignoring the guards that charged forward, Thorn landed with an earthshaking boom. An explosion of dirt, kicked up by his feet, blanketed the area in dust and debris as his tetsubo fell down on the Orc Shaman.

Two of the guards managed to interpose themselves in between Thorn and his target but he swatted them aside like flies, and spun around, his tetsubo

turning in a big arc to swing back down on the Shaman. Despite the dirt in the air, Thorn could see perfectly clearly thanks to his [Spiritual Sense]. He could see the Orc Shaman trying to step back, the emerging point of another shadow spear starting to emerge from the orb in the mouth of his staff. He could see the bloodied Orc guards being forced away, their bones crushed.

But it was what he could not see that sent a shiver down Thorn's spine. The Orc Shaman seemed to be stumbling back, but there was not a single ounce of concern on the Orc's face, just a glimmer of light that pierced through the turbid look in his eyes. Determined to crush his enemy, Thorn put all of his power into his attack, bringing his tetsubo down with enough force to slice through metal.

Even before his tetsubo was close to the Orc Shaman Thorn started to notice a problem. The end of his weapon suddenly encountered a weak, slimy energy, slowing drastically. It was as if he had dropped his weapon into a thick muck-filled swamp. The closer to the Shaman the tetsubo got the more sluggishly it moved. The disgusting energy quickly crept down the handle of the weapon, sloshing over Thorn's hand and up his arm.

Nearly dropping his weapon as the strangely slimy feeling grew stronger, Thorn gritted his teeth and persisted with his attack, forcing his tetsubo down through the mire. Yet, the harder Thorn pushed his weapon the stronger the resistance he felt from the strange energy field. Trying to maintain his attack, Thorn had no time to react when his [Spiritual Sense] abruptly flared, warning him of impending danger.

A tremendous force slammed into his ribs, sending pain lancing though him, despite his heavy armor. Staggering back, Thorn felt as if his rib had been broken from the burning pain that accompanied each gasping breath. His tetsubo began to drop to the ground as the strength in his fingers began to fail him. Trying to figure out what was going on, Thorn's [Spiritual Sense] lit up again, alerting him to another fist that was flying toward his chest. Despite seeing the incoming attack clearly, Thorn struggled to lift his arm. The slimy, swamp-like feeling wrapped around his body, giving him the feeling that the air had turned to thick mud. The attack slammed squarely into his chest, turning his stumble into a tumble as it knocked him over backward.

"Wow, that is probably the fastest I've ever been freed." The Orc Shaman's eyes gleamed brightly as he examined the fist that had just knocked Thorn over. "Your strength is nothing to sneer at, though it will not save you from capture today. I insist that you accompany me as my guest."

As Lord Arhtu walked forward toward Thorn's prone body, his figure appeared to straighten out, growing taller and straighter with each step. Inch by inch he filled out his robe. Arms of knotted muscle bulged from under his sleeves as his form filled out. Like a dried sponge being soaked with water Arhtu's body grew even bigger than his guards until he was a full eight feet tall. Chuckling deeply, he reached down for Thorn who was struggling and failing to lift his tetsubo.

[Sub Zero]

Just before his hand landed on Thorn's armor, Arhtu' body shivered as the temperature around him plunged. Though it was only the briefest of seconds, the monstrous Orc Shaman froze solid, his hand hovering over Thorn. Shaking himself free of Mina's stun, Arhtu looked up, his gleaming eyes seeking out the Ice Witch. What he saw instead was a flurry of fireballs roaring toward him from Akira's tails.

Lifting his arms, Arhtu crossed them in an X across his head, tucking his head down to avoid taking a fireball to the face. The flames exploded around him, driving him back two steps. Ignoring the burning skin on his arms, Arhtu dropped his arms and roared his defiance. Bloodshot eyes fixed themselves on the large red-furred creature sprinting toward him.

Behind Akira, her three tails waved in the air, thick flames licking from their tips. Mina and Alph clung to her back, holding on tightly to keep from being blown off by her speed. Akira resembled a fluffy bulldozer as she trampled over the Orcs in her way, though there was nothing cute about the remains of the Orcs who got too close to her rampaging charge.

"I see your friends have come back for you. How kind of them." Arhtu's booming voice pierced through the swampy mire that surrounded Thorn. "They can join you in being my guests."

"Alph, if I distract him can you help Thorn?" Mina yelled over her shoulder at the alchemist clinging to Akira's back behind her.

"Help him? What is wrong with him? What did that crazy Orc do?"

"I don't know but now isn't the time for that!" Mina snapped, gripping her wand tightly. "Just make sure you get him out of here!"

"What?! How?" Hearing a popping sound, Alph looked up to see that Mina had vanished from in front of him. Seeing her reappear up in the air, her three ice orbs spinning around her head, Alph's voice trailed off. "He's like a million pounds."

Using the moment of weightlessness as she appeared in mid-air, Mina

flicked her wand, activating her ice curse, [Blistering Chill]. The spell materialized around Arhtu in the form of icy chains that wrapped his body. With a roar the Orc Shaman tried to shake them off only to find them tightening as razor sharp icicles grew from the icy links, stabbing into his flesh. The links pulsed with freezing light, damaging and slowing Arhtu in turn.

Dropping slightly, Mina waved her wand down toward her feet. Following her command one of the ice orbs spun down below her, allowing her to step on it and jump forward to where the next orb waited. Down on the ground, Akira had nearly reached Thorn and Arhtu. Letting out a furious squeak, Akira's body shook and her fur grew hard. Spinning, her three tails lashed across Arhtu's chest, sending the bound Orc flying backward. Crashing into the ground, Mina and Akira lost sight of Arhtu in the dirt and dust that was kicked up.

"ARRRRRGH!"

An enraged roar ripped through the air as Arhtu bound out of the pit he had been smashed into. Three deep wounds crossed his chest but the enraged Orc paid them no attention. Bloodshot eyes fixed themselves on Akira as Arhtu's body blurred toward the True Ailuridae, blood trailing him as it dripped from his chest.

"Alph!" Mina's cry echoed across the battlefield as Arhtu and Akira engaged in mortal combat below her.

Arhtu's speed and strength had grown exponentially with the activation of his rage ability, allowing him to overpower Akira. Desperately raining spells down on him from above, Mina did everything she could to assist the struggling battle pet. Together, they barely managed to hold him back but both Akira and Mina knew it was only a matter of time before he gained the upper hand.

"I'm trying, I'm trying! I don't know what kind of curse this is!" Annoyed by Mina's yells, Alph was stuffing every sort of potion he could think of into Thorn's mouth. "Maybe the Delrot leaves will work? No? How about Gagglebloom? Oooh, I don't think blue bubbles are what we wanted. Ah! Nurm Mushrooms and sprig of Glazed Giant Heart. Hmm."

"That's good. We need to run."

Thorn's hoarse voice sounded as he managed to gather enough strength to lift his hand to his mouth, preventing Alph from pouring a boiling liquid smelling of spoiled limes down his throat. Groaning, Thorn managed to roll

himself over and brace himself on his hands and knees.

[Wolf Form]

As his massive black wolf form appeared, Thorn let out a deep howl, the echoing sound freezing everyone including Arhtu in their tracks. Alph scrambled desperately to get on Thorn's back as Mina dropped down to land on Akira. Together Thorn and Akira raced for the woods, a large crowd of Orcs starting to chase after them as they shook off the effects of [Wolf Lord's Howl].

"Let them be. There will be another time to deal with them."

Arhtu's words caused the Orcs who were about to chase after Thorn and the others to come to a stop before gathering up into a large group. Carefully scanning the forest, Arhtu kept his guard up. He could feel an intense threat hiding in the trees, waiting to pounce if he thoughtlessly chased after Thorn and the others.

Inside the forest, two large Children of the Moon crouched, a strongly built Orc with a drawn bow sitting on one and two armored ladies on the other. Seeing the Orcs retreating, Heidi patted Beautiful Wind on the neck and the two wolves turned, running after Akira and Thorn. Only Duratan looked back, his gaze unfathomable as Arhtu and the Orcs were hidden by the trees.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“Thorn, what on earth was that?”

Corvo’s question drifted through the haze that crowded Thorn’s mind and body but it was all he could do to keep running forward, his massive body brushing against the trees as he failed to dodge them. The curse swirled around his body, causing the impression that he was locked in a strange bubble that distorted the world. As he ran, his tongue hung out of the side of his mouth, flecks of saliva building up around his mouth as he gulped down deep breaths of air. The curse caused his muscular frame to wither away, as if he had suddenly aged. Large patches of his midnight black fur had grown silver as well, giving his body a mottled look. When Corvo saw Thorn was unable to answer his question, he assumed command.

“Heidi, guard Thorn and Akira. Let's get back to the harbor as fast as possible. All other teams watch for pursuers. If we do engage, we have to make sure none of them survive. Mina, Alph, can you tell me what is going on?”

“Uh,” Mina glanced through the trees at Alph who shrugged. “I am honestly not sure. I saw Thorn attack and then get punched over. If Akira had

not rushed closer that Orc Shaman would have killed him.”

“Punched? Wasn’t he fighting an Orc Shaman?”

“That’s what I’m not sure about. The Shaman looked like a berserker to me. He shrugged off my spells like they were nothing. Akira’s attacks too. Thorn got hit with some sort of spell that knocked him out pretty quickly.”

“It's a curse, actually.” Alph spoke up. “It is stealing his strength. Quite a powerful curse. If we had more sap from the World Tree I could maybe cook up something, but without it we’ll just have to wait for the curse to fade.”

“It will fade, right? It isn’t like the last curse Thorn got, I hope?”

“I mean, he didn’t eat the Orc’s heart so we should be good.” Corvo said with a laugh. “I’ll take a look when we get back to the harbor. Thorn, are you going to be able to last that long?”

“Yes.” Thorn said between heavy breaths. “It just might take a little while. I’m not moving as fast as normal.”

The trip back to the harbor took nearly three times as long, but Thorn persisted in his shambling run the whole time. Akira ran beside him, casting [Royal Grace] and her other buffing spells whenever they came off of cooldown to help keep his energy up. When the gates of Twin Bay finally appeared Thorn was too exhausted to run any longer and slowed to a walk. Plodding into the harbor he collapsed by the gate, his massive body stretching out across the road. Dropping from Thorn’s back as he rolled over, Alph slipped the tall box he was carrying off his shoulders and began rummaging through the various drawers while muttering to himself.

“Furswort, Kendelvine, three drops of Jasper. Eh, four drops of Jasper. Where is the...oh, there it is. Now for some…”

“Is he going to be okay?” Athena ran over as soon as she arrived, Heidi beside her. “Corvo, what happened? We were not close enough to see.”

Swooping down, Corvo canceled his crow form with a flurry of swirling feathers, his feet touching down lightly. Striding over to Thorn, he examined the sprawled out giant wolf with an uncharacteristically grim face.

“Thorn got into a fight with a strange Orc Shaman and caught something nasty. Everything happened too fast for me to track. It looks like he got hit with a plague spell or something like that.”

“It’s a curse. A curse.” Alph said, his fingers never stopping. “I should be able to stabilize it, but I doubt I’ll be able to eliminate it completely. Thorn’s resistance is too high. Of course, that is why he is still alive, but it sure is annoying when trying to treat him.”

Watching Alph's fingers flying as flowers, roots, and all sorts of other strange ingredients were added to a vial, Athena's eyes narrowed.

"Aren't most of those poisonous?"

"Most of them? Haha, they're all poisonous." Alph said, ginning widely. Plugging the end of the vial, he shook it vigorously, turning the strange sludge like mixture into a neon green liquid that bubbled and popped.

"And how is that going to help him?" Athena's tone was dangerous, but Alph paid no attention.

"It'll stabilize the poison in his body and fill him so full of energy his body will explode. Or, it would if he was normal. As it is, it'll probably be like drinking a fizzy energy drink to him. Move away, move away. Here, someone help me hold his head up. The amount of energy his body contains is ludicrous, so we need to use an equally absurd stimulant to get his energy pumping again. Once that happens the curse will have to fight against the potion, which will free him up to purge the curse."

"And if he can't?" Athena asked, reaching out with her hand to stop Alph.

Glancing down in surprise at Athena's neatly manicured fingers, Alph paused, a slightly confused expression crossing his face. Looking up, he met Athena's eyes directly.

"Then he'll be dead, right? At that point the poison will be overtaken by the curse and will have its effectiveness tripled, killing him for sure."

"We just need to make sure he gets registered to the spawn point here in the harbor first." Corvo said, patting Athena's shoulder. "One way or another we need Thorn to beat this curse. If he can do it while staying alive, great. If he can't then we need him back sooner rather than later."

Holding Alph's gaze for a moment, Athena finally sighed and stepped aside.

"You're right, sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what? Hey, someone help me open his mouth." Alph seized the opportunity to get closer to Thorn, gesturing for someone to pry the giant wolf's mouth open.

Before anyone could, Thorn issued a groan and his massive wolf body began to shrink. His black and grey mottled fur vanished, replaced by dull looking metal armor. Patches of rust covered the fine Dwarven craftsmanship, as if it had been left out in the rain one too many times. Slowly sitting up, Thorn managed to tuck his legs underneath him before reaching out a shaking hand for the potion that Alph held.

Trying to grasp the vial, Thorn found his fingers lacked the strength to close around it, nearly causing it to drop. Seeing Thorn's weakness, Alph helped him lift it carefully to his lips. The bright green liquid slipped down Thorn's throat, settling in his stomach. A loud rumble shook the surroundings as Thorn's body trembled with the energy that began coursing through him. Closing his eyes, Thorn rested his hands on his shaking knees and began to breathe deeply.

"Corvo, can you tell what Thorn was hit with? If we're going to encounter that Shaman again we need to know how he managed to take Thorn down so fast." Mina asked, her eyes fixed on Thorn.

"Yeah, I was just checking." Corvo's eyes flickered as he scanned Thorn. Letting out a whistle, he shared a window with all of the players nearby.

Aeon Curse
Once the greatest Orc Berserker of all the Orc tribes, Arhtu the Destroyer was cursed after attempting to use forbidden magic to defeat the Ogre Tyrant, Red Scourge. Magically aged beyond his years, the once proud warrior was forced to rely on his cunning and affinity for shadow magic to survive amidst the harsh environment of the Red Scourge's army. Despite having his prodigious physical ability stunted, the Orc once known as Arhtu the Destroyer carved out a place for himself and his tribe, soon being granted the title Arhtu the Cursed. Those affected by the Aeon Curse lose 95% of the following attributes: Strength, Endurance, Constitution, Presence. Those affected by the Aeon Curse gain the following conditions: Dim Sight, Shaky Hands, Exhaustion. The Aeon Curse grows by consuming life force. Those affected by the Aeon Curse lose their life force over time, growing progressively weaker until they die. Racial Ability [Titan's Endurance] and Racial Ability [Titan's Strength] have triggered reducing the effect of the Aeon Curse attribute reduction from 95% to 75%. Remaining Duration: [6:27:44]

“Wow, that’s nasty. A curse that turns you into an old man?” Alph said, shaking his head.

“That is nasty. But at least it will only last for another six and a half hours.”

“Well, haha,” Alph rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “If Thorn doesn’t figure out a way to kick it within two hours the energy from the potion will be used up and the curse will take over again. All I did was buy him some time. But don’t worry, if anyone can do it, Thorn can do it. I mean, he walked around with that stone whatever curse for how long?”

“I hope so.” Mina said, shaking her head. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m more worried about that Orc Shaman. Arhtu the Cursed? He sure didn’t seem cursed when he was beating up on Akira. He was practically immune to my spells and if Akira wasn’t as fast as she is he would have crushed her.”

“That good?” Athena asked, her brow furrowed.

“Better.” Corvo joined in the conversation. “He wasn’t taking the fight seriously. He kept looking at the forest where Heidi, Duratan, and you were hiding.”

“You mean we’re facing an enemy that could one-shot Thorn, and spare enough energy while fighting me and Akira to guard against a sneak attack. Seems a bit overpowered, don’t you think?”

“There is no way he was strong enough in his Shaman form to punch out Thorn. We must be missing something. A special attack or trigger that caused this curse to transfer to Thorn.” Corvo gestured to Thorn who was still meditating. “We’ll need to wait for him to recover. Or die. Either way, once he is able to tell us what he experienced we should be able to piece together enough information to clear up what went down.”

Sitting with his legs folded beneath him, Thorn breathed in and out, carefully examining the battle taking place in his body. The turbid energy of the [Aeon Curse] was thick and heavy, wrapping around his body in an attempt to suppress his incredible vitality. While his race gave Thorn a nearly limitless amount of life, the [Aeon Curse] seemed to thrive on it, extracting his lifeforce as soon as it was produced. Opposing the curse was the potion that Alph had fed him. It had settled in his stomach and was producing a constant stream of berserk energy that attracted the curse’s attention. If not for the [Aeon Curse], Thorn could only imagine the damage that the potion would be doing to his body.

As it was, the energy pouring out of the potion in his stomach was taking enough of the pressure off of his vitality that he was able to think, though not very clearly. With his body in a rough balance, Thorn took a closer look at the curse with his [Spiritual Sense]. As he examined it carefully, strange ancient looking symbols began to appear in his head. The symbols flashed and faded too quickly for Thorn to grasp, leaving a faint feeling of horror behind.

Frowning, Thorn turned his attention away from the [Aeon Curse] in his body and to the window that described it. Down at the bottom of the window the remaining duration of the curse ticked away.

Remaining Duration: [6:19:56]

From Alph's explanation he knew that the potion would run out within two hours leaving him on his own to fight against the curse. At that point it would simply be an endurance match between his incredible life force and the duration of the curse, a match he would no doubt lose. What none of the others realized was that while the [Aeon Curse] was consuming his life force, the duration of the curse was growing rather than shrinking. It was only when the new source of energy was introduced that the duration began to shrink.

Wracking his mind for a solution, Thorn continued to breath in and out, using his meditation to calm himself down and restore his equilibrium. His early experiences with a body of ever present pain had given him enough practice detaching his mind that he was quickly able to separate his thoughts. As he stabilized his breathing his thoughts grew clearer and clearer and his [Spiritual Sense] began to expand, sinking into the earth beneath him.

As he connected with the elemental energy of the earth a deep sense of calm flowed through him. He could feel his body becoming vast and powerful. Already abundant, his vitality seemed to connect to a boundless world under his feet, restoring him with each breath he took. Settling into an unending rhythm, Thorn could feel the [Stone Heart] in his chest expanding and contracting as it cycled earth element energy through his body. Without regard for time, his thoughts were filled with the boundless land as he joined it in breathing.

ding

Spiritual Sense [Earth] - [32%]

You have discovered the spirit that fills all things and learned to control the spirit that fills your body. Those who wield their spirit are masters without parallel, as unshakable as they are unstoppable. As you grow in your control over this spirit you will gain additional benefits and abilities. By controlling this spirit in your own body you can protect yourself from outside influences and negative states of mind. You have unlocked the ability to project your Spiritual Sense outside your body. As your mastery of your Spiritual Sense increases, the distance you can spread your Spiritual Sense will grow. Due to your close connection with the earth your Spiritual Sense has gained an affinity with the earth element, becoming Spiritual Sense of Earth and allowing you to shape and control the earth element in your surroundings.

In a flash, two hours had passed, and the last wisps of the potion that Alph had created were sucked away by the [Aeon Curse]. Hungry for more life, the [Aeon Curse] looked for another source of vitality. Sensing Thorn's life force it wrapped itself around him again, looking to consume the remaining life in his body.

Remaining Duration: [4:07:56]
Remaining Duration: [4:07:57]
Remaining Duration: [4:07:59]
Remaining Duration: [4:08:04]
Remaining Duration: [4:08:10]

Rapidly eating away at Thorn's lifeforce, the [Aeon Curse]'s duration began to grow again, waking Thorn from the peaceful meditation he was enjoying. Feeling his life beginning to slip away, Thorn reacted instinctively, drawing the power of the earth under his feet up into his body. Like an all-consuming tide, the elemental energy poured into Thorn's body, wrapping itself around the heavy energy of the [Aeon Curse].

As if it could sense danger, the [Aeon Curse] reacted strongly, bursting out

with power of its own. The remaining duration of the curse fell by a whole hour but the curse was strengthened tremendously. Fighting back against the earth elemental energy that had surrounded it, the [Aeon Curse] began to consume Thorn’s life force as quickly as it could, causing him to immediately feel drained.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Like two ancient behemoths the energy of the [Aeon Curse] that infected Thorn battled against the earth elemental energy that he had drawn into his body with his [Spiritual Sense]. After consuming a part of its remaining duration the [Aeon Curse] had grown significantly stronger. Reaching out with its slimy grasp, the [Aeon Curse] tried to surround Thorn's chest, directly attacking the core of his life force. Understanding its intent, Thorn moved the earth elemental energy under his command to intercept. Using his [Spiritual Sense], the earth elemental energy crashed into the [Aeon Curse], piercing into it like a spear.

The [Aeon Curse] surged, staging a counter attack of its own as it tried to surround the earth elemental energy spear head and rip it from Thorn's control. As they fought, Thorn's sharp gaze noticed that the edges of the sludgy [Aeon Curse] energy was burning away. Every time it encountered his earth elemental energy it would unravel slightly, tiny fragments of arcane words evaporating into the air.

Sensing the path to success, Thorn reigned in his [Spiritual Sense]. Gathering it into his body, Thorn cut off his access to the outside world to

increase his focus and took a deep breath. As he breathed out his [Spiritual Sense] plunged downward, racing deep into the earth. Ten feet, twenty feet, fifty feet, his perception continued to sink deeper and deeper into the earth. One hundred feet. Two hundred feet. Past the roots and worms of the forest. Past the rocks and the tiny microorganisms that dwelled on them. Down into the deep rock where the heat and pressure started to rise.

From deep in the earth, Thorn began to draw the formidable earth elemental energy up through his [Spiritual Sense]. Using his [Spiritual Sense] to envelop the earth elemental energy, he pulled as much earth elemental energy up toward him as he could. Like a geyser, the earth elemental energy shot into his body, bringing with it a tearing pain as Thorn's body was unable to handle the sheer volume of energy rising from the ground.

"Uh, guys? Can you feel that shaking or am I crazy?"

Corvo was the first to sense the huge amount of energy rising from deep within the earth to surround Thorn. Looking at the others, Corvo only saw them shaking their heads, but his words were soon proved out as Akira and all of the Children of the Moon suddenly grew quiet. Slowly they began to inch away from where Thorn sat, their fur rising up on their backs.

[Master, is...is everything okay?]

Akira's voice intruded on Thorn's focus, alerting him to the fact that something was going on outside of his body.

[Yes, everything is fine. Why? What's going on?]

[There is something deep underground releasing a lot of power. It seems like it is coming from underneath you, master. Be careful, if it gets angry we'll all die.]

As the earth elemental energy from deep underground flowing into Thorn continued to strengthen, Akira's voice grew more and more nervous. Confused at first, Thorn used his [Spiritual Sense] to direct his perception throughout the earth underneath him, carefully searching for a sign of the creature that Akira was talking about. Unable to see even the shadow of such a creature, he put the matter into the back of his mind and concentrated on using the earth elemental energy he had drawn out of the ground to surround the [Aeon Curse].

Bit by bit, the earth elemental energy wore away at the edges of the curse, grinding it apart. Twice more the [Aeon Curse] strengthened itself by consuming its duration, but the amount of earth elemental energy Thorn commanded was endless and finally, after nearly three hours, the last bit of

the [Aeon Curse] was crushed. With a shimmer the turbid energy vanished, leaving Thorn's body feeling full of energy.

Letting out a breath of heavy air, Thorn opened his eyes and stood up. His arms stretched up to their full height as he took in a breath of fresh air. A wide smile stretched across his lips as he reviewed the dangerous encounter that he had just experienced. The [Aeon Curse] was a nasty thing, but it had proven no match for the elemental energy he had gathered. More than pleased that he had survived, Thorn was even happier that he had discovered a way to train his [Spiritual Sense].

Spiritual Sense [Earth] - [36%]
You have discovered the spirit that fills all things and learned to control the spirit that fills your body. Those who wield their spirit are masters without parallel, as unshakable as they are unstoppable. As you grow in your control over this spirit you will gain additional benefits and abilities. By controlling this spirit in your own body you can protect yourself from outside influences and negative states of mind. You have unlocked the ability to project your Spiritual Sense outside your body. As your mastery of your Spiritual Sense increases, the distance you can spread your Spiritual Sense will grow. Due to your close connection with the earth your Spiritual Sense has gained an affinity with the earth element, becoming Spiritual Sense of Earth and allowing you to shape and control the earth element in your surroundings.

Though the growth of his [Spiritual Sense] had slowed after the first two hours, it still showed clear improvement from his efforts at manipulating a huge amount of earth elemental energy. Resolving himself to continue to practice, Thorn let out a contented sigh and nodded to the people watching him. Opening his mouth, Corvo beat him to the punch.

"I don't care. I really don't want to know." The Elven avatar's face was stone cold. "I'm sure that knowing how you just defeated that curse will just make me mad, so I don't want to know."

"Haha, it's so true." Mina laughed. "We can just chalk it up to Cheater McCheaterson cheating. That way no one will die of jealousy."

About to protest, Thorn saw that even Heidi was nodding in agreement and could only sigh in defeat. Duratan was the only one who did not understand what was going on, and after looking at the annoyed expressions around him, nudged Athena who was grinning proudly.

“What are they talking about?”

“Thorn is playing the most broken character in existence, that is what we are talking about.” Athena said with a chuckle. “He seems to have an uncanny knack for turning certain death into a mild inconvenience.”

“Oh, but it goes beyond that,” Corvo sneered. “It would be one thing if it was only surviving. But no, he seems to turn every bad thing that happens into a way to get stronger.”

“Jealous much?” Mina teased.

“Yes!”

“Haha, well, I’ll do my best to rub off on you a bit more.” Thorn chuckled, patting Corvo lightly on the shoulder. “But what happened with that Orc Shaman? How did you guys get away from him?”

“He never chased us.” Heidi said with a shake of her head.

As the subject turned back to the narrow escape that they had just experienced, everyone’s faces became serious, their eyes locked on Thorn as they waited for his explanation of what had happened. Closing his eyes, Thorn thought over the fight carefully.

“I don’t have the clearest picture myself. All I know is that there was some sort of field around the Shaman.”

“Arhtu.”

“Yeah, Arhtu. It seemed as if the energy field around Arhtu was made up of the curse. The closer my weapon got to him the more of the curse I absorbed. At the same time, he did something. There was a command, though I could not hear it clearly. When he activated it, part of the curse was transferred to me. I tried to power through it, but that only made the curse stronger. After that, everything is a blur. I got knocked backward and then the next thing I knew something disgusting was being poured down my throat which cleared my mind long enough to transform back into my [Wolf Form] and make it back to the harbor.”

“You’re welcome,” Alph grinned and gave Thorn a thumbs up. “The nastiness helps the potion wake the target up.”

“Corvo, any idea what is going on?”

“Nothing concrete without gathering more information. My best guess is

that Arhtu the Cursed carries this [Aeon Curse] and then has some way to attach it to someone who is within a specific distance, or meets specific conditions. Maybe attacking him? I'm not sure."

"It might be connected to the amount of damage that the person does." Mina said, scratching her head and throwing a glance at Akira who had transformed back into her small form and climbed up into Thorn's arms. "When Thorn attacked he picked up a huge dose of the curse, but nothing happened to me. When Akira attacked from close range nothing happened either."

"Ooh, you think that Thorn's attack was strong enough to absorb the entire curse at once?"

"Dunno, but it wouldn't surprise me." Mina shrugged. "It would not be the first time he has one-shot a boss."

"Regardless, we can think about how to defeat Arhtu later." Thorn said, drawing everyone's attention. "I am positive that we'll encounter him again. For now, we need to organize our raid. Let's get the Charging Wolf Army ready to go."

"Now? Don't you need to rest? You just defeated an insane curse, aren't you tired?" Duratan asked, confusion evident in his expression as the rest of the nearby players began to get ready to leave.

"Thorn? Tired? Oh, you poor, poor man." Corvo patted the avatar of Skoll on the shoulder sympathetically.

While Corvo began to explain to Duratan the true sorrow of serving under a freak like Thorn, the players of the Charging Wolf Army gathered outside of the gate. After giving directions to the players who were staying to guard the harbor, Thorn transformed back into his [Wolf Form]. With the [Aeon Curse] defeated Thorn's midnight black fur had regained its glossy sheen. This time Thorn assigned Alph and Mina to ride on Akira and carried Athena on his back as they set off for the nearest Orc supply camp. Rushing through the forest, the Charging Wolf Army followed Thorn closely.

The trip to rescue Alph from the Orcs who were chasing him had been completed at a dead sprint, but this time Thorn led the army forward at a much slower pace. Knowing that they would be moving for a few days, Thorn did not want to exhaust the players or the Children of the Moon that they rode. Still, their pace was brisk, and after a few hours they began to close in on the first supply camp.

Calling for the army to stop, Thorn sent a few scouts ahead to check it out

while the rest of the army hunkered down to rest. Each of the players pulled carefully dried meat and buckets of water out of their inventories. The meat had been prepared before they left the valley of the Children of the Moon and each of the players in the Charging Wolf Army carried enough for their companion to eat for a full week. Thorn was not nearly as hungry as normal, so after finishing off two steaks, a pie, and half a gallon of tea, he brought out a plate of pastries for Akira to enjoy.

[Akira,] Thorn spoke through the mind connection to his battle pet. [You mentioned that there was something dangerous underground when I was meditating. What were you sensing? I couldn't find anything.]

[Master, you couldn't feel it?] Akira's mouth paused mid bite as she stared incredulously at Thorn. [How did you not feel it? It had gathered so much elemental energy! I don't know what kind of creature it was, but that level of energy is pretty incredible. It was even more energy than I can handle and I am a True Ailurade. I mean, I have more fire energy, and fire energy is certainly better than that stinky earth energy, but it was pretty scary. The last time I saw that much energy was around Big Brother Vento.]

[Big Brother Vento?]

[Hm? What about him?]

[Why are you calling him big brother?]

[Oh, he told me to call him that because we're all ancient species and us ancient species have to stick together.]

Thinking about it, Thorn could only shrug. Having an Imperial Roc for a big brother was not a bad deal however you sliced it, so he brought the conversation back to what he was curious about.

[So, does Vento have a lot of air elemental energy?]

[Yeah, he has a whole sky full.] Akira said as she carefully selected a new pastry. [But he hides it in his feathers really well.]

[Is that how you do your magic? With your fire elemental energy?]

[That's how all magic works, master. Or at least, that's how it works for us ancient species.]

Mulling over what Akira had said, Thorn tried to organize what he had heard. It was obvious to him that the creature Akira was worried about was actually him. The overwhelming pressure she and the other animals felt had come from his accumulation of earth elemental energy.

"Hey Mina."

"Yeah? What's up?"

“Can you describe how you use mana for me?” Thorn asked.

“Uh, sure? I just channel it into my spells.”

“And then it just recharges? Where does it come from?”

“Uh.” Mina gave Thorn a blank look and then looked around for help.

“Mana comes from the ambient energy in the world.” To Mina’s relief, Athena was sitting close enough to have heard Thorn’s question. “Mana is a mixture of all of the different kinds of elemental energies. It is an amalgamation, so it doesn’t matter what sort of mixture you take in. So long as you get enough. Once mana enters a player it loses its connection with the element it was part of and becomes pure arcane energy. That’s why it can be used for any spell.”

“Are there people who can use elemental energy for their magic?”

“No, strictly speaking that wouldn’t be magic. That would be elemental manipulation. Take Akira for example,” Athena said, scratching Akira behind her ears. “She can manipulate the fire elemental energy that she gathers and produce different effects with it. Damage, healing, body transformation. But those are not spells. The disadvantage is that she needs to gather the fire element before she can do that, but the advantage is that they’re not spells so they can’t be blocked by counterspelling or any other kind of negation magic.”

[Master, I gather my fire from the sun. That is why I like taking naps during the day.]

“Most creatures that use magic are actually using elemental manipulation. They gather elements from the world around them to use. That is one of the things that makes them so tough to fight against.” Athena said. “I’m sure there are people who can do the same, but I’ve never met anyone like that.”

Before Thorn could continue asking any more questions, his senses tingled, causing him to look up. The scouts were back and it was time to attack.

CHAPTER FIFTY

“The camp is fairly lightly guarded, which is to be expected. The Orcs have not noticed us yet which is why it is so important that we attack without delay. I would guess that word of Twin Bay being captured will start to spread soon which will make burning the camps that much harder.”

Thorn carefully reviewed his map as he listened to Athena’s words. The scouts had brought back a clear picture of the Orc Supply camp and everyone was excited to attack.

“It looks like the majority of the supplies are being held in the middle of the camp. They don’t seem overly concerned with organization, so most of the supplies are just piled up. A few well placed fireballs should do the trick nicely.”

“That sounds good.” Thorn nodded and pointed at the road that ran straight through the camp. “Our goal is causing damage to their supplies rather than wiping out the soldiers so let’s just run straight through. The gates should not be an issue, and the only other thing we will need to worry about

is getting bogged down in the camp by Orc soldiers."

"Seems like sort of a shame to burn all those supplies."

Turning to Mina, Thorn's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Do you have another idea?"

"I dunno, I feel like we have a lot of collective inventory space." Mina said with a grin. "From the pictures that the scouts took it looks like all the supplies are neatly organized into bundles to make them easier to transport. It would not take very long for each of us to pick up one or two bundles. I'd guess there are, what? 1000 bundles?"

Opening up the picture the scouts brought back, Thorn tried to estimate the number of bundles piled up in the center of the camp.

"Hm, probably less than that."

"Exactly. There are fifteen hundred of us. If everyone grabs one we can clean them out nicely. No burning needed."

"Or, better yet, we can burn the tents around the edge of the camp. Great idea, Mina." Standing up from where he crouched, Thorn dusted off his hands and called for the Charging Wolf Army to gather. "Alright folks, we're going to be going in fast and hot. Melee players, I want you to pick up supplies first. Ranged DPS, get the tents burning as fast as possible. The most important thing is that we get in and get out as fast as possible. We are not going to stay around to slug it out with the Orcs, we have other camps to raid. I'll handle the gates and Heidi, your team will handle any Shaman or Orc Officers that appear. Athena and Mina, can you assist with that?"

"Sure, that is no problem."

"Great. Alph, once the supplies are picked up, I'll leave covering our retreat to you. Let's mount up and go cause some havoc."

In a flash, the relaxing players had geared up for war. Mounting their bonded wolves, they chased after Thorn who had shifted into his [Wolf Form]. Viewed from above the Charging Wolf Army resembled a gigantic black snake slithering through the forest. Since they were quite close to the Orc supply camp Thorn did not bother with stealth, charging forward at full speed.

Located at the northernmost point of the Orc's supply chain, the supply camp was situated along the coast in a large natural gully that ran almost directly south before widening into the forest. Sparsely forested, the gully had been formed from runoff over the years which had created a large open space where the water fed into the sea. Taking advantage of the natural open

ground, the Orcs had cleared the rest of the trees and erected a solid wooden fence to mark out the edge of their camp.

Though the camp had a wooden wall, there were no buildings since it had been constructed as a temporary measure while the harbor at Twin Bay was being finished. Instead, the Orcs simply pitched their tents on either side of the road that split the camp in half. From the pictures that the scouts took, the camp held around five thousand Orcs, most of whom were lounging around as they waited for their orders.

Orc culture made no distinction between laborers and warriors, but because fighting was considered a superior activity, tribes would compete for the right to occupy the front lines of a battle or war. Less powerful tribes were relegated to acting as grunts, collecting and moving goods for the tribes that held the combat rights. Though this often led to conflict within the Orc army, it also saved them from having to employ guards for their laborers since every soldier, whether a worker or not, could fight to some degree.

The Orcs that held this supply camp had lifted their flag above their camp in good Orc fashion, revealing themselves to be members of the Sawtoothed Tusk tribe. Thorn knew nothing about this tribe, but considering that they had been pushed into guarding the supply route, Thorn was not overly worried about them, despite the fact that the Charging Wolf Army was outnumbered three to one.

The tree line ended about five hundred feet from the supply camp wall, and Thorn did not pause as he dashed out of it. Heading directly toward the gate, Thorn cleared the edge of the gully without any issue, the Charging Wolf Army streaming after him like a black and brown tide. At the gate, two bored Orc guards were leaning on their spears when Thorn and the rest of the Charging Wolf Army appeared. Stunned, one of the Orcs just stared, but the other lifted his spear to strike the metal gong that hung next to him.

Before his weapon could reach it, he found himself frozen in place, too cold to even shiver. A buzzing sound filtered into his ears, followed immediately by a series of thuds as half a dozen arrows sprouted from his companion’s chest. Just as he could feel himself unfreezing the buzzing sound came back and his world went dark.

Pleased with how efficiently the two guards were dealt with, Thorn led the Children of the Moon forward, managing to get within seventy feet before an Orc caught sight of him over the gate. Thorn’s normally tall body was even taller in [Wolf Form]. With a shoulder height of ten feet, Thorn’s head and

ears raised his height to thirteen feet with his head up. The eight foot tall wooden wall that surrounded the camp did not even come up to his shoulder, let alone the seven foot tall gate.

A cry of alarm sounded in the camp as one of the taller Orcs looked over the gate. His vision filled with a veritable sea of wolves, each who seemed big enough to eat him in a single bite, the Orc was badly startled and yelled out. Hearing the commotion, Thorn opened his mouth and let out a howl that spread over the camp, drowning out the Orc's surprised shouts. With his [Wolf Lord's Howl] causing the scrambling Orcs to falter, Thorn lowered his head and sped up, crossing the remaining distance to the supply camp gate in a single bound.

Crushing the gate like kindling, Thorn's entrance to the camp sent splintered wood flying. Behind him the rest of the Children of the Moon began to pour into the camp. Some came through the ruined gate, further widening the opening as the giant wolves clipped the sides of the fence. Others simply jumped over the walls, their entrance crushing the tents that had been built too close to the gate. Without regard for the Orcs who were struggling to get out of their tents the Charging Wolf Army rushed into the supply camp in an unstoppable wave.

The pile of stacked supplies was located in the direct center of the camp and it only took Thorn a few seconds to reach it. His thirty foot long body cleared the pile easily, continuing on past it toward the largest tent in the camp. Heidi and her team followed Thorn closely, ready to intercept the Orc leader. Rushing straight to the largest tent, Thorn did not bother to stop and simply barreled into it, using his huge form and swift speed to cause it to collapse into a heap.

Guttural shouts sounded from under the falling fabric as Thorn's tail wiped out the thick poles keeping the tent up in the air. With enraged roars, three Orcs ripped their way out of the layers of fabric, furious at the commotion. The first was a thickset Orc with a large beard who carried a big, wide bladed scimitar on his back along with a small shield. As he emerged the cloth beside him burst into flame, quickly burning away to reveal a dirty looking Shaman in a ragged robe holding a skull tipped staff.

The third Orc was different from the other two. Dressed in a set of leather and chain armor, the skinny Orc had more armor on his body than any other Orc that Thorn had seen. A long spear with a curved blade had allowed him to cut himself free of the falling tent fabric, and as he stepped through the cut,

his eyes quickly scanned the camp.

Without bothering with the three leaders, Thorn continued on his path, trampling over tents and sending Orcs flying as he rushed for the back gate. His primary mission was to clear their path of escape so he moved that direction, trusting his teammates to take out the Orc camp's leaders.

Leading her team forward, Heidi jumped off of Beautiful Wind and activated her fire based charge ability, [Burning Like A Flame], while she was in the air. A red glow flashed across her shield and she burst forward like a flame burning through a fuse.

"Focus on the warrior first! Mina, lock down the Shaman. I've got the armored one!"

As she moved through the air, Heidi's words threw the rest of her team into a flurry of action. By the time her shield was in front of the armored Orc, Mina had already thrown out her ice curse, [Blistering Chill]. The icy chains circled around the Orc Shaman, causing his hurried motions to slow to a crawl. Opening his mouth to chant, the Shaman found that his tongue had trouble forming the correct words. Stumbling through his spell, he was further distracted by the large ball of swirling ice that fell on his head.

Heidi's opponent reacted the quickest of the three commanders. Lifting his spear, he thrust the blunt end of his weapon directly at Heidi's incoming shield. With a ringing sound, the butt end of the spear slammed into Heidi's kite shield, stopping her in her tracks. Borrowing the rebounding force of the blow, the armored Orc jumped backward to gain distance. Even before he landed, his spear spun around and darted forward, cutting at Heidi. Calmly deflecting the attacks with her shield, Heidi pressed forward, her eyes carefully watching the Orc's elbows and wrists.

It was the scimitar wielding Orc who suffered the most. Set upon by Athena and the rest of Heidi's team, he barely lasted for a single round before he was cut to pieces under their flashing weapons. The players had the advantage of surprise and because they knew that they would not be sticking around for long they were not shy about using their most powerful abilities. The Shaman, struggling under Mina's relentless assault, wanted to try and save the scimitar carrying Orc, but a well timed [Sub Zero] disrupted his spell before he could get it out.

With a strangled cry the scimitar carrying Orc fell to Athena's sword and the team that had been attacking him immediately rushed to attack the Orc Shaman. Already constrained by Mina's ice spells, the Shaman found himself

besieged on all sides by flashing blades. Grasping the sun shaped amulet on his neck, he tried to activate the burning spell that the Shaman at Twin Bay had used, but before he could an arrow slammed into his hand, causing him to drop it with a yelp. Taking advantage of the Shaman's distraction, Athena and the other tanks pressed their advantage, hacking away at the energy shield that the Orc Shaman summoned to block their blades. With every strike the shield grew dimmer, clearly indicating that it was only a matter of time before the Shaman would be cut down.

While the Orc commanders were being taken care of, the ranged DPS players were causing absolute mayhem in the camp. Area of effect elemental attacks ravaged the tents and bombarded any Orcs who tried to gather together into groups of more than two. Arrows and other ranged weapons of all sorts of sizes and shapes picked off the Orcs who tried to rush to their leader's aid. In the midst of all of the chaos, the Children of the Moon proved themselves fearsome combatants once again, ripping apart the Orcs who tried to charge into the players' formation.

Fighting as a pack was what the Children of the Moon excelled at and with players mounted on their backs, their power was only magnified. Seeking out Orcs who were on their own, the Children of the Moon would attack in a group of two or more, with one wolf taking the Orc's attention while the others knocked them down. Once the Orc was on the ground, they were at the mercy of the huge wolves' teeth and claws.

"How are we doing with the supplies?" Thorn asked through the team channel.

"We are just picking up the last two bundles." Alph responded.

"Heidi?"

"One commander and one Shaman down. The last one is proving troublesome." Heidi reported, never taking her eyes from the armored Orc trying to skewer her with a spear.

"Great, let's get out of here." Thorn commanded, swatting an overly enthusiastic Orc who was charging at him with his axe raised. "Alph, can you give us cover?"

"Cover? Sure, would you like them poisoned too?"

"Not if it will put us in danger. Once we have cover we're headed to the next camp at full speed!"

"Hmm, not poisonous. Oh, no problem."

After thinking for a second, Alph pulled a potion from his bandolier and

uncapped it, tossing it down into the center of the camp where the supplies had been piled up only moments before. Underneath him, Akira was having a grand time sending out fireballs into the surrounding tents. A thick grey smoke began to billow from the potion, quickly filling the area around him with a dense haze. The smoke was rather heavy and did not rise up into the air, instead hovering at around fifteen feet, it formed a strange bubble like cloud. As more and more smoke poured into the cloud, it grew, spreading throughout the camp.

“This will last for about ten minutes.” Alph reported.

The Children of the Moon turned and, carrying their bonded players, began to rush to the south east, along the coast.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

As swiftly as they had arrived, the Charging Wolf Army vanished from the Orc supply camp, leaving complete chaos in their wake. Fires burned everywhere and both gates had been smashed beyond repair. Even the wooden wall that surrounded the camp had countless holes in it from the spells and explosive attacks that had been scattered around. By the time the thick smoke vanished, Thorn and the rest of the army were miles away, the Children of the Moon's long loping strides eating up the distance between the camps. Rushing forward at the head of the pack, Thorn took a moment to take stock of their gains.

"How did we do?"

"We made out like bandits. We were able to pick up all of the supplies, which we can turn in to Earl Blaige for a reward. We only killed around eight hundred to a thousand Orcs directly, but a bunch more were probably caught in the fires. We did manage to kill two of the commander level Orcs. A tribal Chief and a Shaman. Picked up another of those void shards too, so it looks

like we'll get one with each Shaman we kill. There was also a Weaponmaster, but we were not able to take him down before we left. His defenses were too strong."

"Two out of three isn't bad. And cutting down a fifth of their total forces is great." Thorn's mind spun as he thought through the attack. "I didn't expect the camps to be so big, so we'll need to be extra careful on our way back. Since we took their supplies, they'll probably retreat back toward the supply camp we are going to right now. If we leave too many Orcs alive we could get pinned between the forces from the raided camps and the main army."

"True, though we might not have to worry about that problem." Athena said. Carefully wiping her sword, she examined it for a moment and then put it away in her sheath. "Without supplies, they are going to be hard pressed to fight. Most of the tents were on fire when we left, and I doubt they have any real fire fighting skills with their Shaman dead. Without supplies they'll have to push toward this camp, but by the time they get there we'll have already looted it. At the very earliest, we'll encounter them the following day, after they've spent a whole twenty four hours without anything to eat or a comfortable place to sleep."

"And diarrhea."

Hearing Alph's voice over the team channel, everyone paused.

"Uh, what do you mean?" Thorn asked carefully.

"That potion I threw down? If you stay in it for more than three minutes you'll have diarrhea. For about a week. The longer you stay in it, the longer the diarrhea will last. They won't notice it for about ten hours or so though, and if they get healed it will get cleared." Alph paused, and then slapped his forehead as if he had just remembered something. "We should make sure that everyone who was in the fog gets healed. Even group healing will work. It would be a problem if you started, uh, you know."

Horrified by the picture that Alph's words painted, Thorn stayed quiet for a solid two minutes. With a shudder, he shook the picture of an entire army of sick Orcs from his mind and commanded the support players to begin checking everyone.

"Alph, I'm really glad you are on our side." Mina said, her voice slightly too cheerful. Athena, who was next to her, nodded emphatically.

As the Charging Wolf Army continued to run toward their next target, Thorn opened up a call to Corvo, checking in on Twin Bay and the Iron Wolf

Army players who had stayed there.

“How is it going? Any movement from the Orcs?” Thorn asked when Corvo’s handsome face popped up in front of him.

“It is going well. We have almost completed the defenses and have finished building everything on the peninsula. There have been some Orcs poking around, but we’ve managed to kill most of them. Still, there are some big movements from the Orcs. They’re already spread out to search for Thilvena, but they’re slowly starting to edge our way. We will probably have an army on our doorstep in about four days. My guess is that we’ll face our first real attack the day after.”

“Good, that is enough time for us to clear out at least two more camps and rush back. Our first attack was quick, but I doubt we’ll get more than one more like that. I’d guess that the camps closer to the blockade are going to be more fortified since they’ve been around for a while.”

“That seems right. Still, every camp you destroy will buy us some time. And that is what we need right now. Oh, and be on the lookout for Elves. We’ve seen some evidence that there are ranger teams roaming the forest.”

“Got it. Let me know if there are any other big movements from the Orcs, alright?”

“Sure thing. Talk to you soon.”

Closing the chat, Thorn dropped back to run next to Heidi and Akira, allowing some of the scouts to lead the way.

“Corvo is predicting that the Orcs will probably start their attack on the harbor in five days. That is more than enough time for them to finish the defenses at Twin Bay, and for us to burn some more camps. I’d also like to make contact with the Elves if at all possible. We need to coordinate a strategy for Thilvena. We can’t directly overpower the Orcs once they gather, but from what I understand we’ll need Thilvena to not move for at least a day in order to join up our forces.”

“That seems doable, what’s the problem?” Mina asked, her brow furrowed.

“Well, it might be, but right now Thilvena moves every day. Since they keep moving it, I think we should assume that they have a reason for not staying still long enough to fight the Orcs. Honestly though? I have no idea.” Thorn replied. “I’m not good at this type of strategizing.”

“It's a shame Velin isn’t around.”

“That’s for sure.” Thorn nodded, his eyes sweeping the forest around

them. “Though I can’t help but feel like she might be somewhere nearby.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Mina’s face showed her confusion.

“I’m probably just crazy, but don’t the woods smell a bit like Velin?”

“Uh, I don’t smell anything.”

[Yes, master! The woods do smell a little bit like Lady Velin. I can smell it because my nose is the best nose.]

“See, I knew I wasn’t crazy.” Thorn muttered, his dark nose twitching.

A few hours later, Thorn’s map showed that they were a bit more than halfway to the next camp when they came upon an Orc force moving supplies between the camps. One of the scouts had reported the enemies while they were still around ten minutes away, giving the Charging Wolf Army plenty of time to get ready for an attack. At first, Thorn considered simply going around, but after thinking about it further he decided that the better option would be to wipe them out and steal the goods that they were moving.

Concealing half of the players in a particularly dense area of woods, Thorn brought the other half along with all the Children of the Moon deeper into the woods, making sure they were far enough away that the Orcs would not be able to see them. According to the report, there were close to four thousand Orcs in the supply caravan, so the Charging Wolf Army prepared for a stiff fight.

The road that led between the supply camps was little more than a woodland trail that had been widened and flattened by the Orcs who traveled across it. Currently, the Orcs were walking slowly along the road, paying little attention to the forest on either side. The warm afternoon sun beat down on them, covering all of the Orcs with a fine sheen of sweat. The players who huddled on either side of the road waited patiently as the caravan slowly got closer.

Crouched behind a large tree, Mina listened carefully for the signal from the stealthed archer who stood in the branches of a tree a bit further down the road. Despite the burning sun, Mina’s body was cool, one of the small perks of her Ice Witch class. Fiddling with her wand, Mina’s mind had wandered slightly when the signal came through the team channel. Banishing her distracting thoughts, Mina blinked to the top of the tree that she had been hiding behind and began to summon her ice.

Down below her, the tanks who had been hiding on either side of the road surged forward, standing shoulder to shoulder to block the Orcs’ path. Arranged in a wedge formation with Heidi at the point, they charged into the

surprised Orcs, their weapons working as fast as possible. With the tanks taking all of the Orcs' attention, the ranged DPS hiding on either side of the road began to let loose.

Thorn, hiding in the woods, heard the signal at the same time as Mina, but instead of rushing forward, he began to count. When he had counted to fifteen, he dashed forward, followed by a tide of wolves. Despite how close the trees of the forest were together, Thorn and the Children of the Moon had no trouble navigating their path. Seeming to sometimes become insubstantial, the Children of the Moon used the shadows of the forest to great effect, stepping from one to the next.

The Orc caravan had fallen into disarray when the players first appeared, but even the most common Orc was a warrior, so they soon gathered into a fighting formation and rushed forward to engage the tanks. Braving the spells and arrows raining down on them, the Orcs slammed into the tank line with an earth shaking crunch.

Sweeping through the woods, Thorn waited until he was around fifty feet from his target before unleashing [Wolf Lord's Howl]. As the cry echoed through the forest, the Children of the Moon picked it up, causing the Orcs to fall into confusion once again. Thorn's eyes were fixed on an ornately decorated cart toward the center of the caravan, and that is where he led his forces. Sprinting out of the woods, Thorn jumped and canceled his [Wolf Form] ability in mid-flight.

Without drawing his tetsubo, he smashed into the Orc formation, crushing a few Orc workers under his hefty bulk. Smoothly spinning around, Thorn jumped, lashing out with his foot in a spinning heel kick right into the side of the ornate cart.

BOOM

The resulting explosion of wooden splinters was loud enough that it gathered the attention of everyone on the battlefield for a moment. The players, noticing it was Thorn who had destroyed something, were able to quickly get back to their fight, but the Orcs had a bit more trouble, no thanks to the incredibly intimidating picture that Thorn presented.

The top of the cart had been removed completely, revealing the two passengers who were riding inside. Two Shaman scrambled from the wreckage of the cart, both wielding strange curved staffs. Unlike the raggedly dressed Orc Shaman that Thorn had fought, these Shaman looked more like Arhtu. Dressed in ornate robes, they would have appeared more like well

dressed mages if they were not currently rolling on the ground. Both of them had their magical shields active to avoid getting crushed along with the cart, but that had not stopped them from getting covered in splinters.

Unwilling to give them time to reorient themselves, Thorn jumped forward, his fist punching down onto one of the Shaman's heads. Under the astonished gazes of the surrounding Orcs, the Shaman appeared to vanish. One moment he was trying to gain his bearings, and the next he was simply gone. As Thorn had rushed forward to attack, he had used his [Spiritual Sense] to hollow out the ground underneath the Shaman, leaving nothing but a thin crust of earth under his feet. The punch had been blocked by the magic shield that surrounded the Shaman, but it had not been able to prevent the Shaman from being forced down into the pit that Thorn had created. As the Shaman disappeared into the hole, Thorn pounced toward the other Shaman, unleashing a side kick that sent him flying through the air.

While Thorn had engaged the Orc forces, the rest of the players who had been with him charged into the distracted enemy lines. Rather than fighting from on top of their bond-wolves, the players all jumped down, rushing into the Orc caravan in groups while the Children of the Moon continued to hunt along the edges of the fight. The Orc Shaman that Thorn had kicked landed with a thump, his magical shield flickering out as it absorbed as much damage as it could take.

Roaring with rage, the Orc Shaman tried to lift his staff only to find the strength bleeding out of his fingers. Confused, he began to turn his head, but found he lacked the strength. A moment later, his world faded to black for the final time, as the three players who had just ambushed him reentered stealth and rushed off to find new targets.

In the center of the caravan, Thorn pulled out his tetsubo and began to spin the massive metal weapon, causing utter devastation among the Orcs who rushed toward him. With his long reach, most of the Orcs never got close enough for their attacks to reach him, and the few that did simply bounced off of his armor. After cutting down the initial wave of Orcs, Thorn found himself standing in an empty area, as the other Orcs thought better of getting into his range.

Smiling grimly, Thorn scanned the battlefield for other targets. One of the two Shaman had been killed, and the other was still temporarily trapped underground where Thorn had smashed him. Through his [Spiritual Sense] Thorn could feel the remaining Shaman struggling to claw his way out of the

earth. Since the Orcs were largely staying out of his reach, Thorn paused for a moment, centering himself and focusing his [Spiritual Sense]. He had never used it offensively before, so he was unsure if he was going to be able to damage the Shaman underground, but it was certainly worth a shot.

Seizing the earth elemental energy that spread under his feet, Thorn condensed it into a sharp spike, thrusting it through the ground and into the Orc. The last vestiges of the Orc's shield managed to block most of the attack, but before it crumbled, a shard of the stone spike punctured through the shield, stabbing into the Orc Shaman's arm. From under the earth came an enraged hiss, and then Thorn witnessed something incredible through his [Spiritual Sense].

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

In the underground pit the Orc Shaman's eyes flashed with insanity as the shard of stone cut his arm and without hesitating, he wrenched his arm through the dirt and pressed his curved staff against the bleeding wound. Low and powerful, a hiss that shook the earth all around him echoed out of the staff as it began to absorb his blood. Though the cut was not deep the blood pouring from it did not abate, instead growing into a torrent as the Shaman's arm withered at a visible rate. As it consumed his blood, the staff began to twist and swell, a bloody red pattern emerging all over it. Small scales began to appear on the shaft of the staff, growing clearer and clearer as the Shaman's blood washed over it.

Finally satiated, the top of the staff split open into a six pronged maw that resembled the legs of an octopus. Instead of suckers, the writhing tentacle-like appendages were covered with razor sharp teeth. A sinuous body stretched behind the head, growing longer and thicker by the moment even as the head of the creature continued to spread. Soon the snake-like creature had

grown to the point that the hollow that Thorn had created could no longer contain it.

Bursting from the earth, its six tentacle-like appendages waved in the air as it issued a high pitched screech. Rushing out of the hole, it stretched to its full, eleven foot height. As soon as it appeared Thorn noticed the disgusting stench that radiated off of it. A deep growl rumbled in his chest as the overwhelming desire to crush the monster washed over him. Around the battlefield, the heads of every single one of the Children of the Moon snapped toward the worm-like creature, low growls spilling from their lips.

ding

Kill the Blood Leech
At the cost of sacrificing his vitality, Onog, the Orc Shaman of the Bloody Worm tribe, has summoned a devil worm from the Abyss. One of the most common species in the Abyss, the Blood Leech is lacking in combat ability compared to the other denizens of the Abyss, but that makes it no less dangerous. What it lacks in direct combat strength, it makes up for in its ability to reproduce. By consuming the bodies of other creatures, it gains the ability to rapidly procreate, up to a maximum of ten times. With each new Blood Leech able to reproduce this way, a single Blood Leech can quickly turn into an ever growing infestation. As the Guardians of the Abyss, the Children of the Moon are determined to destroy this threat before it can spread to the rest of the forest. Assist them in wiping out the Blood Leech infestation. Adult Blood Leech Count: 1 Offspring Created: 0 Blood Leeches Killed: 0

“Well, this seems like a problem.” Mina said over the team channel. “We probably need to make sure those things don’t escape.”

“You think?” Thorn grunted, bringing his tetsubo down with two hands onto the squirming devil worm.

In a flash, the creature slipped out of his range, seizing an Orc soldier as it

went. Gripping the unfortunate Orc by the leg, it sunk its razor sharp teeth deep into his skin. Instead of the bloody mess that Thorn expected, the Orc simply shriveled up as the Blood Leech sucked out all his blood in an instant. Under the player's horrified gazes, the Blood Leech finished the Orc and made a hitching motion, as if it was throwing something up. A small squirming ball fell from its mouth as the drained Orc's body fell apart, followed by another, and then another.

Soon there was a small pile of squirming larvae, but before anyone could react, they began to slither away, growing visibly. Horrified, Thorn glanced at the quest window that had popped up, only to have his worst fears confirmed.

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"Mina, Alph, any way you can slow them down? If we don't keep them contained we will be in a huge amount of trouble? We need to clear the Orcs as quickly as possible to keep them from reproducing!" Thorn snapped, lunging forward to try and draw the adult Blood Leech's attention.

“Uh, bad news, Thorn. Those babies seem to be able to crawl into the Orc’s dead bodies. They won’t vanish until after the fight, so we don’t have a good way to stop them from reproducing.” Mina said, bombarding an Orc body with [Ice Spikes].

“Unless we fire bomb them.” Alph interjected. “Fire bombing always works!”

“Just focus on the fight. Alph, try to keep the collateral damage as low as possible.”

Chasing after the adult Blood Leech, Thorn quickly found that the battle fell into a strange rhythm. There were three different forces fighting against each other, each trying to destroy the other two forces and keep themselves alive. The smallest force was the Blood Leeches, though they were beginning to rapidly swell in number as they consumed the fallen Orcs. While they had the highest numbers, the Orcs were in the most dangerous position. On one side they had the players who were determined to wipe them out, and on the other side they had the Blood Leeches that their own Shaman had summoned. Both sides looked at them as prey and with their leaders dead or buried underground, they were not organized enough to resist either enemy.

The Charging Wolf Army was in the dominant position, and did their best to control the battlefield. While there were only fifteen hundred players, each one of those players had a bonded giant wolf, bringing their total numbers to around three thousand combatants. Under Thorn’s direction, the players focused on killing the Orcs while the Children of the Moon hunted the Blood Leeches. The disgusting smell coming off of the Blood Leeches acted like a magnet for Thorn and the Children of the Moon, allowing them to ferret out the young leeches hiding among the corpses.

Thorn was chasing down the adult Blood Leech with Mina and Akira, but despite their efforts the creature was too slippery to pin down. Finally, frustrated that they could not deal any significant damage to it, Thorn changed his tactics.

[Akira, burn any Orc bodies nearby, we need to starve the Blood Leech out. If we can’t kill it, we can at least keep it from reproducing.]

[Got it, master!]

Lifting her tails, Akira began to summon swarms of fireballs, showering their surroundings with crimson flames. The fireballs targeted the fallen Orcs, beginning to burn their bodies into ash. Annoyed that its food was being consumed by the magic flame, the adult Blood Leech lifted its head and

hissed at Akira, causing her fur to stand up. Dashing behind Thorn, Akira peeked out from behind his body with a shudder.

[Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.] Thorn smiled slightly at Akira’s action, causing his battle pet to huff.

[I’m not afraid, master, it's just too gross. What if that slimy saliva got on my pretty fur? I bet that would take forever to get off!]

Chuckling, Thorn activated [Shadow Dash], taking advantage of the Blood Leech’s posturing to close the distance. Having learned their lesson, Thorn and Mina coordinated to try and trap the worm. With a flick of her wand, the Ice Witch summoned three ice walls behind the Blood Leech, trying to trap it in place. As the worm tried to back up, it felt the icy walls behind its back and reacted in a flash.

Squeezing its tentacles into a spike, the Blood Leech dropped its head and stabbed it into the ground. Within an instant more than half of its body had sunk into the earth as it tried to dig its way to freedom. Opening his mouth, Thorn activated [Wolf Lord’s Howl] again, using the brief moment of hesitation that it caused to cancel [Shadow Dash] and reach down. His sharp claws dug into the Blood Leech’s tough scales, allowing his fingers to get a solid grip. Rather than pulling up, Thorn closed his eyes and allowed his [Spiritual Sense] to sink into the earth.

Taking control of the earth elemental energy around the Blood Leech’s body, he compressed it as fast as he could, trying to form a solid block of stone around the monster. The Blood Leech could sense the movement of the tightening rock and began to thrash its body to try to free itself. Feeling like his hand was beginning to slip, Thorn reached down and got a good grip with his other hand, suppressing the Blood Leech’s movements.

“Thorn! Watch out!”

Focused on the struggling devil worm, Thorn had not seen the streak of corrosive green arcane energy that was flying toward his back. By the time he heard Mina’s shout the attack was only a few feet from his back and was impossible to dodge.

[Armor of the Earth]

A rush of yellow energy sprang to life around Thorn, blocking the acid spell and causing it to explode. Deadly green poison dripped from Thorn’s back, sliding down to the ground where it began to eat away at the dirt. His attention shaken by the abrupt attack, Thorn lost control of the ground around the Blood Leech, allowing it to twist its body around. Turning its head, the

Blood Leech shot up out of the earth, its dreadful mouth opening like a bloody flower as it tried to bite Thorn.

Growing angrier by the second, Thorn found it impossible to contain the burning in his chest. As the Blood Leech's head broke the surface [Wolf's Rage] triggered, sending a tremor through his body. Letting go of the Blood Leech's tail, Thorn's claws shot out, fixing themselves around its neck. With a deep roar, he ripped the creature from the ground, the friction lacerating its body badly. Rising up to his full height, he lifted the Blood Leech into the air and grabbed its squirming body with his other hand.

Turning his head to where the Orc Shaman who had clawed his way back above ground was standing, Thorn roared again, ripping the Blood Leech in half. Still holding the writhing head, he threw the other half of its body to the side and vanished from where he stood.

[Predator's Leap]

The boom came half a second later as the place where Thorn had been standing was depressed from the force of his launch. Flying through the air, Thorn drew back his fist, the burning eyes of his armor fixed on the Shaman. A moment later his fist smashed into the Shaman's chest, crushing his bones and driving him into the ground in an explosion of dirt. As the dirt and dust fell to the ground, Thorn's huge figure stood like an ancient behemoth, a deadly pressure radiating off of him. In that moment, every living thing in the surrounding area froze in uncontrollable fear.

Watching from a distance, Mina and Athena shared a concerned glance.

"This…?" Athena whispered, her voice unnaturally loud in the silence.

"This is what I was talking about." Mina said, adjusting her grip on her wand.

"Have you talked to him?"

"No," Mina swallowed, suppressing a shiver. "He doesn't realize that he is doing it."

Still gripped by his rage ability, Thorn's mind was surprisingly unclouded and operating at peak performance. He could feel his [Spiritual Sense] enveloping his mind and body, giving him a feeling of absolute control. With perfect awareness of his body he seemed to instinctively know how to get the absolute most out of every movement he made. As he breathed, he could feel that sense of control stretching into the space around him, permeating every molecule. The subtle twitches of each creature that stood in the space under his control was laid bare to Thorn as millions of bits of information were fed

into his mind. Taking another breath, a strange sense of indifference crept into his heart.

With absolute awareness of where every single one of the Blood Leeches hid, Thorn flicked his finger, forming over a hundred stone spikes that darted from the earth. All across the battlefield the Blood Leeches exploded into spurts of crimson liquid as the spikes ripped through them.

ding

Kill the Blood Leech - [Complete]
At the cost of sacrificing his vitality, Onog, the Orc Shaman of the Bloody Worm tribe, has summoned a devil worm from the Abyss. One of the most common species in the Abyss, the Blood Leech is lacking in combat ability compared to the other denizens of the Abyss, but that makes it no less dangerous. What it lacks in direct combat strength, it makes up for in its ability to reproduce. By consuming the bodies of other creatures, it gains the ability to rapidly procreate, up to a maximum of ten times. With each new Blood Leech able to reproduce this way, a single Blood Leech can quickly turn into an ever growing infestation. As the Guardians of the Abyss, the Children of the Moon are determined to destroy this threat before it can spread to the rest of the forest. You have assisted them in wiping out the Blood Leech infestation, earning their gratitude. Adult Blood Leech Count: 43 Offspring Created: 126 Blood Leeches Killed: 169

Ignoring the pop up, Thorn’s burning gaze swept the battlefield, causing each of the Orcs who fell under his vision to quiver in abject terror. Just as Thorn was about to lift his hand again, the strength and control that had filled him retreated like a tide, emptying out of his body in an instant. With a cough Thorn fell to one knee with a thud. The aura of absolute suppression that he had radiated a moment earlier was gone, replaced with a frail spirit that felt as if it was about to blow away with the wind.

“Iron Wolves!”

Athena’s voice roared out, breaking the strange silence that dominated the battlefield. Brilliantly shining flowers spun around her, the petals shooting out to cover both the players and the Children of the Moon.

“KILL!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Raising their voices together, the Charging Wolf Army burst into action, redoubling their efforts to cut down the still stunned Orcs. Thorn's overwhelming aura had sent shivers down the backs of the players and NPCs alike, but the players were able to recover from their abnormal state faster, gaining a significant advantage over the still frightened Orcs. As the battle began to rage again, Thorn remained slumped where he had fallen, his breath coming in huge gasps. Despite his powerless appearance, the Orcs around him stayed well clear, a deep seated fear burned into their hearts and minds.

Leading the tanks forward, Heidi forced the Orc soldiers back while Athena and Mina led the attack from the other direction. As the Orcs clumped together, the Children of the Moon would dart in and seize Orcs who were out of position, dragging them away from the group where they were quickly finished off.

With the second Orc Shaman dealt with and the Blood Leech threat removed, the rest of the fight only lasted another twenty minutes as the Charging Wolf Army cleaned up the remaining Orcs. Though they were outnumbered by at least a thousand, the initial damage that their ambush had

done, combined with the deadly assault of the Blood Leeches, had destroyed the Orcs' morale, drastically reducing their combat ability.

When the fight was finally over and the battlefield was being looted, Athena, Mina, and Heidi all hurried over to where Thorn knelt. Akira, arriving first, transformed into her pet form and climbed up on Thorn's shoulder, nudging his helmet with her nose. Letting out a groan, Thorn slowly reached up and unclipped his helmet. Taking it off with some effort, he allowed it to drop to the ground and gingerly let himself down into a sitting position.

A grand emptiness filled his body, as if his very core had been sucked out. Instead, it was his mind that felt completely full, as if there was no room for anything else to fit. Instinctively examining his mind with his [Spiritual Sense], Thorn could faintly make out a deep golden mist enveloping his mind. Faint flashes of light lit it up, like lighting in a thundercloud. Despite his mind being full of this golden cloud, Thorn found himself having some trouble gathering his thoughts together. Each time he would try and complete a thought it would simply fragment under the immense pressure that radiated from the cloud in his mind, leaving his thoughts blank once again. It was not until Akira had touched him that his strangely blank brain started working again.

[Master, master! Are you okay?]

[Ooof, I think so?]

Once he was sitting, Thorn could feel the earth under his body. Faint slivers of earth elemental energy began to seep into him. Each sliver brought with it a sense of relief, allowing him to alleviate some of the pressure that the golden cloud brought him. Taking a deep breath, Thorn tried his best to focus on guiding the earth elemental energy up into his head. It was a laborious process, but Thorn's will was firm and over time it grew easier and easier as more energy streamed into his head.

The earth elemental energy wrapped around the golden cloud, separating it from the rest of Thorn's mind. The extra layer of energy seemed to protect Thorn's thoughts from the flashes of light in the golden cloud, keeping them from shattering into pieces. As he built up a barrier, Thorn found, to his great relief, that he was able to think clearly again. The tremendous exhaustion of his body remained however, causing him to let out another deep sigh. Opening his eyes, Thorn was startled to find three women staring at him with various expressions of shock, annoyance, amusement, and anger.

“Are you good?” Athena’s gaze was a mixture of concern and anger that Thorn found it hard to face.

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t know what happened there.”

Giving the sheepish Titan a long look, Athena finally just sighed and patted him on the arm.

“As long as you are alright. Are we heading to the next supply camp?”

“Yeah. Honestly, I don’t know that I’ll be any good for the next fight, but you should be okay without me.” Thorn said, slowly lifting his body from the ground. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to hand command over to you for the time being. At least until I get some energy back. Whatever that was, it was absolutely exhausting.”

“That is fine.” Athena nodded, accepting the popup as Thorn assigned her the team leader role in the group.

Twenty minutes later the Charging Wolf Army had finished cleaning up the battlefield and mounted up. Thorn, too exhausted to run in his [Wolf Form], climbed up onto Akira who had transformed back to her battle form. Though Akira complained a bit about how much he weighed, she seemed quite happy to act as his mount and dashed this way and that to show off how fast she was, even with Thorn on her back.

As the army moved toward the next Orc supply camp, Thorn brought up the windows that had popped up during the fight, trying to make some sense of everything that had happened. Apart from the common notifications of damage and effects, Thorn only found two things that were out of the ordinary. The first strange thing was a series of windows that had popped up when [Wolf’s Rage] activated.

Bloodline Evolution [Stage 1]: [Titan] -> [Titan - Earthbound]
Conditions for a bloodline evolution have been met. Your race has met the conditions to advance from [Titan] to [Titan - Earthbound]. Your racial abilities have been changed accordingly. To stabilize your change, please consume appropriate nutrition and get sufficient rest.

Consummate Warrior Domain Activated
Your domain has been activated, temporarily granting you the following abilities at the cost of increased mental and physical stamina consumption:

Absolute Awareness Total Control - Self

Frowning, Thorn brought up his status to see what had changed. Though he had witnessed Akira's bloodline change from a Royal Ailuridae to a Pure Ailuridae, he was not aware that it was possible for players to change their race.

Status

Name: [Thorn]	Race: [Titan - Earthbound]
Health: [100%]	Mana: [100%]
Titles: [Battle Mad], [Wolfsbane], [Lord Greymane, the Moon Wolf (First Rank)], [Friend of the Earth], [Inheritor], [Commissioned Knight (Order of the Flame)], [Kingbreaker], [Hero], [Gladiator], [The Stone King, Lord of Earth]	Class: [Dawn Walker] Mastery: [Persuasive Aura] Allegiance: [Temple of the Moon]
Abilities: [Wolf Lord's Howl], [Avatar of the Wolf], [Call the Pack], [Blessing of the Moon], [Presence of the Wolf Lord], [Martial Form: Dawn], [Basic Weapons Mastery], [Journeyman Orator], [Improved Rallying Cry], [Improved Pack Travel], [Pack Leader], [Persuasive Aura], [Earth Sense], [The Devil is in the Details], [Shadow Dash], [Language Proficiency: Abyssal], [Intercepting Strike (lvl 1)], [Armor of the Earth], [Heart of the Earth], [Call the Stone Legion], [Spiritual Sense of Earth]	

The only difference that Thorn could spot was a change in his race. Nowhere did he see the two abilities mentioned in the [Consummate Warrior Domain] notification. Going back, he opened up the notification again and clicked on the two abilities listed in it.

Absolute Awareness
You gain awareness of everything in the range of your area of control.

Total Control - Self
You have gained complete control over your body, allowing you to use the perfect amount of energy for every motion.

Both of the abilities turned out to be self-explanatory so he clicked on his updated race, opening up the new description.

Earthbound Titan - Unique
Now lost in the mist of time, this ancient race once ruled the world, rivaled only by the great Dragons. Long-lived and immensely strong, the Titans were masters of almost anything they put their hand to and created a far-reaching empire that is still ruled by the Elemental Giants. Little else is known about the Titans, and further information must be unlocked through discoveries in game. You have advanced to the esteemed state of an Earthbound, the warrior class of the Titan race. Equipped with tremendous strength, unparalleled speed, and the natural resistances of the Titan race, the Earthbound bring consummate skill with weapons and an absolute control of their own bodies. This control is reflected into the world around them through their aura, allowing them to anticipate and overcome any number of enemies.
Racial Traits
Titan’s Strength: Increased resistance to mind-affecting conditions.
Titan’s Endurance: Increased resistance to physical conditions.
Consummate Warrior Domain: You gain absolute awareness of yourself and your surroundings. Additionally, you are immune to combat penalties from being outnumbered.

Scratching his head, Thorn cast his mind back over what he had

experienced. The feeling of invincibility that he had felt was still clear in his mind. Though the feeling had faded he could easily recall everything that had happened as if he was watching a three dimensional movie in slow motion. In the instant that his [Wolf's Rage] activated, Thorn's [Spiritual Sense] had gone into overdrive, giving him the absolute position of every single object on the battlefield.

The trouble had come when he locked on to every single one of the remaining Blood Leeches and then attempted to use his [Spiritual Sense of Earth] to manipulate the earth elemental energy to wipe them all out. Creating hundreds of stone spikes to attack the Blood Leeches had overdrawn his mental energy, forcefully canceling the effect.

Of all of his memories of the fight, what remained clearest to Thorn was the strange feeling of detachment that had grown in his chest when the domain activated. It was the feeling of being above everything, as if he had separated from the world and those who inhabited it. In the moment, it had been the most natural thing in the world to wipe out the Blood Leeches with a simple wave, yet now that the feeling was gone, a shadow of fear hung over Thorn's heart.

There was something intoxicating about that detachment, a sense of control and clarity that was deeply attractive. Yet Thorn could not help but wonder if he would have turned on the players around him after the rest of his enemies had been destroyed. With a small shudder, Thorn put the thought out of his mind and brought himself back to the present.

The second notification that had popped up during the fight was the notification of the condition his body was currently experiencing.

Condition: Exhaustion
Though you have displayed herculean efforts, your actions have overdrawn your mind, body, and spirit, performing far beyond your normal capabilities. Without significant rest you will not be able to recover your full strength. All of your base abilities are reduced and capped while you are affected by this condition. Racial abilities will have reduced effectiveness while you are affected by this condition. Magical healing is ineffective against this condition. -Strength

-Constitution
-Agility
-Intelligence
-Wisdom
-Charisma

Closing all of the windows, Thorn rubbed his head. There was simply too much to try and work through to figure out what was going on. His race and his abilities were mixing in ways that he had not anticipated, creating countless new questions for him.

“Hey, Athena, do you have a moment?”

Hearing his question, Athena and Heidi dropped back until they were next to Thorn and Akira.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Do you know what a domain is?”

“Are you asking about the land version or another version?”

“Another version. Like, a warrior domain.”

Thinking for a second, Athena watched the trees flashing by before her eyes lit up.

“Oh, you mean a control domain. Yeah, I know a little bit about it. Most of the time, control domains manifest when someone has gotten to a certain level of combat ability. Most of the top players have one to some degree or another. Some people call it setting the tempo or fluidity. It's all about how comfortable you are with your skills and abilities.”

“Duratan said something about fluidity when we fought back on Angoril.” Thorn said. “Are there ways of categorizing it? Levels or anything like that?”

“Of course. Most players are only in the initial stages at this point. They have a sense of how their abilities and proficiencies work together, and they are on the edge of discovering how to use them in the most efficient way. Some of us have figured that out, and we have the ability to use our class to a greater degree than you would expect. Sort of a sum of the parts greater than the whole situation. The top elite players fall into that category. In fact, that is what you need in order to be considered an elite player.

“Above that you have players who are so skilled that they can not only control their own abilities perfectly, but they can use them to set the tempo of the fight, becoming nearly invincible. Most of the avatars are in that spot, along with a few other players. Sylith, Ragnarok’s Heavenly Silver Dragon

Knight is one of those players. He is so good that he can trap his opponent into a rhythm that destroys any hope of their victory."

"Oof, I remember." Thorn said, his mind drifting back to the flaming Labyrinth where he and Sylith had fought. "He wrecked me, even though our actual strength is not that different."

"If we compare straight power, you are probably way stronger. But what he has is a control domain that extends to his opponent. The ability to establish the rhythm of the fight and force everyone else into his way of fighting ensures that he wins. To beat him you have to be able to disrupt that control."

"That makes sense. Are there other players who are on that level?" Thorn asked.

"Mina, though to a lesser degree."

Heidi spoke up from where she sat behind Athena, causing both Thorn and Athena to twist around and look at her. Looking ahead calmly, Heidi explained.

"Mina has touched the edge of the control domain level. You might say she has one foot in. Her element is just not strong enough to remain unbroken against people of the same level. If she ever is able to strengthen her element, she'll be able to stand toe to toe against nearly anyone."

Shooting a glance at Mina who was chatting happily as she rode on one of the wolves at the front of the army, Thorn fell into thought. It was true that he had never seen Mina fall into a disadvantage in a fight except when her enemy had the ability to overpower her ice spells. The Ice Witch possessed a nearly uncanny instinct for timing and knew her abilities so well that it often felt like she was conducting an orchestra rather than engaging in combat.

"How about you?" Thorn asked, turning his attention back to Heidi.

"I'm starting to reach the upper limit of personal control. My abilities are getting smoother, but I still haven't shaken the gamer mindset, which is holding me back."

"What do you mean by gamer mindset?"

"I did not understand it for a long time either, but more recently, as I have been playing with all of you, I've had some realizations that have allowed me to progress." A strange look crossed Heidi's face as she ran her fingers over Beautiful Wind's soft fur. Looking up, she met Thorn's gaze. "The difference between ninety-nine point nine percent of the people who play this game, and those who truly excel, is in what they believe about this world."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Even before Heidi continued, Thorn had an instinctive understanding of what she was going to say.

“When Nova Terra launched, it was marketed as an alternate reality. More than a game, another world. Do you remember the tagline for it?”

“Your Dreams, Your World.” Athena said quietly.

“Exactly. Is this a dream? Is this our world?” Heidi took a deep breath and paused for a moment as the breeze sent a wisp of her hair dancing. “I have begun to realize something ever since I joined Nova Luna. You don’t treat this as a game. You treat this as the real world. You don’t treat the natives like empty clumps of data, you take them as seriously as you take me. Which makes sense in a strange way. After all, aren’t we all just clumps of data in here? Once I recognized that,” Heidi held up her hand, clenching it into a fist before she continued, “this is real, I was able to progress. Sure, it's not real the way the real world is real, but the real world isn’t real the way this is real either.”

“Treating this like the real world, huh?”

Looking up, Thorn could see small glimmers of the blue sky through the thick canopy of trees. When he had first entered Nova Terra he had been astounded by how real it felt to him, marveling at the visceral sensations that even the simplest sensations brought. Considering how restrained his life before entering the game world had been, it had been as if his mind, spirit, and body had been set free.

It was in Nova Terra that he experienced life the way he had always imagined it should be experienced. That idea had infected his attitude toward the game world, causing him to take it as seriously as he had ever taken his life in the real world. The idea of treating this wonderful world like a game had never even crossed his mind.

“You’re not the only one, you know?”

Heidi opened her palm, revealing half of a silver coin that she had retrieved from her inventory. Holding it up for Thorn and Athena to see, she ran a finger across the perfectly smooth flat edge of the coin.

“When I was in the game for about a year, game time, I saw a traveler chop this coin in half. With their hand. After they left I found this half and kept it. I’ve never seen that player again, but he gave me such an impression I’ve never forgotten him. You know, the reason I agreed to join Nova Luna is because of him. He had this, I dunno, this aura. Like he fit into the world perfectly.”

“Like Thorn?” Athena asked.

It was a moment before Heidi responded, and when she did it was with a small sigh.

“Yeah, like Thorn.”

For the next half hour the Charging Wolf Army continued to rush toward the Orc supply camp that had been their original destination. As Thorn rested on Akira’s back he could feel fractions of his strength returning. Continuing to talk with Heidi and Athena, Thorn focused on learning as much as he possibly could about the way players thought about control domains.

ding

Hearing a chime during a lull in the conversation, Thorn opened up the call he was getting, revealing a worried looking Corvo who began to speak as soon as the call connected.

“Thorn, we’ve got a problem. Arhtu found us and brought his forces. They’re going to be sieging the harbor soon. We’re going to be in a really

serious situation here if something is not done fast."

"Whoa, hold up. Aren't the defenses fine? What is the issue?" Thorn asked.

"The Orcs found some siege engineers somewhere. They look like they are starting to put together some sort of catapult which will completely wreck us. Who knows where they found Orcs with engineering knowledge, but we spotted at least three of them."

"Do Orcs not know anything about engineering? What is so strange about that? They seem like they're great builders."

"Sure, and they know a lot about building buildings, but weapon engineering is a particular science that requires a fair amount of math. I mean, Orcs are smart, but they're not known for their patience. They'd much rather make a giant club than an intricate counterweight system. The one exception are the Cogs of the Sun, an Orc tribe that think that math will help them get closer to the sun. They're trying to work out a rocket I think. Anyway, I spotted their flag and three Orcs with the yellow and silver robes that their priests wear."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound good. We got slightly delayed on our way to the second supply camp, so we can turn back now." Thorn said, calling for Mina to come over. "My concern is that no matter what we do we're going to be losing out. If we don't take down these supply points we're going to face an endless wave of Orcs. If we do, we could lose the harbor."

"What's going on?" Mina asked as she came over.

Bringing the Charging Wolf Army to a halt, Thorn instructed everyone to take a rest and added Mina and Athena to the call. After Thorn gave them a rundown of the situation, silence fell over the group as each tried to come up with the best solution. Finally, Thorn sighed and looked at the two ladies.

"Can you handle the supply camps if I take a few players to go help with these Cog guys?"

"Sure, but you're still weakened, right? What help are you going to be?"

"If it's just an assassination I should be good. I should be able to get enough strength back by then to wipe out three Orcs. Plus, I'm bound to the resurrection point at the harbor. Even if I die I can try again. I'll be much less help against the camps. You'll need a sizable force to go up against the camps, but we should be able to spare a small suicide squad."

"Wow, suicide squad? Not what I expected from you, that's for sure." Mina said, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

“Hey, I am an immortal traveler, remember?” Thorn joked with a wink. “But seriously, I have no intention of dying. That is always a last resort. With Corvo running intelligence, we should be able to come up with a plan that will get us in and out without trouble.”

“Corvo?” Instead of continuing the conversation with Thorn, Athena looked at the avatar of Huginn on the video screen.

“Yeah, it's possible. We’ll need people with the ability to cross distance fast and silently. Preferably without being visible. We have plenty of stealthy characters here, but we can’t get out without being spotted. The Orcs have set up these towers all around the harbor with a bunch of Shaman. Each one has an Evil Eye Staff, which makes stealth useless. Our only real shot is to hit them from behind with someone already outside the harbor.”

“That would be me.” Thorn said.

“Correct, that would be you. Or a team of yours. I’m honestly not sure how much help you will be, Thorn. You are not exactly the most, uh, subtle?”

“What if I could be?” Grinning widely, Thorn opened up his [Wolf Form] and shared it.

Wolf Form
You have been granted the form of Hati, the Moon Wolf. While you are in this form, you may activate any of your abilities but you may not equip any gear. All current gear will be stored upon assuming this form. All gear will remain in your inventory when shifting back to your natural form with the exception of any armor that has been blessed by Hati. +Agility +Agility +Agility +Regeneration Abilities: [Shadow Walk] [Call the Pack] [Hunter’s Mark] [Hunter’s Senses]

“Check out the top ability my [Wolf Form] grants.”

Shadow Walk
To Hati, the Lord of the Night, using the Shadow Plane is as natural as breathing. By connecting two shadows within range, you can create a personal doorway, moving swiftly between them. Activation Time: 3 seconds

“Of course you can teleport through the shadows. Why wouldn’t you be able to teleport through the shadows? Let me guess, you can shoot rainbows from your butt too? Just in case you need to spice up a party? You know, I don’t want to come across as ungrateful, or anything, but all I got was a stupid bird form. Greatest bird ever, of course.” Corvo added quickly, his eyes flickering upward for a moment. “Definitely the wisest, best looking, totally best bird the world has ever seen, but come on.”

“Haha, it's not that great.” Thorn laughed. “I have to use shadows big enough to fit my body through, which isn’t always easy as a ten foot tall, thirty foot long wolf.”

“Did I mention my bird form is tiny?” Corvo said, fixing Thorn with a death stare.

Coughing, Thorn looked away, refusing to meet his fellow avatar’s eyes. The Elven avatar of Huginn had certainly gotten the short end of the stick, even compared to the other avatars that Thorn had met, let alone Thorn himself.

“We will pick a team and head back your direction. Athena will lead the Charging Wolf Army to continue attacking the supply camps. If we can come up with a plan that will allow me to participate, I will. Otherwise I’ll just come back to the harbor. I’m not going to be much help in either case. Does that sound good?”

“Sure, I’ll start working on a plan. I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with something that will let you sneak into the camp.”

“Great, see you soon.”

Closing the call, Thorn began to comb over the Charging Wolf Army roster. The Charging Wolf Army was made up from the players from all ten of the Iron Wolf Army battalions who had been able to complete the reputation quest with the Children of the Moon. The uneven composition of the army skewed toward ranged DPS players and support players, but there

were a fair amount of stealth based players for Thorn to pick from.

After discussing it with Athena, Thorn finally settled on a team of four other players who all had a teleport ability and some form of stealth. Three of the other players had a ranged DPS focus along with their stealth abilities, and the last was a Shadow Assassin like Jorge. Gathering them together, Thorn explained what they were going to do.

“It turns out that there are a few Orcs that we need to take down. Our brain trust has determined that the best way to do that is run an assassination mission. We’ll be going into an active Orc army camp to take down the three Cog priests.”

Thorn paused and gestured for the woman who raised their hands to speak.

“Yes, GhillieGhillie, go ahead.”

“Is this a suicide run?”

“No, I hope not. But the possibility is there. I mean, it is a full Orc camp. Until we see what the final plan is, I am not sure what our chances of getting out alive are, but they could very well be low. I don’t want to force anyone to their death, so if you are not interested in participating that is fine.”

“Nah, I’m good. I just wanted to know if I should leave my nice gear at home.” GhillieGhillie grinned and held up a glittering crystal bow. “I have no problem with a suicide run as long as the pay is good.”

“You can be sure of that.” Thorn nodded. “If there is one thing that Nova Luna is not lacking, it is the ability to give rewards. Everyone who participates will be generously rewarded. Additionally, if we do die, there will be additional compensation.”

“Great, I’m in.”

“Excellent, how about the rest of you?”

The other three players shared a look and then nodded their heads. The cost of death in Nova Terra was significant, but unless they dropped a priceless piece of gear, they could make up the proficiency loss over time. On the other hand, if they took the risk they were sure to be rewarded handsomely.

“Good. Let’s do our introductions as we go. Athena,” Thorn turned to his aunt. “We are going to head out. Let me know if you have any issues.”

“Sounds good. Best of luck with your raid.”

“You too.”

Climbing up onto Akira’s back, Thorn and his small team set off for the harbor while Athena led the rest of the Charging Wolf Army further south

east along the coast. As Akira and the large wolves carried the five players back along their path, Thorn began the introductions.

“I’ll go ahead and kick things off I guess. I’m Thorn and I run Nova Luna. Hah, but seriously, I’m a Dawn Walker, which is a support and leadership double category class. My teleport ability comes from my [Wolf Form] ability. Typically I play as melee DPS or tank in addition to leading. I like using a tetsubo or mace, and my hands and feet.”

“You’re a support player?” GhillieGhillie asked, unable to believe what she had heard.

“Uh, yeah. I focus more on the leadership side of the class than the support side. How about you?”

“Uh, well, I’m GhillieGhillie, but you can call me GG. I’m a Dark Archer. Utility Combat dual class. I have the same shadow abilities as a Shadow Assassin. Dark Archer is really just the ranged version of the Assassin class progression. I use a shortbow and I’m good at traps.”

“Gorlik. Shadow Assassin. Short blades.” A slim human man spoke up next, his voice short and clipped.

Realizing nothing more was coming, the player next to Gorlik chuckled and raised his hand.

“Hi everyone, I’m SubtleScythe. I have the Black Harvester class. I use a crossbow and have some shadow manipulation abilities. I have some mid-range fighting abilities as well as a few AoE crowd control attacks. Dark Harvester is a combat and support class, though my support is pretty much limited to crowd control.”

“How large are your area control abilities?” Thorn asked.

“I have three different abilities, and each covers an area of about twenty five feet. I can keep them all up with about a two second delay as long as I am not being attacked.”

“Oh, that’s pretty solid.” Thorn nodded, and turned his head to the last player. “How about you?”

“The name is Zandibear. I’m a Shadow Song Warden. Elven racial class. Combat, utility, and support. My main focus is ranged damage, but most of my abilities are damage over time. I also have group stealth and a personal teleport. Main weapon is a flute that shoots mind bullets that cause different conditions. And I can talk to plants, sort of.”

“Sounds great,” Thorn chuckled. “Let’s pass our profiles over to Corvo and see what he comes up with. I’m excited to be working with all of you.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

As large as he was, Thorn enjoyed sneaking through the forest. He was terrible at it, but he enjoyed it. Thankfully for the success of the mission, Zandibear's [Shadow Song] ability made up for the lack of his skill. Together, Thorn, Zandibear, SubtleScythe, GhillieGhillie, and Gorlik snuck toward the large Orc army camp sieging the Twin Bay harbor.

"Corvo, we're here." Thorn spoke softly as he peered at the camp from behind a tree.

"Great. You should not have any trouble sneaking in, because they are all pounding down our gate." In the video window, Corvo was hiding behind the reinforced wall that Thorn had set up. "Look for signs of logging and see what you can find. They'll need to cut a significant amount of wood for the siege engines, so you should be able to track the resources to the part of the camp where the Cog Priests are staying."

"How about the smithy?" GhillieGhillie asked. "I smell smoke from a coal fire."

“Yeah, that should be it.” Corvo nodded. “Once you have found them, let me know and I’ll kick off the distraction. It won’t last long though, so make sure that you are getting in and out quickly. Thorn, how well have you recovered?”

“Eh, probably about twenty percent?”

“Oh, good. So you should be able to solo the whole army. Great.”

“Jealousy, it's pure jealousy,” Thorn said to the others as he shook his head in exasperation. “We’ll let you know when we get into position.”

Minimizing the call, Thorn looked over the Orc camp laid out before them. The only other reference that he had at this point was the supply camp that he had taken part in destroying, but there was something about this camp that unsettled him. The whole camp was laid out in neat blocks, looking almost exactly the same as the Iron Wolf Army camp that had been set up near Stormwatch. In fact, if Thorn had not seen a few Orc guards loitering around the edge of the camp he would have assumed that he was looking at a Northern Angoril camp.

Each tent was placed in a group of four, their doors pointing north or south. The groups of four tents were further organized in rows of five, making up a unit of twenty tents that were evenly spaced into a square with four other units of twenty tents. Each block of one hundred tents was evenly spaced with a large path between it for ease of travel. Apart from a few larger tents toward the center, everything was laid out in meticulous order, neatly dividing the camp into sections.

“Any idea where that forge is?” Thorn asked GhillieGhillie who had climbed up into the tree above his head.

“Yeah, looks like it's a bit further south. Five blocks down, three blocks east. There is a set of tents with a big open area in the middle. There are two glowing chimneys, so I’d guess that is our target.”

“Great.” Thorn cracked his knuckles excitedly. “Let’s plan our route and go.”

“Are we going in fast or quiet?” SubtleScythe asked, his eyes carefully tracking the guard’s patrol routes.

“Let’s aim for quiet, since I am absolutely not up for fighting my way through a full Orc army, regardless of what Corvo says. But be ready to rush if we get spotted. Subtle, you’re our controller, so you’ll be giving us directions until things go south. Once the main fight starts I’ll take back over.”

“Sounds good.” The Black Harvester said with a nod. “We’ll probably need to take down two of the guards at once to make our window big enough to sneak in. Zandibear, how much longer can your group stealth last?”

“Till someone attacks.”

“In that case, you will stick next to Thorn and me. GG, you and Gorlik are each responsible for taking down a guard since you have the best personal stealth abilities.”

“Sure.” GhillieGhillie nodded.

Gorlick said nothing, but he pointed toward the guard who was further away and then took a step forward, vanishing into thin air with his stealth ability [Phantom Fade]. Still up in the tree, GhillieGhillie carefully selected an arrow and slipped it onto the string of her black bow. After hearing the plan, everyone in the group had opted to keep their weapons on them. While there was a chance that they would not come out of this mission alive, it seemed quite slim and they were all much more comfortable with their own equipment.

Letting out a slow breath, GhillieGhillie balanced herself and slowly drew her arrow back, lining up the tip with the Orc guard. Keeping her stance relaxed but her arm locked, she waited for Gorlik’s signal. Half a minute ticked by as the players waited in silence. Just as Thorn was wondering what was going on, his eyes caught a slight flash of light near the further Orc’s neck. At exactly the same moment, GhillieGhillie released her arrow. Like an owl on silent wings, the arrow plunged through the air, its black tip punching through the Orc guard’s neck, killing him instantly.

“Well done. Let’s move.” SubtleScythe commanded, leading Zandibear and Thorn out of the trees and toward the large camp at a jog.

Originally, Thorn had been concerned about how fast he was moving because his footsteps were anything but quiet. Thankfully Zandibear’s group stealth ability had a silencing effect as well, allowing him to move faster than a slow creep. Behind them, GhillieGhillie dropped from the tree she had been standing in and ran forward to the Orc guard her arrow had taken down. Grabbing the body, she tugged it deeper into the shadows and pulled a small bottle out of her inventory. Sprinkling over the body and the ground where the Orc had landed, she kicked some leaves over the corpse and then followed Thorn and the others into the camp.

“What was that?” Thorn asked Zandibear, jerking a thumb back toward GhillieGhillie.

“Hmm? Oh, the bottle? It helps kill the scent of blood. Otherwise the other guards will pick up that something is wrong. It is pretty much essential equipment if you are an assassin class.”

Marveling at the incredible depth of the game, Thorn stayed as low as possible as they crept through the camp. Walking between one of the blocks, Thorn’s heightened senses could hear the shifting of Orcs in the tents all around him. The thought of the whole camp coming to life sent a bit of a shiver down his spine, but the danger only made his head clearer.

“There are a couple guards up ahead. We’ll need to subdue them together.” SubtleScythe whispered. “They are standing on one of the crossroads, so we have to watch for people at a distance. GG, Zandibear, take lookout in case someone happens to come by. Gorlik and I will take them down on my signal.”

The two guards stood in the center of one of the crossroads between four of the one hundred tent blocks. In two directions the road crossed the camp to the west and north, providing a clear line of sight for anyone who would happen to glance down toward where the two guards stood. Seeing that GhillieGhillie had taken her position to watch the northern road and Zandibear held his flute ready as he looked down the western road, Thorn took his arbalest out of his inventory and loaded up a giant bolt just in case.

“Holy!” Startled by the size of Thorn’s weapon, Zandibear nearly dropped his flute.

“Haha, haven’t you seen Thorn’s siege crossbow?” SubtleScythe chuckled. “But seriously, don’t fire that thing or we’ll have the whole camp on us. Everyone in place?”

This time, since GhillieGhillie was watching for enemies in the distance, Gorlik waited for SubtleScythe to begin the engagement. The Dark Harvester took a moment to prepare, lifting both hands up and reaching out toward the two guards. Slowly he closed his fingers until they resembled a pair of claws stretched toward the Orcs. Thorn’s eyes caught a slow shift near the Orcs, but when he blinked it was gone. Wondering if he had just imagined it, he heard SubtleScythe whispering a word under his breath as the shadows around the Orcs erupted into silent motion. SubtleScythe clenched his fingers into tight fists as the Orc’s shadows were bound tightly, causing the two guards to completely freeze.

That moment of inaction was all that Gorlik needed. Appearing silently behind one of the Orcs, the Shadow Assassin’s dual blades flashed, cutting

the guard down in an instant. Almost immediately Thorn could smell the tang of spilled blood, but before he could react the other guard had been cut down as well, a blade sliding in and out of his body as the other slipped across his throat.

As soon as the second Orc crumpled, Gorlik revealed a bottle like the one that GhillieGhillie had used earlier, spreading a greyish powder liberally. The metallic smell that had filled Thorn's nose faded almost immediately as the powder neutralized the bloody scent. Putting his arbalest away, Thorn helped Gorlik move the bodies into the shadow of a tent, as the others kept a lookout for more guards.

"It's really quiet, isn't it?" Zandibear looked around, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Yeah, I don't like it. Sets my teeth on edge." SubtleScythe agreed.

"Is there something wrong?" Thorn asked, brushing some dirt from his hands.

"I'm not sure, but it seems really quiet for a military camp. Especially an Orc camp. Who knows. Maybe I'm wrong, but I would have expected a lot more guards. Instead, it is as if the whole camp just went to sleep."

"Good point." Thorn looked around at the quiet tents. "Orcs don't strike me as people who go to bed early."

"Exactly." SubtleScythe nodded.

"Do you want to back out? We can leave if you don't feel right about it."

"Really?" Taken aback, SubtleScythe and Zandibear both looked at Thorn in surprise.

"Yeah, why not? If you are all feeling like there is something strange going on I don't see why we can't leave and come back later. I'm not going to demand you jump into danger if we can avoid it."

"Uh, guys, is that our target?" GhillieGhillie's voice interrupted the whispered conversation, drawing everyone's attention to a yellow robed Orc in the distance.

Glancing at each other in surprise, Thorn and the others watched as the Cog Priest hurried through a crossroads and turned toward the road leading to the forges. Behind him staggered five large Orc soldiers carrying large boxes. Without another word, the team quickly crept down the road toward the crossroads where they saw the Cog Priest and his followers disappear. Peering around the corner, they saw that the road led right up to the back of the two forges.

Situated in the southwestern part of the camp, the two forges were solidly built furnaces that pumped a torrent of sparks and thick billows of smoke into the air. More than once Thorn had been impressed with the quality of workmanship that the Orcs displayed and the two furnaces were no different. Made of thick stone, they were fed from a giant pile of coal that was shoveled into a shoot in the side.

“Whoa, hold up.” Thorn stretched out his big hand, stopping Zandibear who had begun to creep closer. “If we’re doing this, let’s make use of Corvo and his distraction. But first, let’s see if we can tag the three Cog Priest. We’ll want to take them down as quickly as possible and then get out of here as fast as we possibly can.”

“Gorlik and I can see about spotting them.” SubtleScythe said. “GG, can you try to give us a heads up on where the guards are? Or even the soldiers working at the forge? The more we know about placement, the easier this will be.”

“And we’ll take all the assistance we can get.” Thorn agreed. “The priests will probably have some scary abilities so we’ll need to be ready for anything.”

With their plan set, SubtleScythe and GhillieGhillie faded into the darkness, joining Gorlik who had not been visible to Thorn since he had cut down the two guards earlier. Making himself as small as possible, Thorn crouched in the shadow of a tent next to Zandibear as they waited for the others to come back. While he waited, Thorn opened up the minimized call and pinged Corvo. It took a moment and when Corvo finally did open the call back up, he was covered in sweat and dirt.

“Looks like you are having fun.” Thorn grinned.

“More than you, certainly.” Despite his disheveled appearance, Corvo was in a good mood. “The defenses are proving strong enough to stop the Orcs, which is a major plus. I thought we would have to start committing the native soldiers to the defensive line, but we’re able to hold on for now. Probably because they aren’t taking this seriously. How are you doing? Anything strange going on there?”

“It’s been really quiet, but we’ve got the target in sight. As soon as we lock down their exact position we’ll be ready to go.”

“Let me know, because we’re ready on this end.”

“Okay, I’ll…”

Just then, Thorn saw SubtleScythe peek out from behind the other forge

and wave Thorn over. “Actually, it looks like we’re ready to go. Give us three minutes and then start.”

“Remember that you will only have about five minutes, four to be safe. I’ll go start the countdown.”

Nodding and closing the call, Thorn and Zandibear crept along the tents to where SubtleScythe crouched.

“We’ve got them marked. There are the three Cog Priests and seven Orc soldiers who are assisting them. Two of the Cog Priests look like they are basic level, but the oldest one seems pretty strong. The main priest is working on something at a table in the center of the open area. The other priests are casting parts in front of the forges. Each has three of the other Orcs helping and then there is one more who is running material from where the resources are stacked.”

“How strong is that head priest? Do you think GhillieGhillie and Gorlik could take him out?” Thorn asked, scanning the open area in front of the forge. From his spot he could see one of the Cog Priests using a long tool to heat something in the forge. Past him, standing at a table covered in scrolls, another priest in an ornate robe was calculating something on a giant abacus.

“If you jump in, yeah, for sure. Zandibear and I can lock down the other Orcs until you’ve taken care of the boss priest and then you can focus down the two other priests.”

“Sounds good.” Thorn breathed out and flexed his fingers, his sharp claws gleaming in the light of the forge.

“There is no chance that we’ll be able to remain quiet, but as long as we get it done quick, Corvo’s distraction should cover us, right?”

“Haha, yeah, I think it should.” Thorn grinned and equipped his helmet. “I’m pretty sure it’ll cover for everyone in the forest.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Corvo jogged through the streets of the harbor, his ragged looking feather coat rustling in the breeze. All around him the soldiers who had come with the Earl of Scorchfrost bustled about, getting ready in case the situation on the wall got worse. Glancing over his shoulder, Corvo could see the players of the Iron Wolf Army fighting against the Orcs who were attacking the harbor. Above and beyond the wall were five wooden towers, bright red lights shining down from them.

“Bring Evil Eyes will you. Hah, we’ll see who has the last laugh.” Corvo muttered under his breath, drawing strange looks from the soldiers around him.

Ignoring them he continued on his way, eventually arriving at the largest of the piers. The massive ship that had brought the army from Northern Angoril lay moored at the end of the pier, its impressive bulk reminding Corvo of a massive building. Nodding to the guards, Corvo jogged up the gang plank and surveyed the wide deck. All across it bundles of long thin sticks had been tied together and placed on flat stone platforms.

“Are you sure that this is going to work?” Earl Blaige wobbled over, his

skeptical gaze resting on the bundles.

“Oh, it’ll work. One way or another.” Corvo said with a laugh. “As long as everything was done to my specifications we’ll be fine.”

“Wait, is it dangerous?” The Earl took a small step backward.

“Eh, I don’t know about dangerous. It will certainly be distracting. And more importantly, it’ll take down those stupid spy towers.”

“Those are Evil Eyes, right? We learned about them at the academy, but this is the first time I’ve ever seen one. So, explain how this works again?”

“Sure,” Corvo nodded and patted one of the bundles of sticks. “The Evil Eyes are a tool that tracks magical energy by collecting trace amounts of it from whatever they look at. That energy is then fed back into the staff to keep it operating. That makes hiding from them impossible since almost everything has energy of some sort. What we’re going to do is feed them a lot of magical energy all at once. Specifically, a type of fire elemental energy that also happens to be really volatile.”

“And the sticks?”

“Oh, that’s just kindling. But we also prepared a compound that will keep the fire burning. It’ll spike the concentration of fire elemental energy at the cost of burning the wood faster.”

“And this is going to overload the eyes and turn them off?”

“No idea.” Corvo shrugged. Seeing the strange look on Bothy’s face, Corvo laughed and patted the Earl on his soft shoulder. “Really, I have no idea. That isn’t how my abilities work. They just tell me the best way to achieve my objective. As for the mixture, that is a secret from the far, far south. What I do know is that it's going to be big, and it will work. But don’t worry, we’ll find out soon. We’re ready to go so I would recommend that you join me down on the dock.”

Together, Corvo and the Earl walked back down the gangway to the pier. Once they had gotten a good distance from the deck, Corvo gave a wave to the two mages who were standing nearby.

“Go ahead and light them up! Just remember not to look once they’re lit.”

Muttering an arcane syllable, one of the mages summoned a small fireball in her palm. Placing her other hand over top of the fireball with her fingers together, she spread them out, splitting the fireball into five flames, each dancing between one of her fingers. Next to her, her companion had waved a staff in a circle, summoning a small dancing flame with a pair of bat wings.

Together the two mages lifted their hands, sending their spells flying

through the air toward the deck of the ship and the large bundles of sticks. As the flames touched down, the bundles lit up like a pile of dry leaves, instantly brightening the night. For a moment they simply burned, the flames sending shadows dancing across the town.

“Are they supposed…” Earl Blaige had barely begun to speak when he heard a strange sound and turned his head.

The bundles of sticks were burning in clear sight of the five Evil Eyes that had been scanning the harbor. As the bundles lit up, the Evil Eyes were instantly attracted, turning to fix themselves on the bright flames. Now, as the Earl watched the bundles began to let off a hiss, glowing brightly with a reddish light. Brighter and brighter they grew until the Earl could feel his eyes starting to water.

“Hey, hey, don’t look at that.” Corvo said with a frown, pulling on Bothy’s shoulder. “Just watch the Evil Eyes.”

Turning around, Earl Blaige rubbed his stinging eyes and blinked them rapidly, trying to get some moisture back into them. Above the harbor, the five red lights of the Evil Eye staffs were sucking in the energy from the burning sticks at a tremendous rate, causing the swirling fire elemental energy to draw faint red lines across the night sky. Looking up at the trails of energy, Corvo smiled slightly before turning his gaze to the towers that held the Evil Eye staffs.

More and more energy flowed toward the Evil Eyes, causing their pupils to grow redder and more concentrated. The swirling energy gathered together, spinning around and around until it resembled a glittering gem. As the lines of fire elemental energy traced their path across the harbor, they shed more light on the battlefield.

In the towers, the Shaman who were controlling the Evil Eye staffs were confused. The bright light that came to life on the ship was feeding their weapons with the highest grade fire elemental energy. After talking briefly, they just shrugged and allowed their weapons to continue sucking up the pure energy. After all, such pure fire elemental energy was hard to come by.

“And you’re sure this is going to work? They aren’t just going to use all the energy we’re giving them to blast us into pieces.”

“No, no, it’ll work.” Corvo tried to sound positive, but his voice had a bit of a squeak to it. “Ahem. It’ll work. My ability said this will give the best result.”

As Corvo’s voice faded, a change took place in the sky. The thin spirals of

fire elemental energy that had been streaming toward the Evil Eyes up in the towers suddenly thickened. The brightness of the bundles of wood grew in intensity, causing the entire night sky to grow light. Startled, Bothy started to turn around but Corvo quickly grabbed him to prevent him from going blind.

The Orc Shaman in the towers were not so lucky. As the whole horizon lit up they were momentarily blinded. Groping for the railings so they did not fall out of their towers, not one of the five Shaman realized what was happening with the Evil Eyes. The sudden surge of light painted red streaks across the sky as the bundles released their most powerful burst of fire elemental energy. Frantically sucking in the energy, the glittering gems in the center of the Evil Eyes spun faster and faster, growing more and more compressed.

crick

The sound of one of the gems cracking almost went unnoticed. Even the Shaman, who was standing next to it did not realize that anything had happened. It was only Corvo, whose eyes were darting between the towers, that realized what was going on.

“Iron Wolves, push forward! Archers, hit the towers, now!”

Yelling commands into the group channel, Corvo started running toward the wall where the Orcs and players had paused their fight to stare at the intensely glowing sky. Startled by Corvo’s abrupt action, Bothy followed behind him.

crack

This time, the Shaman heard the noise of his gem cracking. With a horrified look spreading across his face, the Orc Shaman let out a scream and jumped from his tower without pausing to consider the height. As he cleared the edge, the fire elemental energy that had been gathered and spun into a tightly concentrated gem erupted. Rather than exploding, the energy spread silently, flying out of the crack in the gem like a jet. Spinning around incredibly quickly, the gout of fire elemental energy made a complete rotation in less than a second, cutting the unfortunate Shaman in half.

Two halves of the Shaman tumbled down to the ground, but everyone’s attention was fixed on the flame that was spinning faster and faster. A terrifying thought occurred to all of the other Orc Shaman at the same exact time, but before they could react they discovered a wave of arrows and other attacks flying toward their towers.

A few of the remaining Shaman tried their best to prevent their Evil Eye

staffs from being hit, while the last Shaman simply abandoned his tower, using a spell to flee as fast as he could. As the attacks bombarded the four towers, the Shaman protecting them were able to stop most of the attack, but the abrupt shockwave that emanated from the fourth tower turned their hopes to dust.

Without anyone to defend against the attacks, an arrow had stabbed directly into the center of the Evil Eye on the fourth tower, causing the tightly wound gem to explode into a cloud of fire elemental energy. Shaking the ground and both of the towers next to it, the explosion seemed to cause a chain reaction. One by one the other towers also exploded, silently sending waves of compressed fire elemental energy into the air. The intensity of the fire elemental energy caused the towers to burst into flame, once again lighting up the sky.

Watching the five towering flames, Corvo let out a low whistle. A sound behind him caused him to turn his head to where Bothy stood, rubbing his hands together.

“So, about this ability of yours?”

Still hiding in the Orc army’s camp, Thorn, GhillieGhillie, Gorlik, SubtleScythe, and Zandibear watched the sky lighten the first time. Collectively they gulped and looked at each other.

“Uh, is that the signal?”

“Well, it certainly is distracting.” Thorn shrugged. “And if it gets much lighter I’m not sure we’ll be able to hide any more.”

“Then we should probably go.” Zandibear muttered.

Just when they were debating taking action, the first of the Evil Eyes exploded, sending a shockwave of hot energy across the forest. Shivering reflexively, SubtleScythe nearly stood up from where he was crouched as his eyes snapped to the horizon. A giant gout of flame could be seen over the trees. As the second one appeared, Thorn grinned.

“Yup, that’s it. Let's go.”

Tearing their eyes from the five pillars of flame on the horizon, the five players sprang into action. SubtleScythe activated his abilities, his writhing shadows locking down the seven Orc soldiers who were assisting the two Cog Priests. Next to him Zandibear lifted his flute to his lips, a hollow, eerie tune drifting from it to surround the two Cog Priests. The ethereal music seeped into their ears, causing their movements to slow as they fell into a trance.

Almost at the same exact moment GhillieGhillie and Gorlik burst into action. The Dark Archer released the arrow that had rested on her string, instantly reaching for the next one. With a single smooth motion she drew her bow and fired again, sending the second arrow slightly to the right of first one. Her target had just noticed that something was happening and looked up in confusion as the two arrows rocketed toward his chest.

Despite his confusion, the Cog Priest was not a pushover, and managed to activate his magic shield almost instantly, protecting him from the first arrow. The impact staggered him to the side, causing him to flinch as the second arrow arrived directly in front of his face.

diing

With an echoing ring the arrow bounced off of the magical shield, dimming it considerably. Gorlik's twin daggers arrived almost at the same time, stabbing toward the Cog Priest's back as the Shadow Assassin appeared from behind his target. Once again the magic shield held strong, sending the daggers skittering off of it. Despite the deflection, Gorlik did not allow his failure to deter him. Within two seconds he had stabbed the shield five different times, each one of his strikes shaving off some of the magical shield's defenses. One last attack landed on the staggered Cog Priest, causing the magical shield to crack open.

Desperately trying to cast a spell, the Cog Priest was so confused when Gorlik's triumphant smirk turned into a look of complete terror that he forgot to continue his chant. A moment later his question was answered when a crossbow bolt the size of an arm ripped through his back, ending his life instantly.

"Gah! Give a guy some warning next time!" Gorlik shrieked, scrambling up from the ground where he had thrown himself to get out of the way of the bolt.

"Sorry, sorry." Thorn waved his hand sheepishly. Feeling a strange sense of dejavu, he pulled out another bolt and reloaded his arbalest.

With the main Cog Priest cut down, Thorn turned his attention to the other two Cog Priests, only to find a strange silence hanging over the area. A bad feeling flooded through him as he rose from his position next to one of the furnaces. From where he stood he could see SubtleScythe and Zandibear. The two players were no longer locking down the Cog Priest and were instead standing back to back, their eyes darting around them, looking for some sort of threat.

The sound of footsteps broke the silence, bringing with it a sense of dread that beat a tattoo across Thorn's heart. His senses began jumping like crazy as Orcs began to appear all around the forge. Seeing a fully armed Orc stepping out of a nearby tent, Thorn's heart dropped. More and more Orcs filled in the area, blocking the path in every direction until the five players were completely surrounded.

Nervously shifting his grip on his daggers, Gorlik looked around, trying to guess his chances of getting out if he turned invisible. GhillieGhillie backed into the center of the open area, turning this way and that as she searched for an escape path.

"Steady." Thorn's deep voice brought a sense of calm to the group as the five players all gathered in front of the two forges.

"Well, well, if it isn't the giant."

A creaky voice sounded from across the open area in front of the forge. His hands folded behind him and his back bent, Arhtu the Cursed walked out from between some tents and looked up at Thorn, a faint smile on his face.

"You are not the one I expected to catch, but I must say I am quite pleased that you decided to accept my invitation. I'm quite curious how you survived the [Aeon Curse], you know? It has been, well, forever, since someone other than me survived its touch. I will quite enjoy taking you apart to find out how."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

A deep sense of crisis filled Thorn as he heard Arhtu's scratchy voice. There was something about the old Orc that set Thorn on edge. He did not know if it was the strangeness of the Orc himself, or if it was the weird sense of restraint that Arhtu's tribe showed. There was something decidedly off about the whole tribe. Even now, the Orc soldiers simply stood silently around Thorn and his friends, their faces impassive. Thorn settled for a mixture of both.

"Ahem, yeah. Glad to be here. Nice camp you got." Thorn looked around and coughed into his fist. "Really impressive, uh, forges."

"You know, you travelers lack a certain sense of seriousness that marks the rest of this sad world. It is quite refreshing, I must admit."

Continuing to walk forward, Arhtu's cloudy eyes looked over the five players, pausing on Zandibear for a moment before his gaze drifted back to Thorn as he came to a stop in front of the Titan. Calming himself down, Thorn took a quick inventory of his strength. His body was still mostly exhausted, leaving him with only a fraction of his normal strength. Considering Arhtu had taken one of his full power strikes and shrugged it off

like a scratch the last time they fought, Thorn did not like his chances.

Additionally, his [Spiritual Sense] could feel the dirty aura that surrounded Arhtu surging, as if it could not wait to pounce toward him. If he was at full strength, Thorn was confident that his [Spiritual Sense] would be able to help him overcome the [Aeon Curse], but there was no chance of that now. Cursing himself for insisting on joining this raid, Thorn took a deep breath and drew himself up to his full height.

"Who were you trying to capture with this trap?" Thorn asked the hunched Orc Shaman.

"So you did know it was a trap? I was wondering about that."

"We suspected, but not enough to back out."

"Ah, yes, it is always hard when your goal is so very close. But that was part of the trap as well, you know? Asking the Cog Priests to wander around the camp to attract potential attackers. As for who I was targeting, hmm, any number of people really. My biggest wish was to get the Lady of the Old Wood, but I probably would have had to trade half my camp for her, so in some regards I'm quite glad that she did not come. I was also interested in that traitor who was with you in the woods."

"Lady of the Old Wood? You mean the Elven Queen?" Thorn asked, his brow furrowing as he tried to remember why that name tugged at his mind.

"Queen? Hah, no.

The Lady of the Old Wood is the one who has woken the forest to fight against us. She seems to be like an Elf but she is different in some way. No, the Elf Queen does nothing but flee from us, hiding like a rabbit in her little hole."

"Hole? You mean giant moving tree city? You are talking about Thilvena, right?"

"Tree, hole, what's the difference if you just hide? She refuses to meet us in combat. An utter disgrace to even the idea of a leader."

"Or maybe she is smart." Thorn shrugged.

"No, if she was smart, she would have…" Arhtu stopped and chuckled. "Ah, but that is neither here nor there. Enough about the worthless Elves, let us talk about the matter at hand. Specifically, you."

"Before that, I have one more question. If you don't mind of course."

"Sure," Arhtu shrugged. "We have the time, so what is on your mind?"

"If you are here, who is fighting over at Twin Bay? And what are those giant pillars of flame?"

“Hmph. Two of our sister tribes are in charge of the assault on the harbor. They fancy themselves the stronger, more, uh, Orcish tribes, and seized the honor of running headlong into death for themselves. I had to respect their wishes of course. Besides, I was waiting for guests. As for the pillars, they are the remains of the towers that were set up for the attack.” Arhtu’s expression was dark. “It would seem that someone on your side is very familiar with the Evil Eyes that were being used. But enough stalling, let us talk about you.”

“Hold on, sorry. One last question. This is it, I promise.” Thorn held up his hands to placate the annoyed Shaman. “How did you know we would be coming tonight?”

“Hah, that was the easiest part. You either would attack tonight or you would die tomorrow. A simple choice really. I just assumed, rightly I might add, that you knew of the Cog Priests. Anything else?”

“No, no, I’m good for now.”

“Good, so let’s talk about you.”

“Hm? What about us? We were just stopping by to check out your camp?” Thorn tried to appear as casual as possible as he looked around. “It really is a nice camp, but we should be going. Have a lot of things to do.”

“I’m not sure that leaving this soon is polite.”

“Eh, sometimes you just have to do what you have to do.”

As the two of them bantered back and forth, both Thorn and Arhtu were carefully examining each other, looking for weakness. Thorn scanned the gathered Orcs that completely surrounded the forge and the empty area in front of the two furnaces. Unfortunately, there were no gaps. After running a quick estimate of the number of Orcs that surrounded them, Thorn came up with close to two thousand. From the way they stood in silence, Thorn could tell that they were two thousand elite Orcs as well.

If Thorn was feeling great he would have considered taking the chance, but as it was, he was not even confident in his ability to take on a fraction of the Orc soldiers that surrounded them. Though all four of his companions could call for their bonded companions, even four giant wolves would not solve the pickle that they were in.

At the same time that Thorn was looking for a weakness to exploit so that they could escape, Arhtu was examining Thorn and the other four players. Apart from his brief encounter with Thorn, Arhtu had never interacted with travelers before, though he had heard a lot about them from other Orcs. The

longer he looked at them, the more impressed he was. Not only was their equipment top of the line, they were obviously well trained.

He had been watching when they had taken down the yellow robed Cog Priest and the sheer offensive capability they displayed made him nervous. Even with the yellow robed priest's magical shield, Gorlik, Thorn, and GhillieGhillie had killed him almost instantly. In fact, Arhtu was confident that the Shadow Assassin could have done it without Thorn's abnormally large crossbow.

As he thought about the monster crossbow that he had seen in Thorn's hands, Arhtu's hazy eyes swept the area. The crossbow had been too big to miss, but now it was gone. Vanished into the traveler's mysterious space, undoubtedly. There were too many things about the travelers that Arhtu was curious about. Things that he longed to seize for himself and his tribe. While he had truly been disappointed at first, the more he thought about it, the more that Arhtu was excited that he had caught five travelers in his trap.

Realizing that there was no way out of the Orc formation that would not get his entire team killed, Thorn gave a small sigh and turned his gaze back to Arhtu.

"Tell me, what are the chances we can just call this a wash and all go home?"

"Go home? Ahahaha!"

Arhtu's chuckles turned into a wracking cough that caused him to hunch even more. Waving off his guard who stepped forward, Arhtu spat on the ground and sighed. "You must forgive me, age is a real burden. Why don't we continue this in my tent? You are my guests, after all. We can sit and have some refreshments."

"Thorn, should we…" SubtleScythe whispered, his hand tightening on his crossbow.

[No, just go along with it for now.] Thorn replied in the team chat.

"I would be delighted to accompany you back to your tent. However, my friends have some things to take care of back at the camp, and will not be able to experience your hospitality." Thorn said to Arhtu evenly. "In fact, they should probably get going now. Could I impose on you to escort them to the edge of the camp?"

"My, how bold." For a moment, Arhtu's eyes gleamed, but the light was gone so fast that Thorn was not sure it had ever been there. "I am not sure how I feel about visitors who walk into my camp, kill my very special Cog

Priest and then waltz out."

"Cog Priest? You mean the three gentlemen over there?" Thorn lifted his large arm and pointed to three black robed Orcs standing around fifty feet back.

"I mean the Cog Priest you killed."

"Honestly, you should be thanking us." Thorn smirked, glancing down at the scattered loot that the Orc Shaman with the yellow robe had dropped.

"Thanking you?" It was Arhtu's turn to have a furrowed brow.

"Yeah, thanking us. A great deception was being carried out, right under your nose. A fraud, a con, a sham, even. That Orc Shaman was pretending to be one of the very esteemed Priests of the Cogs of the Sun. Such a foul lie could not be borne, so we assisted you in taking him down."

Silence reigned as everyone in the area stared at Thorn who simply smiled casually. The whole camp had felt off to Thorn and the rest of his team, and they had been proven correct when the trap was sprung. At first Thorn had been surprised that Arhtu would have used Cog Priests as bait, considering how important they were to the Orc war effort. However, when his sweeping [Spiritual Sense] found the three Orcs in black cloaks his confusion cleared. While the black robes hid their identities, they could not fool Thorn's [Spiritual Sense] and [Earth Sense]. Under the black robes hung the metal tokens of the Cog Sun, the symbol of the Cog Priests.

"Haha, you got me." Arhtu serious expression faded and he flashed a subtle grin. "But I still don't see why I should let any of you go."

Reaching up, Thorn unclipped his helmet, ignoring the Orcs around him who reached for their weapons.

"Hm, how much do you know about travelers?" Thorn asked, holding his helmet in his hand.

"I confess, not as much as I hope to after we chat."

"That is what I suspected." Thorn said, making his helmet vanish from his hand by putting it into his inventory. "One piece of information about travelers that is particularly important is that when we die, we come back to life."

"Oh, I know that." Arhtu smirked, his eyes abruptly blazing with a fanatical light as he gazed at Thorn. "I'm quite interested in the source of your endless vitality."

"You need to let me finish. I'm afraid you'll continue to be curious, because when we die we don't come back to life where we died."

Frowning, the fire in Arhtu's eyes dimmed, returning to their blurry calm.

"Ah. That is indeed a problem." Arhtu said, his voice quavering as he looked at the five players.

"So, the real question is, can you even keep us here?" Thorn asked with a shrug, unequipping his armor.

Dressed in a set of nobles' clothing that would be much more common in the capital city than in the middle of an Elven forest, Thorn stood out even more than normal among the Orcs. Taking another small step forward, he towered above Arhtu, a wide smile crossing his face.

"What do you say? I'll enjoy your hospitality, you let my friends go about their business. We can bring an end to this in a way that is at least somewhat satisfying for both of us."

"Ah, I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" Arhtu looked around as if he was despondent before shooting Thorn a glance from the corner of his eye. "Though I wonder if you would really be willing to kill yourself. Death is not something to take lightly you know. There must be a cost since you did not turn to it immediately. Tell me, are you willing?"

"Huh, I don't know. Let me think about it." Thorn said sarcastically. "On the one hand I could stay here and let you torture the secret of immortality out of me, or I could just take a break and respawn tomorrow. Tough choice, tough choice."

"Ai, you young people are too energetic. I can't keep up." Arhtu gave a sigh and shrugged. "Fine. You have made your point. Your friends are free to go. But you will stay with me."

"Sure, that was my idea all along." Thorn nodded to the Shaman before turning to face the rest of his team.

"Are you sure about this, Thorn? We can just fight it out." GhillieGhillie said, stealing a glance at Arhtu.

"No, there is no point. Let's keep the deaths down to a minimum if possible. You can report what happened to Corvo. I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

Giving his team mates an easy grin, Thorn nodded goodbye, sending them a message at the same time.

[Get back to Corvo as quickly as you can and ask him to contact this Lady of the Old Wood. If the Orcs wanted to capture her, she is undoubtedly a potential ally. Don't engage with Arhtu directly, I have a really bad feeling about that. When you get out of here, be sure to lose the Orcs as fast as

possible. They will undoubtedly try to stop you from getting back to the harbor, so instead of heading that way, try to reconnect with the Charging Wolf Army. I'm sure that between Corvo, Mina, and Athena, they will come up with something to get me out of here. I don't know if I'll be able to communicate while I'm a prisoner here, so tell them that they can't rely on inside intel from me.]

"You know I don't think…" Zandibear started to speak up, but Thorn silenced him with a look.

"This is a direct order," Thorn's gaze was heavy. "There is no reason to waste more lives than necessary."

"But!" Zandibear felt a touch and stopped.

Gorlik shook his head, his hand resting on Zandibear's shoulder. Giving Thorn a long look, the Shadow Assassin took his hand back and spoke softly.

"We will follow your directions, sir."

"Good. Zandibear?"

"Yes, sir." The Elf sighed in defeat. "We'll retreat.

"Stay safe, Thorn." GhillieGhillie said, patting Thorn on the arm, her face somber.

At Arhtu's command ten large Orc soldiers brought SubtleScythe, Zandibear, and Gorlik to the edge of the camp. After watching them disappear into the forest, Thorn smiled and turned back to Arhtu.

"What was that you said about a tent and some refreshments? I must confess, I am starving."

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

ding

You have been captured by Arhtu the Cursed, Chieftain and Head Shaman of the Ash Maw tribe. Until you escape or are rescued, you gain the title [Prisoner].

"Well, that's not good." Sitting in a large Orc tent, Thorn stared at the window that had popped up in front of him. Clicking on his new title, he could barely suppress his sigh.

Prisoner
You have become a prisoner of the Ash Maw tribe. While you have this title, your ability to recover is drastically reduced and you can never recover above fifty percent of your strength. Additionally, your active abilities are locked and your equipment can be permanently removed by

your captors. Any equipment removed this way will be lost unless recovered. Furthermore, as a prisoner, you are not free to contact your companions. Your system messaging functionality is locked while this title is active.

Captured by: Arhtu the Cursed

This was not the first time that Thorn had found himself unable to communicate through the system, so he was not overly worried about that. Instead, it was the fact that his captors were able to take his gear that he was concerned with. The [Prisoner] title was quite restrictive and would prevent him from recovering his full strength. Though he could equip his gear to try and escape, if he failed he risked his enemy taking it from him.

If he chose not to equip his gear, he would only be able to operate at a maximum of fifty percent of his natural abilities, and even that would take a while. He had already felt his recovery slowing down to an absolute crawl. Doing a quick self assessment with his [Spiritual Sense], Thorn estimated that he was only around twenty six percent recovered.

"Tea?"

Thorn looked up and saw Arhtu offering him a cup of tea with a shaky hand. Slightly startled, Thorn took the cup carefully, nodding his thanks. Pouring himself a cup, the old looking Orc took a seat across from Thorn, sitting down with a comfortable sigh.

"Much better, much better. Few things nicer than a hot cup of tea, you know." Arhtu said, blowing at the top of his cup. "It's one thing I often miss when campaigning, so I brought some of my own. You'd think that the Elves would be great at growing tea but honestly, they're pretty terrible farmers."

"Are Orcs good farmers?" Thorn asked as he lifted his cup to his lips.

"Orcs? Hah! That would be a sight, huh? Maybe if they found a plant that needed to eat meat to grow. No, Orcs are much worse farmers than Elves. We're more interested in building and fighting really. Most of us really value our freedom so the idea of being tied down to something is naturally repulsive."

"Is that why you organize into tribes? But what about this whole invasion? It seems pretty well organized and structured for people who are not into those things."

"Who told you that Orcs are not into structure?" Arhtu chuckled, placing

his cup down on a small side table. “We are highly structured. If my fist is stronger, my words are obeyed unquestionably. Unless someone thinks they are stronger than me, they will follow my directions. I lost to the Red Scourge, so my tribe has come to fight. The rest of the tribes are in the same boat. Our structure is quite firm, it's just more practical than the social structures of other races.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Thorn said, finishing his tea with another sip.

“But enough about tribe politics, I’m much more interested in you.” Arhtu shot a glance at Thorn as he poured himself another cup of tea. “More tea? Here, just put it on the table. Help yourself. I was pretty sure that I had cookies somewhere, but I must have eaten them all.”

After hesitating for the briefest moment, Thorn pulled a large plate of pastries from his inventory, placing them down next to the pot of tea.

“If you’re comfortable with it, you can try some of mine.” Thorn gestured for Arhtu to help himself. “Made by the head cook of Moon Wolf Citadel. They’re quite delicious. I like the ones with the strawberry jam the best.”

“Ooh, don’t mind if I do.” Arhtu’s wrinkled face broke into a smile, showing his thick tusks as he carefully selected three of the small pastries.

Silence fell over the tent as Thorn and Arhtu ate their pastries and sipped at their tea. If it had not been for the weakness that his body felt and the imposing looking Orc guards standing at the tent’s entrance, Thorn would have thought that he was simply having a nice visit with the Orc Shaman. Smiling at the incongruity, Thorn selected another pastry and waited for Arhtu to speak.

“So, tell me about yourself.” Arhtu finally said, placing his cup down on the side table after drinking the last of his tea.

“Me? I’m a traveler. I’ve been completing some quests for Northern Angoril. Nothing else to say, really.”

“Hmm, I don’t know that I would call leading the Northern Angoril counterattack nothing.”

“No, I’m not leading it.” Thorn shook his head with a smile. “That responsibility falls to someone else.”

“Uh huh. The Earl of Scorchfrost, right? Though I’ve heard that Northern Angoril has deployed a few different armies.”

“I’m really only familiar with what is going on with our force.” Thorn replied, his smile turning bland. “And I have to admit, I was surprised to see so many Orcs. You really pulled out all the stops for this invasion, didn’t

you?”

“Actually, this is only about a fourth of our total forces. As I mentioned, we are not an overly cohesive force. However, when the War Chief moves, everyone moves. Most of the tribes are busy conquering the southern continent. Very few of us were actually deployed here to Rasyn.”

“Do you mean that this was a distraction?”

“Sort of. We needed slaves, so our advisor suggested that we start here. The Elves were isolated enough that we could gain a large number of slaves with the cooperation of their new leader. The idea was that by the time Northern Angoril responded it would simply be too late. We were largely successful, though most Elves have retreated to that annoying teleporting city. Still, once we capture it, we’ll have a perfect launching point for bypassing Northern Angoril’s defenses. Then, once we have conquered Southern Angoril, we can start our invasion of the northern continent.”

“Should you be telling me all of this?” Thorn asked, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the old looking Orc.

“Haha, why shouldn’t I? Are you going to stop it?” Arhtu chuckled as his eyes met Thorn’s. “You’d have to figure out a way to connect with the Elves, let alone defeat our armies. And how would you do that when you are stuck here?”

“You are not concerned about my friends saving me?”

“I’m sure your friends are great and all, but no. No, I’m not worried about your friends saving you. Besides, even if they did, we will just crush you in the next fight.” Arhtu smiled easily, picking up another pastry. “You were right, these strawberry ones are delicious. Anyway. Even at full strength, you won’t be able to beat me, so why bother trying?”

“You don’t think so? Why not try it and see?” Thorn said, spreading his arms with his palms face up. “You could let me free and we could go at it.”

“Eh, it’ll just end up the same way it always does. The [Aeon Curse] will consume you and the fight will become boring.” Arhtu’s slight smile gained a wolfish edge as his eyes glimmered for a moment. “And even if it didn’t I would crush you.”

“You seem quite confident. I survived it once, what makes you think I won't be able to do it again?”

“Haha, you call scurrying away with your tail between your legs surviving? I mean, different knives for different warriors, but I would not really consider that a win for you. I am, however, interested in what allowed

you to survive the curse's life force consumption."

"I'm tough, what can I say?" Thorn shrugged.

"Uh huh. Let's go with that for now." Arhtu smiled and slowly rose from his seat. "It has been nice talking to you, but I do need to go. The assault on the harbor is reaching a critical stage, and I need to reinforce the tribes who were deployed to the front line. Please enjoy your stay here. If you need anything, you can try asking one of the guards, though I can't guarantee they'll help. They're not my warriors, you see. I will be back tomorrow to chat some more."

Bobbing his head toward Thorn, Arhtu gripped his cane and slowly left the tent, leaving Thorn alone with the two large Orc warriors who were guarding him. Watching the Orc Shaman go, Thorn was left unsettled. The encounter had gone nothing like what he had envisioned. Arhtu had been gentle, soft-spoke, and more than willing to answer his questions. The conversation had borne no signs of the interrogation that Thorn had expected, and while he had not been looking forward to it, having the Orcs interrogate him would have made him feel much better.

As it was, Thorn was left with a strange empty feeling. Almost as if he had stepped forward, expecting to feel solid ground only to find an abyss waiting beneath his feet. Taking a deep breath, Thorn began to rise to his feet when one of the Orc guards stepped forward, a hand outstretched.

"Hold, prisoner. You may not leave."

"Sure, I get that." Thorn said with a nod and a smile. "Can I walk around in the tent?"

"Uh," unsure, the Orc guard looked at his companion who shrugged. "Uh, sure, I guess. Just make sure you stay on the rug."

"Yup, no problem."

The tent was around fifteen feet tall at the point, with a roof that fell away to the four nine foot tall corners. Heavy canvas was stretched between the poles, enclosing the twenty foot by twenty foot space. A thick carpet dominated the center of the tent, decorated with gold and crimson thread in a swirling pattern. Taking a quick turn around the carpet, Thorn's eyes wandered over the rest of the tent. Standing by two small tables was the chair that Arhtu had been sitting in, and against one of the walls was a small chest that was full of clothing, based on the corner of cloth sticking out from under the lid.

As Thorn walked, his [Spiritual Sense] seeped into the floor, spreading

through the ground to the area surrounding the tent. With his energy largely drained he found that his [Spiritual Sense] did not spread nearly as far as it normally would and the picture that it fed him was blurrier than he had expected. Still, it revealed that the tent he was in was heavily guarded. Sixteen Orc soldiers, divided into groups of four, patrolled around the tent.

With a sigh, Thorn stopped walking and just sat down. With nothing else to do, he folded his legs under him and closed his eyes. Resting his hands on his knees, Thorn began to breathe calmly, doing his best to speed up his recovery as much as possible.

The rest of the night passed quietly for Thorn, who was meditating in the center of the tent, but he knew that was not the case for his friends. With Arhtu and the Ash Maw tribe joining the attack on the harbor, Thorn could only imagine that Corvo and the others were going to be in for a serious fight.

The silence gave Thorn some time to sort through his encounters with the Orc Shaman. Arhtu had seemed like the typical villain at first, but their latest interaction had forced Thorn to reevaluate his opinions. There was something about the kindly seeming Orc that set Thorn's hackles up, though Thorn could not quite pin it down. It was different from the disgusting smell that those touched by devilish influence possessed. Instead, it was a feeling of pure danger, similar to what Thorn felt when he met the mad alchemist, Alph, in the Barrow Hills catacombs.

Based on their first encounter, Thorn knew that the unassuming way that Arhtu carried himself was pure deception. He had taken Thorn's full powered strike and returned it in kind, easily beating back Mina and Akira at the same time. Even now, Thorn could feel the lingering energy of the [Aeon Curse] surrounding him. Thin fingers of the turbid energy roamed the carpeted area of the tent, forming an invisible prison around him.

He was unsure if it was just the natural state of the [Aeon Curse] or if Arhtu had the ability to control it completely, but Thorn could feel the curse following his every move. Earlier, when he walked around the carpet, Thorn could feel the energy of the [Aeon Curse] following him, as if it was getting ready to pounce as soon as he attempted to step off. Now, as he sat and tried to restore himself to at least half of his normal state, Thorn could feel the [Aeon Curse] trying to constrict him. Every time he would breathe in, the [Aeon Curse] would drift closer, trying to absorb the life in the air before he could.

Annoyed, Thorn's brow furrowed slightly before smoothing out. With a

grunt, he gathered his [Spiritual Sense] back together, taking control of the earth elemental energy under the tent and funneling it into his body. Instantly the swampy energy of the [Aeon Curse] reacted, attempting to stifle him and cut the connection. Wrapping itself around the pure earth elemental energy that Thorn was pulling up from the ground, it tried to consume it, as it had with Thorn's life force.

Sneering in his heart, Thorn controlled the earth elemental energy to slam into the slivers of the [Aeon Curse] that were in the tent. As they collided the purity of the earth elemental energy proved too much for the [Aeon Curse], beginning to burn it away bit by bit. Doubling down, Thorn was about to surround it completely when he noticed the sound of hurried footsteps approaching the tent.

Quickly releasing the earth elemental energy under his control, Thorn allowed it to flow back into the ground and spread his [Spiritual Sense] out, locking onto Arhtu's figure at the entrance to the tent. With the earth elemental energy gone, the [Aeon Curse] dominated the area around Thorn once again, subtly eating away at his life force. Coughing slightly, Thorn's breath was ragged as Arhtu threw aside the cloth door and strode into the tent, his eyes blazing.

"Did you see anything strange just now?" Arhtu's voice had an edge that Thorn had never heard before as he addressed the two guards.

"N...no, sir!"

Both of the guards were standing as straight as two spears, their bodies trembling slightly as Arhtu's eyes raked over them.

"Hm. Very well."

The fire in Arhtu's eyes died down, replaced by the muddy haze that they normally bore. Taking a look around the tent, he saw that Thorn was sitting on the carpet meditating. With nothing else out of place, Arhtu could only sigh. Ambling over to the chair where he had been sitting before, Arhtu sat down and faced Thorn.

"You know, on second thought, why don't we chat some more?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

By the time the morning sun had begun to make its presence known, stretching thin fingers of grey into the deep blue of the night sky, the fight at the wall of the Twin Bay harbor had slowed to a crawl. Exhaustion had set in for the attackers almost an hour earlier, but their commanders still urged them forward, forcing them to trudge up to the wall over and over again. The situation on the wall was better, though most of the defenders were just as tired as the Orcs who were attacking them.

“Why is there no report?”

At the command center that had been set up in the harbor office, Earl Blaige narrowed his eyes as he stared at Corvo. The avatar of Huginn was bent over the map of the forest, his eyes darting back and forth.

“Hmm? Report about what? Oh, about the Cog Priests?” Corvo straightened and rubbed his forehead. “The ones we targeted were fakes. That Arhtu is pretty cunning. He baited us in and has captured Thorn. I sent him a message, but he has not responded, which means there is probably something blocking us from communicating. The other members of the hit squad are linking up with the Charging Wolf Army as we speak. I would expect them to

arrive some time tomorrow evening. Maybe even the next morning."

"So we just need to maintain our defense?" Bothy frowned, his finger tapping on the table. "How are we going to survive the siege weapons?"

"We need to hold on for at least another day. Possibly two."

Sighing, Corvo pointed to a spot on the map north of the Orc camp.

"Part of the issue is that Thilvena is continuing to teleport around. The latest report from our scouts is that Thilvena was located right here. But they also reported something else troubling. When the Orcs found it, they rushed over with a bunch of Shaman and began trying to set up a spell around it. I did a flyover and it looks like the Orcs have a way to keep the city in place. It just takes a certain amount of time to activate. Thilvena can teleport before they can set up the spell, which is good. But it also means we can't make contact unless we can take the Orcs down."

"And if we can't make contact, we won't be able to survive a siege against the Orcs." Bothy squinted down at the map. "We need to figure out a way to break the siege on the harbor, and connect up with the Elves in Thilvena. How are the efforts of the Charging Wolf Army?"

"Great." Corvo said with a broad smile. "They've taken down two of the supply camps, wiped out a supply convoy and are about to hit the third camp. They've been moving fast enough that the Orcs have not caught on yet, which is great. As soon as they get through the third camp they'll be on the way back up here."

"Finally some good news. Do you think we should have them join up with us or go and rescue Earl Greymane?"

"I'm not sure, sir. We could have them potentially do both, but," suddenly Corvo paused, his head snapping to look south.

Following his gaze, Bothy saw nothing but a blank stone wall.

"Corvo? Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah." Corvo spoke slowly, his words drawn out. A grin slid onto his face and he turned back to look at Earl Blaige. "Sir, an old friend is coming to visit. I'll be back in a bit."

Barely had the words left his lips when Corvo dashed to the window. Jumping up onto the sill, he launched himself into the air, his coat swirling around him. As he reached the apex of his jump, his body shifted and the swirling coat became a flurry of feathers. Two wings emerged, carrying him further up into the air.

As Bothy watched Corvo's figure disappear into the early morning light,

he sighed.

“Stupid travelers, just running off all the time.”

Rushing through the sky, Corvo could feel the cool morning air slipping past his wings. Turning in a rising spiral over Twin Bay, Corvo’s eyes scanned the Orc forces who were still pushing toward the large walls that had been erected around the harbor. It was a puzzle to him and Earl Blaige why Arhtu the Cursed had not joined the fight, but whatever the reason, he was thankful. The battle would have been significantly harder if the Ash Maw tribe had joined once everyone was tired. Instead, the attackers and defenders were largely even, leading to an exhausting stalemate.

Turning his gaze away from the fight at the entrance to the harbor, Corvo flew to the southeast. Dark trees passed underneath him as he sped over the forest, his eyes constantly scanning for threats. As he got further from the harbor at Twin Bay, he saw fewer and fewer Orcs, and soon he had left them all behind. Continuing on for another ten minutes, Corvo’s sharp eyes spotted an opening in the forest below him.

Tucking his wings, Corvo dropped rapidly, quickly arriving in the clearing. Just above the ground his figure transformed from his bird form back into his Elven form. Landing on the ground lightly, he looked around, his hand resting on the hilt of his thin rapier. The light of the morning sun had not yet pierced through the thick canopy, casting the trees in deep shadows. The darkness did nothing to deter Corvo who began to walk into the forest.

swish

A faint sound caused Corvo to pause his footsteps. Looking ahead, he saw a slight motion in the forest as a strange wind picked up, rustling the leaves and branches of the trees all around him. Tightening his grip on his rapier, Corvo’s other hand slipped into his coat, curling around a piece of wood carved in the shape of a strange looking flower.

“Hello?”

Corvo’s question was soon lost among the trees. As if in response, the wind began to blow harder, swirling around a thick tree trunk, sending the tree’s leaves waving. With a small sound the leaves separated from the branches of the tree and joined the wind in swirling around the trunk. Faintly, Corvo could see a faint green figure on the tree growing clearer and clearer. As Corvo watched in amazement, he saw something emerge from the tree, stretching out to reveal itself as a slim hand.

Little by little, the hand left the tree, becoming increasingly clear as it was

followed by an arm. The leaves swirling around the tree gathered around the hand, granting it further definition. The first hand was soon followed by a second, and then a head and torso as a glowing green figure stepped out of the tree completely. As the figure separated from the tree the leaves plastered themselves against it, forming the shape of an Elven woman.

“Hello, Corvo.” The figure spoke in a voice made of gentle wind and rustling leaves. “Thank you for coming. I’m occupied at the moment or I would have made my appearance in person.”

“Where are you?” Corvo asked, his hand falling away from the hilt of his rapier.

“Where am I active, or where am I truly?” The figure lifted her chin slightly as her eyes turned up toward the sky. “The forest is my domain and my presence permeates it. That is how I knew of your enemy and your plight. Though my attention is limited, tied mostly to the brave trees keeping the invaders occupied to the southeast, I felt your enemy moving and came to help.”

“Do you know that Thorn was captured? We fell into a trap. A trap I should have seen coming.”

“You cannot be blamed. Your enemy is dangerous, a powerful arm and a cunning spirit. He is a rarity among the Orcs. It is not often you find a mind so meticulous. The curse he bears is even more dangerous.”

Biting his lip, Corvo began to pace back and forth in front of the leafy figure.

“What is bothering you?” The figure asked, drifting closer to Corvo.

Stopping in place, Corvo let out a deep sigh and threw up his hands as he began to speak, his voice laden with frustration.

“I’m not a tactician and what we need right now is someone to come up with tactics. Political manipulation, sure. Scheming against others, no problem. Military tactics? Forget it. I’m frustrated because I simply don’t know what to do. I’d love to help, but I have no idea how. Thorn has been strong enough to punch his way through anything that has been thrown at him, yet even he was nearly wiped out by Arhtu the Cursed in a direct engagement.” Corvo shuddered as he recalled the scene. “I was there, I saw it with my own eyes.

“Thorn tried to hit him and got knocked over like a bowling pin. Sure, he survived the fight, but honestly, it made me nervous. There is something strange going on, and I don’t know what it is. Something is off. It's like there

is something boiling under the surface of the game. Something growing, waiting to devour us. Besides, has Mina been keeping you updated with what is going on with Thorn? The craziness he is showing? Players can't do what he is doing. They can't. This isn't a matter of abnormal strength anymore. He is bending the game itself."

Corvo's voice fell quiet, and for a moment the forest was silent. After looking at Corvo for a moment longer, the leafy figure sighed, causing the trees to rustle around them.

"Yes, Mina has been keeping me posted."

"Velin, what is going on?"

Staring at the avatar of Huginn, Velin finally was not able to maintain his clear gaze and turned away.

"You know, don't you?" There was no accusation in Corvo's voice, just absolute certainty. "You know what is happening. It's happening to you too, isn't it? That's why they took your pod. I heard from Mina that your pod has been moved and you've been logged in permanently. Don't glare at me, intelligence gathering is what I do. All Seeing, remember?"

"I have an idea, but I can't tell you anything. Believe me, if I could I would. I think everyone has the right to know, but I really can't say anything. All I can say is that," the figure paused for a second, a deep shiver running through her. "Never mind. I can't say anything. Do you remember how Thorn got his position? What started it? The game began changing at that moment, and we've all gotten caught up in it. I just got caught up a bit earlier."

"I guess some of Thorn's luck really did rub off, huh?" Corvo flashed a smile.

"Luck? I guess you could call it that." Glancing up at the sky again, the figure began to rise up into the air. "I need to go. I can't spare too much attention or the Orc Shaman might succeed in tying down Thilvena. Without my interference their magic will be able to establish a dimensional anchor, locking the city in place."

"Hey, wait. What about Thorn and the Arhtu the Cursed?"

At his question, the leafy figure stopped and turned to look at Corvo, her face lighting up with a smile.

"Don't worry, I have a plan."

* * *

Once Arhtu had left, Thorn found that the threads of the [Aeon Curse] in his vicinity had increased drastically. They curled around him, occasionally drifting close enough to wrap around him and try to sink into his body, forcing him to use his [Spiritual Sense] to defend himself. This regular battle between the [Aeon Curse] and his [Spiritual Sense] prevented him from using his [Spiritual Sense] to gather up earth elemental energy to hasten his recovery, effectively halting his attempts to rest.

While Thorn could use earth elemental energy to burn away the threads of energy from the [Aeon Curse], doing so would alert Arhtu, who seemed to be able to sense the threads of energy from a distance. The Orc Shaman had known immediately when they started to be corroded the last time and Thorn did not want to chance it.

He was seriously considering just killing himself when the flap to the tent was thrown open, revealing two Orcs. The Orc in front was dressed like a normal Orc warrior except for the jewelry that covered his arms and neck. A thick torc with two large jewels on the ends was matched with the pair of ornate golden bracers set with a variety of gems that covered his arms. One of his tusks had been broken at some point and replaced with a gem encrusted golden tooth that jutted from his lips.

Behind him, an Orc nearly as wide as he was tall lumbered into the tent. Thick muscles rolled under skin that was nearly completely covered in tight blue tattoos. The thick-set Orc was completely bare apart from a loin cloth, but that did nothing to take away from the air of savagery his small beady eyes projected. Stomping into the tent, he glared at Thorn as his decked out companion addressed the two guards.

“Get out. We want to have a chat with the prisoner.”

“I’m sorry, but the Shaman…”

Holding up a hand that was heavy with rings, the Orc Chieftain gestured for the guard to stop speaking.

“I don’t care what that old fool said. I am in charge of this camp and I want to talk to the prisoner.”

“Haha,” the thick Orc laughed evilly, cracking his knuckles. “Yeah, we just want to talk to him.”

“Chief Goldtusk, my orders are very clear. I can’t leave the prisoner alone, even with you.”

The bedazzled chief stopped and turned to look at the guard, clearly shocked that someone had denied his request. Taking a good long look at the

Orc guard, Goldtusk raised his eyebrows.

“Are you sure you want to fight me on this? Has it been too long since I painted a mural with someone’s blood? Maybe you would like to volunteer?”

“It sounds like he does want to volunteer.“ said the wide Orc, turning to look at the trembling guard with interest. “We could pull his fingers out one by one. That could be a fun way to spend the evening before we skin the human.”

“I’m not going to repeat myself,” Goldtusk said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the entrance to the tent. “Get lost before I let Chief Frug take you apart piece by piece.”

It only took a moment for the other guard to pull his clearly hesitating companion out of the tent, leaving Thorn facing the two Orc chieftains. Still sitting on the carpet, Thorn cracked an eye open and surveyed them for a moment. Once he had taken a good look he let out a dismissive sigh and closed his eyes, completely enraging both Orcs.

CHAPTER SIXTY

“Hahaha, looks like we got a tough one here, Goldtusk.” Chief Frug guffawed as he closed in on Thorn.

“That’ll just make it all the more fun to break him open.”

Frug’s meaty lips curled back in a wide grimace, revealing a horde of broken and jagged teeth. Slamming his fist into his palm, the thick Orc Chieftain was about to step onto the carpet when Thorn opened his eyes and held up a hand.

“Hold on. You don’t want to do that.”

“Huh?” Chief Goldtusk sneered at Thorn from behind Chief Frug. “Don’t want to do what?”

“Come on the carpet. It is liable to be quite bad for your health. Why don’t we talk from here?”

“Oh? Not so tough anymore, now that you’re faced with real power, are you?” Goldtusk said, the sneer on his face deepening.

“No, I just would hate to be responsible for your death.” Thorn replied with an easy smile. “Or at least, partially responsible. It’ll be Arhtu who actually kills you. He has set up magic on this carpet and if you enter it you

won’t be able to leave. It's a prison of sorts.”

Standing just outside the carpeted area of the tent, Chief Furg glared at the empty air in front of his face. Shooting a suspicious glance at Thorn, he saw nothing but open honesty on the Titan’s face. Unable to see the magic that Thorn was talking about, Chief Furg lifted one of his sausage-like fingers and waved it in front of his face. Tension filled the tent as the Orc jerked his hand back and stiffly waited for something to happen.

“Hah. What a load of nonsense.” Chief Furg said in his rumbling voice when nothing happened to his hand. “What can that weakling do, anyway? Now, are you going to cooperate peacefully, or do I get the pleasure of using your fingers as toothpicks?”

“First,” Thorn’s smile slipped slightly as he placed his hands on the ground and began to stand up. “You have not yet informed me as to what you need my cooperation with, so I don’t actually know if I will be willing to cooperate.”

Taken aback by Thorn’s height as the Titan stood up straight, Chief Furg had to stop himself from stepping backward into Chief Goldtusk. The feel of Goldtusk’s hand on his back helped him, but he still found himself staring up as Thorn stepped closer.

“Second, I am Arhtu’s prisoner, not yours. If you would like to gain my cooperation you should probably ask him, not me.”

“That weakling? Bah.” Chief Goldtusk spat on the carpet as he glared up at Thorn from the safety of Chief Furg’s broad back. “Arhtu has no say here. I...We are the strongest Orcs in the camp and what we say goes!”

“I was not aware.” Thorn replied, his smile fading. “And what is it that you two chieftans want with me?”

“Haha, nothing much.” Chief Furg jumped back into the conversation, his beady eyes gleaming with cruelty. “Just your head really. We don’t need the rest of you.”

“It’s true. The defenses of the harbor were a tough nut to crack last night, but delivering your head to them should help shake them loose.” Chief Goldtusk agreed, making a slicing motion across his neck as he stared up at Thorn.

“Really? How so? Don’t you think it will just make them angry?” Thorn asked, pretending to ponder the question as he activated his [Spiritual Sense] and began to pool earth elemental energy under the two Orc Chieftain’s feet.

Though he had barely recovered any of his strength, Thorn was confident

that he would at least be able to keep himself alive until Arhtu arrived. Still, he could not rule out the very real possibility that the cursed Orc Shaman was watching from nearby, using these two brutes to force out Thorn's hidden cards. If that was his plan, Thorn was not about to let him have his way. Continuing to question the two Chieftains, Thorn waited until he saw one of the invisible threads of the [Aeon Curse] swimming near the ground.

As soon as it dipped down toward the earth, Thorn reached out with the earth elemental energy under his control, wrapping around the [Aeon Curse] sliver and dragging it into the earth. As the earth elemental energy began to burn away at the [Aeon Curse] Thorn opened his senses fully, searching for signs of Arhtu nearby. Within less than a minute he spotted the ancient looking Orc hurrying toward the tent. Hiding a smirk, Thorn turned his attention back to Goldtusk and Furg.

"Are you sure that you have the authority to do this? I'm not questioning your strength, but it seems awfully convenient to come here when Arhtu is not around, you know?"

"Hah! Even if that old fool was here I'd say it to his face." Goldtusk sneered, his broken tusk flashing.

"Say what to my face?" Arhtu's mild voice bore no malice, but it still caused Chief Goldtusk's legs to lose strength.

Watching the jewel covered Orc tremble, Thorn stifled a laugh and looked toward the tent's entrance where Arhtu's bent form stood leaning on his staff.

"You were going to say something to me about my prisoner, right?" Arhtu advanced into the tent, his eyes looking past the two Orcs toward the carpet Thorn stood on. "Well, I'm here now. I'd be happy to listen to what you have to say."

Seeing Arhtu's obvious lack of attention seemed to ignite something in Furg's mind and his anger flared, overcoming his sense and causing him to take a step forward aggressively.

"Listen here, old man!"

"Be quiet, I was not talking to you." Arhtu said evenly, his turbid eyes resting on Chief Furg for a second before continuing on toward Chief Goldtusk.

Though none of the others could see it, Thorn could clearly see the tendrils of the [Aeon Curse] that surrounded Arhtu reaching out toward Chief Furg through his [Spiritual Sense]. Thorn took a quick step back as the tendrils began to worm their way around the thick-set Orc's body, sinking into his

skin and beginning to sap the life out of him. At first Chief Furg did not notice the effect of the curse but after a moment his large muscles began to shrivel at a visible rate, causing him to stumble backward, horror plastered across his face.

As Furg's body began to shrink, Arhtu's did the opposite, growing thicker and stronger at a visible rate. The most pronounced effect was seen on his face as the thick wrinkles began to become smooth, his jaw and cheeks filling out. The various dark spots that littered his face and neck shrank, vanishing as his sallow looking skin gained a healthy sheen. The sparse hair that rose from his head began to turn black, as if ink had been dropped into it, growing thicker and longer by the second.

As Arhtu grew bigger and younger, the exact opposite happened to Chief Furg. Skin that had been tight and healthy a moment before began to sag and wrinkle, gaining the discoloration of age. Dark spots began to appear, making the formerly healthy Orc look decrepit. His thick, broad shoulders that had been packed with muscle, bent under the weight of years as his back curved down. The large, polished tusks that he had displayed so aggressively began to rot, pieces of them crumbling away as the [Aeon Curse] sucked his life from him.

Under Goldtusk's fearful gaze, Arhtu stepped forward, his shoulders broadening as more and more of the [Aeon Curse] was transmitted to the unfortunate Orc Chieftain by his side. Rolling his neck, Arhtu stretched his arms, letting out a contented sigh.

"It is not often that someone else is willing to bear my curse, but I always welcome the relief. No matter how brief."

Equally as horrified as Furg, Chief Goldtusk retreated from the advancing Shaman, his eyes darting between the withering Orc Chief and Arhtu's growing body.

"What...what are you doing?" Goldtusk hissed, his words barely making it through his clenched teeth.

"Isn't it obvious?" Arhtu glanced at Furg who had crumpled to the ground and laughed lightly. "I am just sharing my gift with him."

"You know the rules, Arhtu! You can't kill him!"

"Kill him? Who wants to kill him?"

Even though Thorn could not see Arhtu's face from where he stood behind him, he could easily imagine how ruthless his smile must have looked to Goldtusk.

“Besides, I thought that the strongest Orc made the rules? Isn’t that what you were telling my prisoner a moment ago? Do you fancy testing your strength today? All you have to do is show me how strong you are and I’ll let you do whatever you want with him. Cut his fingers off, stick his head on a pike, I won’t stop you.”

By this point, Arhtu’s body had swelled to nearly the same size as Furg had originally been. Coming to a stop in front of Goldtusk, Arhtu’s hand suddenly shot out, gripping the bejewelled Orc by the neck and lifting him from the ground. Holding the struggling Orc Chief up in the air, Arhtu’’s mouth split open in a wide smile, clearly showing the tusks jutting from his lower jaw.

“But if you are not going to fight, stop wasting my time.”

Arhtu held Goldtusk in the air for a moment, letting his words sink in. Just as the Orc Chieftain began to twitch, Arhtu tossed him aside and turned back to Furg who was gasping for breath on the floor of the tent. Pausing, Arhtu savored the strength of his body for a moment and then sighed.

“It's a shame, really, to leave such power with those who are weak.” Arhtu said to Thorn, gesturing to the two Orcs on the ground. “They posture with their physical strength until they are crushed, never realizing that true strength comes from a willingness to suffer. Still, their strength does provide some benefit, so it is better to punish them but leave them alive. If nothing else, they can serve as a warning to others.”

Breathing in, Arhtu summoned the tendrils of the [Aeon Curse] that were sucking the life from Furg back to his body. At first the curse seemed hesitant, but as Arhtu offered the life he had gained, it grew eager, wrapping itself around his body once again. This time it was Arhtu’s body that began to wither at a visible rate. Despite what the curse was doing to his body, Arhtu’s expression remained the same. Without even so much as a grunt, he walked back over to where Thorn stood, his body shriveling with every step.

By the time Arhtu stood in front of Thorn, his body had returned to the hunched, ancient looking state that Thorn had first seen, yet the feeling of danger that Thorn felt was stronger than ever. Arhtu seemed to notice Thorn’s tension and smiled lightly, gesturing for Thorn to take a seat. Pulling over the chair that he had been sitting in when he talked with Thorn earlier, Arhtu sat down, a gentle smile on his face.

“I hope I did not startle you. I admit, the way we Orcs negotiate can seem a bit, uh, barbaric to outsiders. But it is simply part of our culture.”

Watching as the two Orc guards from earlier dragged the barely breathing Orc Chieftains from the tent, Thorn was not sure that he would call what had just happened a negotiation, but considering where he was he decided not to push it. Giving a small shrug, he turned his attention back to Arhtu. After a few more minutes of chatting, the Orc Shaman excused himself and Thorn was once again left alone in the tent with the two Orc guards.

Closing his eyes, Thorn carefully thought over what he had just seen in the altercation between Arhtu and the two Orc Chieftains. The Shaman had used the [Aeon Curse] almost exactly the same way that Thorn used earth elemental energy. The main difference was that the [Aeon Curse] lived on Arhtu's body when it was not sucking the life out of another victim. Somehow, Arhtu had been able to create an equilibrium with the curse, preventing it from depleting his life beyond a certain point.

It seemed that, by forcing the [Aeon Curse] onto his target, Arhtu was also able to recover his own physical strength while the curse was occupied with the other person. Thorn was not sure if Arhtu was absorbing the target's strength or simply being restored to his own strength from before he was cursed, but regardless, the Ash Maw Shaman became a formidable warrior as soon as the curse was even partially lifted.

With a sigh, Thorn examined the strands of energy that surrounded him on his carpet prison. Just like the energy that surrounded Arhtu, the energy forming his prison obeyed Arhtu meticulously. Thorn had not missed how, during the moments when Arhtu was attacking and defeating Furg and Goldtusk, the strands of energy on the carpet had swirled around his body, controlled by Arhtu to lock Thorn in place, preventing him from interfering with the fight.

Though Thorn had not been able to determine quite how Arhtu was controlling the energy of the curse, he assumed it was similar to the [Spiritual Sense] that he possessed. If that was the case, then Thorn knew he would have a tough time escaping. Thankfully, Arhtu's [Spiritual Sense] did not seem to be as well developed as Thorn's, lacking some of Thorn's ability to see remotely. Instead it was completely concentrated around manipulating the [Aeon Curse].

Letting his mind sink into his body, Thorn carefully examined how his recovery was going while he opened up his perception fully, bringing the area around the tent into full view. The Orc patrols outside continued to walk around the tent and the two guards inside the tent continued to stand by the

door as the day progressed. Eventually, when the sun started to set, Thorn felt a flicker in his mind as a small creature crept into the range of his [Spiritual Sense].

Casting his attention over that direction, Thorn could see Akira hiding near the edge of a tent. Tucked behind a barrel and a few boxes, Akira waited until the guards looked away and was about to dash into the tent when the ground suddenly caved in under her. With a startled squeak, Akira fell into the hole that had appeared, vanishing into the earth.

Alerted by the sound, the nearest guard nudged his companion and jogged over to the tent where the sound had come from. Peering over the barrel, he saw nothing but some slightly messed up dirt. A frown crossed his face as he took a closer look. Finding nothing he shrugged and walked back to his team.

“Nothing there. Must have been a rat or something.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

[Master! Master! Don’t worry, master! I’ll get you out!]

Akira scrambled through the tunnel that Thorn had created under ground, quickly arriving under the carpet where Thorn was sitting.

[Akira, don’t come out. There are guards here.]

[Don’t worry, master! I can beat them in a flash. I’m super strong!]

[Hold on, relax.] Sensing how eager Akira was to get into the action, Thorn broke out in a sweat. [We will take them down but not right now. There are too many guards and Arhtu is somewhere around here too. If I try to escape now I’ll just get caught. We need a plan first.]

[A plan? Oh, right, a plan.] Remembering something, Akira fished around in her pouch, pulling out a small piece of paper. [Mr. Corvo gave this to me to bring to you. I don’t think he thinks I can understand human, but I totally can. Mr Corvo and Lady Velin…]

His eyes going wide as he waited for Akira to continue, Thorn only heard silence. Sending his spiritual sense underground to where Akira was, Thorn

saw that his furry battle pet had her front paws across her mouth.

[Uh, did you say Velin?] Thorn could not keep the excitement out of his voice. [Where is she?]

[Huh? Why are you asking about Lady Velin, master? I have not seen her in a long time. I definitely did not see her glowing green spirit earlier today coming out of a tree, so why would you bring her up?]

Akira's vehement denial almost caused Thorn to laugh out loud, but he managed to hold it in.

When Velin had decided to stay on Rasyn, Thorn had not expected to see her again for quite a while, so he was quite happy to hear that she was nearby. Shooting a glance at the two Orc guards, he saw that they were not paying close attention to him so he made an opening in the dirt behind his back so Akira could come up from underground.

[You did not see her?]

[See who?] Akira's eyes shifted back and forth awkwardly. Dropping her voice into a conspiratorial whisper, she continued. [Master, it is supposed to be a surprise, so later, if you meet someone that smells like Lady Velin, you have to pretend to be really surprised, okay? Not that you will.]

[No problem.] Thorn kept his voice as serious as possible as he replied. [If I meet someone who looks like Velin, I'll be really surprised.]

[Oh, she doesn't look anything like Lady Velin anymore, master. Her body got really green and she is completely see through, apart from when she is sticking leaves to her. Honestly, I don't know why she did that. It seems really uncomfortable. Nice fur like mine is so much better. It's softer, prettier, and is fireproof.]

[That does sound useful. But about that plan?] Thorn tried to get the conversation back on track. [You said Corvo gave you something?]

[Yes, master. Here it is.]

Slipping the letter from Corvo to Thorn, Akira risked a peek at the two Orc guards. Seeing that they were not looking in her direction, she bared her teeth at them and then hid behind Thorn's broad back again. Thorn put the letter in his inventory and then opened up a digital copy of the letter in a virtual window in his menu so that the Orc guards would not be able to see it.

Thorn,

We've got a plan for getting you out, but it'll probably be pretty dangerous.

If you don’t make it we can just regroup in the harbor, but that’ll put us in a really bad position. Our hold on the harbor is solid, and with the ability to bring players back to life after twenty four hours we are not going to crack any time soon. However, that is only defensively. If we want to make any progress against the Orcs we need to connect with the Elves soon.

Unsurprisingly, you being captured is not the worst of our problems. It looks like setting up a siege on Thilvena is Arhtu’s main purpose, but in order to do that he needs to lock down the city. He is using a pretty complicated spell to do so, but so far the Lady of the Old Wood has been able to disrupt them, allowing the Elves to continue moving the city. However, if we want to connect with them we have to get players inside the city. According to the Lady, if they open the gate, they can’t teleport for at least twelve hours, which would allow the Orc Shaman to get their spell off, disruption or not.

It is extremely likely that Arhtu wants to use you as a hostage to try and get the Elves in Thilvena to open up the city gate so he can lock them down. As dangerous a gamble as it is, we’re going to use that. We need to connect with the Elves otherwise we will not be able to fight the Orcs outside the harbor, so we’ll take advantage of Arhtu’s desire to have Thilvena in one spot and punish him for it. Earl Blaige gave the go ahead to use the plan we discussed for the harbor, but in Thilvena instead. Hopefully they let you in.

I’ve already started preparation on my end, so get ready to go. We’ll be starting about an hour after Akira gets to you. When the distraction starts all you need to do is break out with Akira and head for the coordinates I’m attaching, you’ll find Thilvena there.

-Corvo

Reading over the letter a few times, Thorn frowned. Corvo had given him a relatively small role, but given his current situation Thorn was not sure that he could handle much more.

[Akira, I am going to need you to carry me to Thilvena really fast. Are you up for it?]

[Yes, master.] Unusually serious, Akira patted Thorn’s back. [Just tell me

when and we’ll go.]

[Great, let's wait for the distraction that Corvo promised. I wonder if it will be like last time.]

As the minutes slowly ticked by, Thorn immersed himself in meditation, doing his best to recover his spirit. Even if he was only able to restore himself a single percent, it could very well mean the difference between life and death in the coming fight. As he focused on guiding earth elemental energy into his body, he kept an eye on the rest of the Orc camp, waiting to spring into action when the time came.

A few tents away, Arhtu sat on a carpet quite similar to the one in Thorn’s tent. Unlike Thorn, Arhtu did not meditate, but instead talked quietly with a few of his officers. As time passed, the conversation came to a close and the Orcs who had been talking with Arhtu left, leaving the Shaman of the Ash Maw tribe alone. Finally by himself, Arhtu found his mind wandering. His fingers brushed over a small ornament that hung from his belt and he let out a deep sigh.

Standing, Arhtu lifted the tent flap and walked out. The guards who had been standing at the entrance to the tent fell in behind him as he made his way across the camp toward the area where Chief Goldtusk and the Golden Sun tribe had pitched their tents. Along the way he saw countless Orc soldiers who scrambled to get out of his way. Whispered conversations alerted him that the news of what he had done to Chief Furg in the tent where Thorn was imprisoned had begun to make the rounds. Keeping his face impassive, Arhtu ignored the fear in the glances that were sent his way.

Arriving at the tent where Goldtusk was staying, Arhtu was about to enter when his sharp perception triggered. Freezing, his eyes turned to the east. A deep and ancient energy was beginning to grow in the forest at the edge of the Orc camp, causing Arhtu to narrow his eyes. It seemed that the guest he had been waiting for was about to arrive.

“Who is holding the eastern side of the camp?” Arhtu asked his guard.

“The east? That is the Stone Crusher tribe.” His guard replied after a moment of thought.

Arhtu’s brow furrowed for a moment and then smoothed out. The Stone Crusher tribe was one of the strongest tribes in their army. Their warriors were powerful and known for their defense. Even if there was an enemy attack, they would at least be able to buy time for the rest of the tribes to mobilize. About to command his guards to send scouts to check out what was

happening in the forest, Arhtu's face paled as he remembered a crucial fact.

"Stone Crusher? Wait, isn't that where the Priests of the Cog are staying?"

"Yes." Another of his guards said, nodding. "They're helping the Priests of the Cog with the stone throwers."

"Mobilize our forces, now! We need to get over there. Enemy attack!" Arhtu yelled, his voice surprisingly powerful.

Even as the words left his throat, he felt the ancient aura at the edge of the camp swell. In no shape to run, Arhtu slammed his staff into the ground and spoke an arcane command. His shadow began to grow and stretch behind him. As it twisted, it began to split. A single head became two and then two became four as they stretched out. Within a few seconds a deep hiss sounded as the heads bulged and then lifted from the ground, continuing to split as they rose.

The heads were followed by a long neck and a large body, forming an eight headed hydra made entirely of shadow. Lowering its heads, the hydra allowed Arhtu and his guards to step onto its back, their feet sinking into its shadow body. Lifting a few of its heads, the shadow hydra let out a roar toward the sky as it began to stomp to the eastern side of the camp.

Arhtu's yell had a profound impact on the camp as countless Orc soldiers rushed from their tents, picking up weapons as they went. The hydra's heads were easily visible, weaving back and forth as it charged through the camp. Each footfall shook the ground and its impressive bulk flattened more than one tent as it carried Arhtu and his guards. Yet it was not the large hydra that captured the Orcs' attention. Instead, it was the sight of the entire forest on the eastern side of the camp standing up and beginning to charge forward that alerted them to where the battle was.

In the tent in the center of the camp, Thorn's eyes snapped open. Arhtu's yell had carried clearly to where Thorn sat and Thorn was positive that this was the distraction he was waiting for. Despite the distraction having arrived, Thorn waited a moment longer, his gaze resting on the two Orc guards who were looking at each other, confusion clear on their faces.

Sending out his [Spiritual Sense], Thorn was able to see the Orc soldiers rushing toward the east where fire and smoke had already started to rise. His eyes flickered as some of the guards around his tent joined the running soldiers, leaving only eight of the sixteen guards remaining. Judging that it was time to go, Thorn was about to give the command, when a subtle feeling made him pause. The air seemed to take on a tinge of sweetness, like the

smell of dew on a morning meadow.

ding

Sleep Spore
Released by a rare flower only found in the Old Forest of Rasyn, Sleep Spores live up to their name, causing a deep sense of calm to invade anyone who inhales them. Anywhere the Fairy's Slumber flower blooms, it brings deep sleep to those who are with the range of its spores.

Racial Trait: Titan's Endurance
Due to your natural resistance to physical conditions, the environmental effect [Sleep Spore] has been negated.

As the notifications scrolled past him, Thorn saw the two Orc guards begin weaving on their feet as their eyes drooped. Less than a minute later the two Orcs fell to the ground as if their legs had been cut off. Springing forward, Thorn caught them before they hit the ground and laid them down carefully. Sensing someone behind him, Thorn took a deep breath and calmed himself down.

"Hello, Thorn."

Hearing a voice behind him, Thorn could not keep the wide smile off of his face. Spinning around, he found himself looking at a beautiful Elven woman made up of leaves.

"Hello, Velin."

For a moment, the two of them just looked at each other, their gazes locked. It was not until Akira yawned that Velin broke the silence.

"You don't seem surprised." Velin's face was calm as she spoke, but her voice carried a note of teasing.

Too late, Thorn remembered that Akira had told him that Velin's return was supposed to be a surprise. Opening his eyes wide, he pretended to be shocked, but Velin just laughed and waved a leaf covered hand.

"I should have expected that Akira would spill the surprise."

"Haha, yeah, sorry." Thorn rubbed his head, giving Akira a sheepish glance. "Nice, uh, leaf body you got there. And a fancy title too, right? Lady of the Old Wood. Is this part of your quest?"

"Sort of," a faint shadow clouded Velin's eyes, but with her whole body

being made of green energy, Thorn felt like he could have been imagining it. “I have a lot of flexibility in the Old Wood here on Rasyn, but I’m still not anywhere close to completing my quest. I managed to figure out my next steps, and once this fight is done I’ll keep working on it.”

“If there is any way I can help, just say the word.”

“Thanks, I’ll let you know. I’d love to catch up, but it is just about time for you to get going. I’m going to lock down Arhtu and the rest of the Orcs for you and Akira will take you to Thilvena. We only have about an hour until they warp again, so if you can’t get there in that time, we’ll fail.”

“Do they know I’m coming?” Thorn asked.

“No.” Velin shook her head. “That is the weakest link in our plan. We do not know if the Elves will open their gate and let you in. If they don’t you need to keep running. How are you feeling?”

“Eh, not great.” Thorn glanced down at his hand as he flexed his fingers. “I’m at maybe thirty percent. With no abilities until I make my escape.”

“Okay, just rely on Akira to get out of the camp.”

Velin’s head cocked to the side as if she was listening to something.

“I have to go, Arhtu has begun to engage my forces. Wait for two minutes and then leave as fast as you can.”

Velin’s figure began to fade and within a few seconds she was gone from the tent, leaving only the collapsed guards on the floor as a sign that she had been there.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

By the time that Arhtu and his guards arrived at the edge of the Orc camp, it had been reduced to a ruin. The cause for the commotion, as well as the devastation that had been caused to camp, was immediately apparent. A row of huge trees had uprooted themselves from the edge of the forest and dragged themselves forward with their wriggling roots. Thick branches whipped through the air, laying waste to everything in their path.

Groups of Orcs had already begun to try and fight back, thrusting their spears toward the lumbering giants to little effect. A few enterprising Orcs had rushed toward the advancing forest, their axes gleaming. Before they could get anywhere near the thick trunks a rain of leaves and thin branches swept past them. Each leaf and twig was wrapped in a dark green energy, granting the attack supernatural speed and cutting power. As the storm covered them, the Orcs screamed and dropped to the ground, their bodies riddled with bleeding holes.

“Get torches!” A large Orc who held a thick warhammer bellowed at the soldiers rushing around. “Use fire! We’ll burn these blasted twigs to embers!”

Undeterred by the threat, the thick trees continued to advance, crushing any Orc who came in range with ease. A massive Oak that towered above the battlefield pushed forward, its gigantic roots slithering through the dirt like a nest of vipers. The dirt roiled around it as the roots dug their way forward, preventing any of the Orc soldiers from getting close to its trunk. Two thickly built Orcs who had grabbed torches from one of the tents roared and charged forward, their eyes gleaming with fervor.

The first had hardly made it a few steps when thick roots burst from the ground in front of him, wrapping themselves around his neck and lifting him into the air. With a slithering sound the thick root continued to twine around the Orc's muscular form, slowly tightening until, with a crunch, the struggling Orc went still. The second Orc, seeing his companion's fate, thrust the torch that he carried toward the ground. The roots that had been waiting for him recoiled, dancing just out of the torch's range.

"Get back, fiend!" The Orc's roar held a twinge of fear, but seeing that the roots were retreating, he was emboldened.

SHIK

Stiffening in shock, the Orc warrior's eyes widened in sudden terror. As the strength drained from his fingers, his gaze slowly traveled down to his chest where he saw the bloody end of a sharp root wriggling. Trying to look over his shoulder, he failed as the root that had snuck up behind him lifted him into the air and flung his body like a ragdoll. The other roots that had kept his attention poured toward him, stabbing into his body and tearing it to pieces.

Clenching his teeth in fury, the chieftain of the Stone Crusher tribe lifted his massive weapon and charged forward. Little more than a boulder that had been bolted to a thick metal handle, it contained incredibly destructive power when wielded by a strong Orc. Lifting it above his head, he let out a guttural roar, intending to smash the trees to splinters. Yet he had hardly gone a few steps when he saw thick, knotty branches sweeping toward him.

Turning to face the incoming attack, he swung his hammer down, crushing three of the attacking branches into the ground, the weight of his hammer cracking the branches in half. Snarling in triumph, the Stone Crusher Chieftain was about to lift his hammer when a sea of brown began to fill his sight. Where there had been three attacks before, there were now dozens, all shooting toward him.

Quickly lifting his hammer, he swung again, snapping the branches that

got in his weapon's path. Yet where one fell, three filled its place. The knotty branches continued to swing toward him in ever greater concentration, filling the sky as a large willow tree stomped its way toward him. The drooping branches whipped back and forth, hemming in the Stone Crusher Chieftain as the trunk got closer and closer.

Up and down the line, the large trees of the forest stomped on the Orcs who rushed out to engage them. Sitting on the back of his shadow hydra, Arhtu's cold gaze raked over the fights. A few more Orcs had found torches, but the trees were practically unstoppable. Even without supporting each other, the trees were massacring the Orcs at a tremendous rate.

Opening his mouth, Arhtu let out a command in an arcane language. Instantly, the shadow hydra stopped and lowered its heads, allowing those on its back to step off. After the last of them had gotten down, the shadow hydra lifted its head and rushed toward a powerful Sycamore that was stabbing its long branches into the surrounding Orcs. As if sensing the powerful creature coming, the tree shifted, turning its trunk to stab out at the body of the shadow.

"Where are the Priests of the Cog?" Arhtu asked as he lifted his staff and began summoning a shadow bolt. "And bring the Sun Forgers tribe, tell them to field their Shaman as fast as possible."

"The Priests of the Cog are to the north, my Chief. As for the Sun Forgers," the Orc hesitated for a brief moment until Arhtu turned to look at him. "The Sun Forgers were in charge of the Evil Eye towers at the harbor. Only one of them made it back alive, sir."

"Then tell them to bring their warriors. Fire is the best weapon against these wooden monsters." Arhtu said with a glare. Turning around, he looked over the armored Orcs who had been gathering behind him. "Ash Maw warriors! To battle!"

With a deep roar, the warriors of the Ash Maw tribe charged forward into battle. As they streamed past him, Arhtu turned around, his eyes sweeping the battlefield again. This was the same cursed trick that had been used to keep the Orcs penned up near Ilha Cealora. There, the whole forest had appeared to come alive and the bloody battle had been raging for weeks. It seemed that only half a dozen trees had been marshalled for this attack, but left unchecked, even half a dozen of these ancient trees had the ability to sweep through his army.

Closing his eyes, Arhtu began to mumble under his breath. Tendrils of the

[Aeon Curse] spread from him, waving gently in the air as they made their way toward the Sycamore that was fighting with his shadow hydra. The two monsters were locked in mortal combat, their struggles destroying everything around them. A few of the hydra's heads had locked onto the large tree while the others ripped large chunks of bark and wood from the Sycamore's trunk and branches. Without care the tree slammed its branches into the hydra's heads and necks, even as its roots sought to bury themselves in the hydra's belly.

As the [Aeon Curse] tendrils got close to the tree, it seemed to shiver and try to back up, only to find itself held in place by the shadow hydra's razor sharp teeth and powerful tail. Falling into a frenzy, the Sycamore rammed its branches into the hydra with renewed vigor, each pounding attack taking some of the shine from the hydra's black scales.

CRACK

In its wild hammer, the Sycamore's thickest branch snapped, leaving behind a jagged stub. Undeterred, the Sycamore wrapped its remaining branches around the hydra and squeezed, forcing the splintered end of its branch into the hydra's body. Letting out a roar of pain as the branch stabbed through its scales, the hydra still kept its hold on the Sycamore, holding it in place as the [Aeon Curse] reached out to touch it.

Wherever the sticky energy from the curse touched the tree its bark began to rapidly turn grey, crumbling as the life energy was sucked out of it. The few leaves that had still clung stubbornly to the branches of the Sycamore yellowed, ageing rapidly before falling to the ground. As the tree lost its life it grew older and older, growing thicker and slower with each moment.

Feeling himself growing stronger, Arhtu straightened his body. Nearby, the remaining Shaman of the Sun Forger tribe had arrived and was beginning to summon a flaming elemental golem to do combat with the trees. As the molten golem stood up and stomped forward, its feet lit the grass around it.

"I heard you were looking for me, Arhtu."

The wind carried a gentle voice over the battlefield, causing all of the Orcs to look around. Arhtu was no exception, and his eyes soon locked onto a faintly glowing figure who stood by the edge of the dark woods. Lifting his staff, Arhtu sneered and fired off a [Shadow Spear] toward the figure. Gently waving her hand, the figure caused one of the trees near her to bend down, shielding her from the attack. With another wave, the two trees next to her uprooted themselves, and began trudging toward the camp, their branches

waving as they joined the battle.

“Do you really think such attacks will work on me?” Velin asked Arhtu, her voice carried to his ears by the rustle of the leaves.

Keeping his eyes fixed on her form, Arhtu walked forward, his figure straightening with every step. Seeing that he was advancing, Velin stepped forward as well, her feet stepping in the air as she came closer.

“You are the Witch of the Wood?”

“Witch? Only to trespassers who seek to plunder the land.”

“Do you really think that you can fight against us? Your forest will fall eventually, Witch.”

“Oh? Do you really believe that?” Velin chuckled lightly, her laughter like the rippling of a small stream. “Where I am, there is life.”

As if to illustrate her point, Velin waved her hand and a stream of green leaves burst from the forest behind her, rushing over her head to where the mighty Sycamore was beginning to crumble. Whirling around the tree, the leaves began to settle themselves onto the branches, bringing with them a rush of life. Vitality began to stream back into the aged wood, causing new shoots to burst from its branches.

The large gashes began to heal as the tree grew thicker and more vibrant. The feeble struggles of the Sycamore grew stronger and stronger as new life filled it. From the splintered branch which impaled the shadow hydra new growth erupted, digging deeper and deeper into the hydra’s body. Hearing the enraged roar of the hydra behind him, Arhtu’s gaze grew cold. Across from him, Velin’s glowing eyes stared into his, her tone becoming frosty.

“I am the Lady of the Old Wood and you have trespassed on my land. You will pay the consequences.”

* * *

[Akira, it's time to go.]

[Yes, master!]

In the tent, Thorn stood to his feet once the two minutes had elapsed. Next to him, Akira’s eyes gleamed and her small body suddenly grew, filling the tent. Jumping up onto her back, Thorn pulled his arbalest out of his inventory and loaded a bolt. Behind him, Akira’s three waving tails began to burn with crimson flames as she got ready to run. Once they were both ready, Thorn spread his [Spiritual Sense] out and gave Akira’s shoulder a pat.

[Let’s do this.]

In a blaze of flame, cloth, and fur, Akira sprinted out of the tent, ripping through the wall with her sharp claws and bowling over the Orc guards who had been right outside. Paying no attention to them, Akira simply trampled them under her feet, leaving large scorch marks on their skin where her sharp claws landed. Gathering her flame around her, Akira began to sprint toward the edge of the camp, heading away from where Velin was fighting with Arhtu.

Akira was fast in her battle form, though not nearly as fast as she would have been without Thorn on her back, and it took only a minute for them to make it to the edge of the camp. Behind her, Akira left a path of burning wreckage as she simply ran over everything in her way. Though most of the Orcs were flooding toward the fighting on the eastern side of the camp, a few Orcs tried to stop Akira and Thorn as they fled to the west.

Those that were not crushed under Akira’s feet found themselves on the wrong end of a crossbow bolt the size of their arm, and Thorn and Akira were soon at the edge of the camp. Pulling up his map as they ran, Thorn highlighted the coordinates that Corvo had sent him and Akira began to run through the woods.

[Master, you might want to cut back on those pastries.] Akira complained. [What have you been eating? You are really really really heavy. I mean, I can still carry you, but you’re like an elephant.]

[Have you ever seen an elephant?]

[No, but I heard they are huge. Like really big.]

Akira fell into silence as they continued to run for a few more minutes.

[I lied. You are not as fat as an elephant. You are as fat as two elephants.]

[Haha, I can get off. I’ll run alongside you. We’ll need you to conserve your energy for when the pursuit starts.]

Jumping down from Akira’s back, Thorn took a deep breath and began to run forward. After keeping pace with him for about a hundred feet, Akira transformed into her pet form and jumped up onto Thorn’s shoulder, her tails curling around his neck to help her balance as she fished in her pouch for a pastry.

[Whew. I need to regain some energy.]

[Hey, can I have one?]

[No way!] Akira shook her head vehemently. [If you get any fatter you’ll crush me.]

Grinning, Thorn began to get food out of his inventory and stuff it into his mouth. At the same time, he began pulling out random items that he had been carrying and tossing them to the ground. While his inventory was not normally an issue for him because of his strength, in his weakened state he found himself feeling the weight.

With a rattle, Thorn dropped an extra set of armor that he had been carrying around just in case he needed it. The platemail let out a clang as it landed, denting the soft ground. A large chest of supplies followed, cracking open and spilling rations all over. As Thorn ran he left a trail of random weapons, armor, and supplies. After some consideration, Thorn even began to drop the bolts for his arbalest, keeping only one hundred back in case of emergency. Debating for a second, he decided to keep his boulder seat, just in case he needed it.

Once his inventory was finally clear of everything he could get rid of, Thorn settled into a steady jog, cutting through the trees toward the Elven city of Thilvena, trying to get as much distance as he could before the Orcs began to chase him.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

With a thunderous boom Arhtu's fist impacted the earth, blasting a hole in the ground as a shockwave radiated out from him. Baring his tusks in anger, his rage filled eyes darted back and forth, searching for the elusive green form that had been dancing just out of his reach for the last few minutes.

"Do you know how to do anything apart from run, Witch?" Arhtu bellowed.

"It's not my fault that your attacks can't hit anything."

Velin's voice drifted on the wind, seeming to come from countless directions as the breeze stirred the dust and ash that Arhtu's fists stirred up. All around them, Orcs swarmed the few trees that remained, chopping at them with axes and burning them with fire. Bursting through the smoke and dust, Arhtu spotted a green flash from the corner of his eyes and looked over. He caught sight of Velin's green form retreating to the forest, a group of enraged Orcs chasing after her.

"Those idiots." Arhtu growled, anger radiating from his body as he began to sprint toward Velin.

As she retreated, Velin turned back to face the howling Orcs, her body

continuing to fly away from them. Taking a deep breath, she waved her hand, summoning the last sliver of power she could spare. A soft green light scattered from her fingertips landing on the ground around the Orcs. Instantly the grass under their feet began growing at an insane rate. Bursting up from the ground, it was only moments before the grass had grown up and around the stunned Orcs.

Wrapping around the Orcs who were caught in the middle of the explosive growth, the grass began to tighten, binding them in place. Furious, the Orcs tried to rip themselves free but the grass proved almost impossible to tear. One of the Orcs, thinking quickly, pulled out his knife to try and cut the grass away, but before he could, a thick vine wrapped itself around his wrist. Dark thorns sprouted from the vine, digging into his skin and forcing him to drop the knife.

By the time Arhtu got there, the four Orcs had been reduced to desiccated corpses, the blood in their bodies sucked out by the vicious vine that snaked its way through the grass. Sensing new prey, the vine reached out for Arhtu as he passed by. With a sneer, Arhtu allowed the vine to latch onto him, its blood sucking thorns digging into his skin. Strangely, the vine began to shrivel as soon as it touched him, dying within moments. Seeing that Velin had reached the edge of the woods, Arhtu stopped chasing her and fixed her with a glare.

“What, you’re not going to join me in the woods?” Velin’s cold face wore a small grin as she matched Arhtu glare for glare.

“Not all Orcs are idiots.” Arhtu spat, sparing a glance for the four corpses by his side.

“Quite unfortunate, really.”

“What game are you playing?”

“Game?” Velin’s eyebrows rose as she looked at Arhtu. “What are you talking about?”

“You are hiding something.” Arhtu said, his eyes searching Velin’s face. “You would not waste your time on an attack like this without a bigger goal. Are you testing our defenses? Trying to distract us from the harbor so they can launch a force? No, if you were doing that, you would have attacked the sieging force. What are you up to?”

“Do I have to be up to something? Can’t I just be attacking you because I am tired of you being in my forest?”

“No, there is something else going on.” The Ash Maw Shaman said, his

mind working furiously. “What would cause you to divert your attention from the main camp and deploy your trees up here? Someone here needs reinforcements? The Elves? No, the travelers. No.”

Arhtu’s eyes gleamed brightly as he spun, his gaze shooting past the battle line toward the center of the camp.

“The prisoner.”

Slowly, Arhtu turned his head back to look at Velin, a murderous look in his eyes. Velin met his gaze, her face impassive. As they matched stares, the last of the giant trees fell to the combined might of the Ash Maw soldiers and the flaming elemental golem that the Sun Forger Shaman had summoned. As it crashed to the ground with a earth shaking thud, Arhtu suddenly burst into motion, his form blurring as he charged toward Velin.

Arriving next to her in an instant, his fist drew back and then blasted forward, the force of his attack crushing the air. With unstoppable might, his fist ripped through the air where Velin stood a moment earlier. Slamming into a tree behind the spot her heart had been, Arhtu’s fist smashed straight through it, cutting the thick trunk in half.

A light laugh echoed throughout the forest, carried by the breeze that rustled the leaves of the trees. Suppressing a roar of rage, Arhtu cast one last look around and turned to stalk back toward the camp. As he walked, the strands of the [Aeon Curse] that he had sent out to decay the massive trees began to gather, wrapping themselves around his powerful body. With each step his back bent more and more until he was forced to stop, his body unsteady on his trembling legs.

One of his guards brought him his staff and he took it with a nod of thanks. Leaning on it, Arhtu breathed out a lungful of turbid air and looked around at the devastation that the living trees had caused. Hundreds of Orc corpses littered the battlefield, most in pieces from the incredibly destructive attacks of the tree’s roots. Countless more Orcs were wounded and required immediate medical attention. Letting out a deep sigh, Arhtu cursed the green Witch who had brought the trees to attack them.

“Go, find out if something has happened to the prisoner.” Arhtu said, coughing into his arm. “If the tent is empty, send our fastest scouts after him. We cannot let him escape.”

It did not take long before the guard that Arhtu sent was seen running back toward him, a furious look on his face. Cursing, Arhtu lifted his hand to summon his shadow hydra when he remembered that it was currently laying

in pieces on the battlefield behind him. Gesturing for his guards to come with him, Arhtu began to slowly make his way toward the center of camp, issuing orders as he went. Soon a squad of Orcs mounted on wargs were rushing from the camp, intent on running Thorn down before he could escape.

Deep in the forest, Thorn was still jogging toward Thilvena, Akira sitting on his shoulder. Though it had not been that long, he was making good progress toward the coordinates that he had been given and expected that it would not take more than another twenty minutes to get there. Doing his best to conserve his energy as he ran, Thorn continued to eat the piles of food that he stored in his inventory.

It had been quite a while since he had last slept, and combined with the deep exhaustion that had set in after upgrading his bloodline, Thorn would have much preferred to simply lie down for a nap. In fact, he felt like it would not be an issue to sleep for a few days. Despite his exhaustion, Thorn continued to jog, placing one foot in front of the other to carry him forward.

[Akira, can you sense if we are being chased?]

Thorn's active abilities were still locked due to his [Prisoner] title, so he could only assume that someone was going to come after him. Thankfully, his senses and his [Spiritual Sense] were not counted as active abilities, but were passive in nature. As he ran, Thorn allowed his [Spiritual Sense] to seep out of his body, doing his best to keep track of everything around him.

[No, I don't hear...wait.]

Pausing, Akira jumped from Thorn's shoulder and ran up a tree. Jumping to another tree, she began to scamper up it, muttering in a low voice as she went.

[This tree is mine. And this tree is mine.]

Slowing to a walk, Thorn extended his [spiritual Sense] to its maximum range, creating a narrow field of view that stretched out almost three hundred feet. Sweeping it around himself like a radar, Thorn took note of everything in range. Not finding anything of note, Thorn let go of it, allowing his [Spiritual Sense] to return to normal. As he did, Akira dropped out of the tree that she had scaled, landing on his shoulder.

[Master, there is a major commotion behind us. The birds are saying that there are beasts rushing toward us.]

[Well, that's our que.]

Breaking into a run, Thorn stopped worrying about conserving energy and moved as quickly as he could toward Thilvena. Without his [Improved Pack

Travel], his speed was much slower than normal, though it was still considerably faster than most people. As his body picked up speed, Thorn could feel his energy beginning to drain at a noticeable rate. The sensation was strange, almost as if he had a tank of fuel that was being used up as he moved.

While he had often experienced this feeling in the real world before he came into the game, Thorn had not felt it since. His normally endless pool of stamina was an advantage that he had not truly appreciated until now when it had been drained. It made him wonder what other things he took for granted.

Thorn continued to run for six more minutes before he sharp hearing picked up the sound of paws on the forest floor. The sound reminded him of the corrupted wolves that he used to hunt in the forest around Berum when he first started playing, though he could tell from the tremors in the ground that these creatures were much bigger than the corrupted wolves. Concentrating his [Spiritual Sense], Thorn projected it backward, extending it as far as he could. At first he did not see anything, but he persisted, continuing to send it out every twenty seconds.

Another two minutes passed before Thorn saw them, large ugly looking creatures that looked like a cross between a hyena and a bulldog. Thick shoulders with powerful front legs gave way to a thin waist and haunches. Large claws graced their feet and a snub nosed mouth full of grinning teeth dominated their heads. Small beady eyes and pointed ears gave them an especially evil look that was only compounded by the spiky hair that covered their bodies.

Sensing that they had gotten close to their prey, the warg in the front let out a furious howl that sounded like a demented laugh mixed with a dying screech. The call was picked up by the other wargs and they rushed on, closing on Thorn with every moment. Sending out his [Spiritual Sense] repeatedly, Thorn counted six wargs, each carrying an Orc warrior on its back.

Cursing under his breath that his abilities had still not unlocked, Thorn could only run as fast as he could. With his [Improved Pack Travel] he could have at least maintained his lead, but as it was, the wargs were gaining on him steadily. Dashing past a tree, Thorn risked a glance behind him. While he could not see the wargs, they had already entered the regular range of his [Spiritual Sense]. Checking his map, Thorn saw that he was only a few minutes away from his goal.

[Master, I'll stop them!]

[Not yet, Akira. We can make it by running.]

[Uh, master, they have bows.]

Akira's words were punctuated by an arrow that brushed past Thorn's head, causing him to flinch. For a moment he considered equipping his armor, but that would slow him down, and besides, if he died, he would be guaranteed to lose all of it.

[Master, I can do it!]

[Alright, but if you are in danger I want you to retreat, okay? Do you understand?]

[Yes, master!]

Jumping off of Thorn's shoulder and landing on a nearby branch, Akira vanished into the trees. Hiding in the crook of a tree as Thorn charged forward, Akira waited for the chasing Orcs to get closer. It did not take long before the wargs were sprinting past her position, their long tongues hanging out of the side of their mouths.

Just as the first two wargs were passing under her tree, Akira dashed out of her hiding place and launched herself into the air. As she flew, her body abruptly grew until she dwarfed the two wargs. Taken by surprise, the two wargs stood no chance at all. Akira's razor sharp claws flashed, cutting huge chunks from the wargs even as her bulk pinned them to the forest floor. One of the riders was lashed by her tails, his chest caving in as he was thrown into a tree, but the other rider was able to make a narrow escape by throwing himself from where he sat.

The four other riders reacted quickly, loosing arrows at Akira as soon as she appeared. Though the arrows were not able to get through her fur, the attacks forced her into a defensive stance, allowing the rider who had thrown himself from his warg to scramble behind a tree. Squeaking angrily, Akira's tails rose up into the air, igniting with flame.

"Horg, Femet, keep chasing! We'll handle this creature and catch up!" The dismounted Orc said, throwing away the bow he carried and drawing a pair of axes from the sheaths on his back.

The two warg riders whose names he had called out gave Akira one last glance before splitting up, one going to the right while the other went to the left. Seeing that they were going to try and pass her, Akira's tails began to wave, fireballs forming above their tips. Just as she was about to release them, a low roar sounded from her side and the dismounted Orc threw

himself at her, his axes slashing toward her neck. At the same time, the twang of bowstrings alerted Akira to the arrows that were flying toward her eyes.

Furious, Akira had to change her target, sending the fireballs at the two remaining warg riders, while her tails swung around to block the attacks. As the two axes glanced off of the tail that she used to block, Akira let out a slash, trying to rip through the Orc's legs. As if he sensed the attack, the Orc jumped backward, causing her to miss.

The two fireballs that shot toward the warg riders burned with a deep crimson light. They were not large but the wargs were not about to stay still and block them. Jumping to the side, the wargs dodged. While one of the warg riders remained at a distance to continue shooting arrows, the other urged his mount to attack. Sprinting forward, the warg circled to the other side of Akira, sandwiching her with the axe wielding Orc.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

Continuing to run, Thorn saw Akira ambush the warg riders with his [Spiritual Sense] and for a moment he was tempted to turn around. It was only with strict self control that he was able to continue his run forward. By this time he had slowed considerably, his breath coming in large gasps and he struggled to continue to run. His energy was almost completely drained, so Thorn deactivated his [Spiritual Sense] trying to conserve as much energy as he could. His legs felt like they had lead weights tied around them, dragging them to the ground every time he tried to step forward.

Breathing heavily, Thorn focused on moving forward, forcing himself to leave Akira to her fight. His battle pet was a powerful force by herself and even if she could not win, she was more than capable of escaping. For now, all that Thorn needed to do was make it to Thilvena. Forcing his body to move, Thorn could see a large open space ahead through the trees.

Stumbling forward, Thorn focused on making sure that he did not trip on one of the uneven roots that crossed the forest floor. He was so focused that

he almost missed the attack of one of the wargs that had chased after him. Seeing his exhaustion, the Orc on the warg's back put away his bow and drew his axe, guiding his warg toward Thorn's back. Together they charged toward. Just before the warg leaped, something in Thorn's mind alerted him to the incoming danger and his body began to dodge.

Thorn tucked his shoulders down as he spun around, dodging out of the way of the warg's leap by bending over backward. As the monster passed over him, Thorn equipped his arbalest and lifted it up. Without the strength to support himself in this twisted position, Thorn fell to the ground on his side. Rolling onto his back he saw that the warg was still above him and instinctively pulled the trigger of his weapon. With a terrifying twang, the bolt left the bow and slammed into the warg's belly at point blank range.

The force of the attack lifted the warg even further into the air, the sharp point of the bolt driving up through the warg and stabbing into the Orc on his back. With a sharp shout, the Orc tried to wrench himself free, but the bolt had gone all the way through his mount and stabbed up through his leg. Blood sprayed from the wound as the warg crumpled to the ground. Writhing on the ground, the warg rolled over, pinning the Orc rider against the ground and a thick tree root. Shouting for help, the injured warg rider struggled to get himself free but failed.

Scrambling up, Thorn realized that he had lost his grip on his arbalest, but with no time to find it he simply abandoned his weapon and stumbled toward the open field he had seen. Breaking into the clearing, Thorn realized that it was much more than a clearing. At least a few miles across, the massive open space was dominated by the largest tree that Thorn had ever seen. It towered in the air, reminding Thorn of the floating capital city of Northern Angoril.

The tree itself was at least a mile and half tall, making Thorn wonder how he had not seen it from the harbor or ship. Hidden in the unbelievably large branches, Thorn could make out soaring towers and countless buildings. Around the trunk of the tree were large platforms with buildings that looked like palaces stacked on them. Lower still was a thick castle wall that encompassed the entire tree. The large open space that surrounded the castle wall was dotted with Orcs who seemed to be simply waiting for something to happen. Every thousand feet or so Thorn could see a Shaman busily carving out the formation that they were using to try and trap the city in place.

Thorn was wondering how something so large would teleport when he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. A heavy force slammed into his back, sending

him tumbling forward into the clearing. Realizing that the other warg rider had caught up, Thorn forced out the last dregs of his energy and lunged to his feet. As if it could sense the danger that he presented, the warg kept a healthy distance as Thorn stared at it. Thorn wanted to equip his tetsubo but he was not sure that he even had the energy to swing the heavy weapon.

Glancing at the massive gate on the wall that was only a thousand feet away, Thorn tried to judge if he could make it the remaining thousand feet without getting swamped. Realizing that it was incredibly unlikely, Thorn began to back toward the gate. As he did so, the warg stalked forward, looking for a moment of weakness so it could pounce.

“Open the gate!”

Thorn’s voice carried across the field, alerting the Orcs around him to his presence. Seeing him staggering toward the gate, they began to move toward him.

“Open the gate!”

Again Thorn raised his voice, trying to alert the Elves that he was coming. His only real chance at survival was dependent on the Elves choosing to save him over avoiding a siege, so Thorn was not holding out hope. Seeing an Orc Shaman turning to look at him,

Up on the wall a golden sun shade had been raised. Underneath it, Queen Naevyre had been watching the Orc Shaman as they tried to lock Thilvena down. Seeing Thorn burst from the woods, the queen’s mouth dropped open. It was not until he shouted the second time that she finally pulled herself together.

“We need to open the gate!” Queen Naevyre said breathlessly as she watched Thorn’s figure struggling with the Orcs that surrounded him.

“My queen, we cannot!” A tall Elf dressed in shining armor that was standing next to the queen looked horrified at the suggestion.

“We need to rescue him. Of course we must open the gate.” The Queen’s words were firm and her gaze scorching as she looked at the general who spoke up. “Lord Greymane saved me on more than one occasions, and I refuse to ignore him when he is in need. Prepare to lead my royal guards outside the gate.”

“Your majesty, if we do that we will not be able to shift!” A mage spoke up from the other side of the queen. “The enemy Shaman are close to binding us in place. If they do so they’ll put us under siege.”

“We are going to rescue him.” Queen Naevyre’s voice brooked no

argument.

“I don’t think that is a good idea, your majesty.” The general frowned as he looked out over the field. Though the Orcs were spread loosely, with only the Shaman working on the grand sealing formation that would lock the great tree city in place.

“I did not ask you if you thought it was advisable, general.”

For a moment a tense air hung over the group on the wall as the general matched gazes with the queen. It was only when her eyes began to narrow that he sighed and bowed his head.

“I will do as you command, my queen.”

Turning on his heel, he jumped down to the gate, the queen's guard jumping after him. Though they fell almost thirty feet in full armor, each one landed as lightly as a feather. Rushing to the gate, they formed up as the general took his place at the front of the formation. Taking a deep breath, he gave the queen one last look and raised his hand.

“Open the gate!”

A deep horn sounded, echoing around the walls of the city and off of the branches of the great tree. With a creak the massive doors on the wall began to open inch by inch. As soon as the opening was large enough for a single person to run through, the general led the Royal Guard out of the city. The Orcs outside the city were taken by complete surprise when they heard the sound of the horn, but that surprise soon turned to happiness. The scattered Shaman quickly renewed their efforts to lock the city in place.

At the same time some of the gathered Orc warriors began to rush toward the Royal Guard, intent on claiming the first kill. His eyes narrowing, the Elf general gestured and five of the Royal Guard split off from the force, charging out to intercept the incoming warriors while the general led the rest of the guards toward Thorn.

A moment later, the fastest Orcs met the Elven Royal Guard who rushed among them, blades flashing. The Orc in front lifted his warhammer, intending to crush the shiny armor of the Elf in front of him, when the Elf simply disappeared. Confused, he tried to look around only to find his vision flipping and then going dark as his head tumbled from his shoulders. Already past him, the Royal Guard’s sword flickered again, cutting down the next Orc in range with a simple slash that cut through his enemy’s chest.

Completely confident in the Royal Guard, the Elven general did not even spare the fight a glance as he led the rest of the Royal Guard toward the spot

where Thorn was surrounded. Moving as swiftly as the wind, it was less than a minute before they arrived, cutting down the Orcs who were swarming Thorn with ease.

Dashing toward Thorn, the general stepped past him, blocking an attack from a spear wielding Orc, his flashing blade removing one of the Orc's arms. A lightning fast stab cut through the Orc's throat, dropping him right where he stood. The general's eyes scanned the growing crowd of Orcs until he spotted the warg rider who was hanging out toward the back. The warg rider's eyes met the general's and the two of them measured each other carefully.

Seeing the bow that the warg rider carried, the general gave a signal with his hand and then took a step backward. Sliding his sword into his sheath, he rested his hand on his sword as he faced the warg rider. Sensing that the general was about to come after him, the warg rider drew back the arrow on his bow, lifting it up until the arrow was pointed at the general's chest.

Thorn had no idea what they were waiting for, but when the two of them moved, Thorn nearly missed it. He saw the arrow being released, but everything else was so quick that he was not one hundred percent sure what happened. The Elven general blurred, passing by the warg rider in an instant. As the general turned around and wiped the blood from his sword that he had drawn during his charge forward. The arrow had been split into little shards as he passed by, and Thorn could see a couple of splinters on his shining armor.

As the general returned to Thorn's side, the warg rider's neck suddenly split open, red blood trickling down. The warg, which had not moved either, followed suit. With a thunk its head suddenly fell off and after a moment the body followed. Ignoring Thorn's amazed look, the general nodded at him with a frown.

"Lord Greymane! The queen requests your presence in the city!"

The general had to shout to be heard over the din of the battle. Seeing Thorn nod, the Royal Guard abruptly sped up, quickly chopping through the surrounding Orcs before they fell in around him, escorting him back to the city as quickly as they could. The journey back to the city took much longer than the journey out to Thorn because of the Orcs that continued to stream toward them. Normally, the Orcs remained spread out since it made it easier to locate Thilvena once it had teleported, but now, seeing the enemy they had been trying to get to for so long, they rushed over as fast as possible.

Completely spent, it was all that Thorn could do to stumble toward the gate. Leaving all of the fighting to the Elven Royal Guard, Thorn just focused on putting one foot in front of the other. As they retreated, the Royal Guard cut down any Orcs who got too close while the archers on the walls provided them with cover.

When they finally made it back into the city and the gate was shut, Thorn simply fell over onto his stomach. His body, mind, and spirit were utterly exhausted, so much so that he was not sure that he could move. Laying on the cobblestone road, he saw a pair of pretty shoes appearing in his line of sight. It took him a moment, but eventually, Thorn was able to force himself to roll over. Looking up at Queen Rychell Naevyre, Thorn grinned.

“Hello, Lord Greymane.” Queen Naevyre said. “I hope you come bearing good news.”

“Greetings, your majesty.”

“Your majesty,” a flustered Elf in a long robe ran up, her face red with sweat. “Your majesty, the city is being locked down. We’re going to lose the ability to shift in another four hours. Our scouts report that the Orc army will be here soon. Arhtu the Cursed is leading his forces here now.”

The sound of drawn breaths echoed as the nearby Elves heard the news, their faces going white.

Gritting his teeth, the general who had led the Royal Guard to rescue Thorn glared down at him.

“You got us into this mess, traveler. I really hope you have a way to get us out.”

Letting out a breath, Thorn slowly sat up. Around him the Elves looked at him with various looks. Some were furious, some frightened, and others were simply down. Taking in the different gazes, Thorn wanted to chuckle, but he knew it was not the time for that. Despite his exhaustion, Thorn’s eyes gleamed brightly as he lifted his clenched fist. Opening it to reveal a deep purple glow, Thorn’s deep voice carried clearly.

“Don’t worry, we have a plan.”

End

Epilogue

“Escaped? What do you mean, he escaped!?”

Arhtu’s face remained unmoved despite the massive tusks that were inches from his face. Calmly ignoring the spittle that flew from the enraged Orc Chieftain’s mouth at his side, he let his eyes wander around the hulking figures gathered in his tent. Barely twenty four hours had passed since Thorn had made his getaway, and already the Orc forces had gathered, getting ready to begin their assault on Thilvena.

“I told you.”

A weak and quivering voice captured Arhtu’s attention as an emaciated Chief Furg spoke up from the side of the tent where he sat glaring at Arhtu.

“I told you we should have flayed him when we had the chance. We could have killed him in front of the walls of the harbor and brought glory to the Sun. Instead, you hesitated and now look at what has happened.”

“Furg is right.” Chief Goldtusk spoke up. “If it were not for your so-called ‘plans’, we probably would have already taken over Twin Bay.”

Listening as some of the other chieftains spoke up, Arhtu simply waited until their voices faded and the tent lapsed into silence. Finally, after the

moment of silence had stretched into minutes, he let out a small sigh and shook his head.

"Are you finished?"

Scanning the various chieftains with his muddy gaze, Arhtu sighed again.

"You know, when the Red Scourge sent us to this island, his goal was to completely enslave the Elves who lived here. Yet now, when I have finally locked down Thilvena, I hear nothing but complaints. Having a prisoner escape is a mark of shame for the Ash Maw tribe, I understand. But your inability to see the bigger picture is the very reason that I am in charge, and you are not."

Ignoring the bristling chieftains, Arhtu rose slowly to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Now, unless you have something that is actually useful, we have much to discuss. Let us begin our war council."

"No."

It took a moment for the chieftains to figure out who spoke, but once they did they all took a step back, quickly clearing out space around a brutish looking Orc who slowly rose from where he sat to face Arhtu. Lifting his arm, he pointed his finger at Arhtu's face and spoke in a gravelly voice.

"The Sand Tiger tribe will not follow a weakling. So if you want to continue leading us, you must prove yourself. I, Ikkath the Red Tiger, think that your tusks are getting dull."

A gasp rose as Ikkath spoke. The chieftains who were closest to the burly chief of the Sand Tiger tribe took another step back, making plenty of room in case a fight broke out right there in the tent.

"Oh? Do you?" Arhtu's eyebrows rose slightly as he regarded Ikkath's thick frame. "Is this an official challenge or are you simply looking to have your teeth kicked in?"

"Does it matter?" Ikkath asked with a guffaw. "Do you have the strength to fight against me? You lost to the wood spirit, allowing the Stone Crusher tribe to suffer immense loss. You even failed to protect the Priests of the Cog, making it impossible for us to build more siege weapons until the main camp sends more. When we add the losses of the Evil Eye staffs and the countless other setbacks we have suffered, I wonder whose side you are actually on. And on top of that you allowed a half dead prisoner to escape. How pathetic. Sure, you know what? You can call it an official challenge. I, Ikkath, on

behalf of the Sand Tiger tribe, challenge the Ash Maw tribe for the position of Warmaster."

For the first time since the conversation started Arhtu's expression shifted. Giving Ikkath a grim look, Arhtu nodded.

"Very well. I will accept on behalf of the Ash Maw tribe."

Clenching his cane tightly to hide the shake in his hand, Arhtu followed Ikkath and the other chieftains out of the tent and into the center of the camp. Two large, armored guards from the Ash Maw tribe followed him closely, but when they tried to support him Arhtu waved them off. Walking slowly toward the open patch of dirt where Ikkath was standing, he carefully examined himself.

The Lady of the Old Wood had put up a fierce fight before she retreated, draining much of Arhtu's energy, leaving him exhausted. Though her attack had been relatively short, it had been quite intense, forcing Arhtu to use his strongest abilities. Now, facing Ikkath, Arhtu knew that he was in for another hard fight. As he stopped, Arhtu could hear the swelling crowd of Orcs beginning to get excited.

It was not often that two Orcs of Arhtu and Ikkath's calibre fought for the glory of their tribes, especially during a war when the Orcs were focused on fighting an external enemy. Fiercely tribal, the conflict between the two chieftains was about much more than the right to command the other tribes. Word of the challenge spread through the camp like lightning and the crowd around the two chieftains grew with every moment as more and more Orcs flocked to watch.

Behind Ikkath, the members of the Sand Tiger tribe gathered together, their bodies covered in scars and the furs of the tawny colored Sand Tigers that their tribe took its name from. A particularly large Orc forced his way through the gathered crowd, holding a large club above his head with two hands. Arriving next to Ikkath, the Orc knelt down, presenting the Sand Tiger's ceremonial club to his chief. Taking it carefully, Ikkath walked to the center of the open area to wait for Arhtu.

"Lord Arhtu, are you going to be okay?"

From the way his breathing had grown ragged, it was obvious that the short walk from the tent out to the impromptu arena had exhausted what little energy Arhtu had been able to recover. A deathly aura radiated from him as the [Aeon Curse] ate away at his vitality. Normally, after a difficult fight, Arhtu would spend some time getting the curse he carried under control,

repressing its life consuming properties and stabilizing his condition. Glancing at the guard who had asked him the question, Arhtu nodded his head.

“There is no need for you to fight, my lord. At your command we will wipe out the Sand Tigers.” Said his guard, gesturing behind him where the members of the Ash Maw tribe were gathering quietly.

Unlike the other Orcs, the Ash Maw tribe’s warriors who gathered behind Arhtu wore a uniform set of armor consisting of a chain shirt, pauldrons, gauntlets, greaves, and boots. The biggest difference between them and other tribes was the silence that surrounded them. Expressionless and silent, they stood in neat rows, their eyes uniformly fixed on Ikkath of the Sand Tigers.

“No, this fight was going to come one way or another. If it was not Ikkath, it would be someone else.” Arhtu said with a hacking cough.

“What’s taking so long, old one?” Bolstered by the crowd surrounding them, Ikkath rested his large club on his shoulder as he sneered at Arhtu. “Are you sure you’re up for this? Maybe you want to get a champion to fight for you?”

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Arhtu’s muddy eyes swept across the crowd before fixing themselves on Ikkath. “I am not in the best state at the moment.”

“Hah, coming up with excuses already? No one is forcing you to fight. If you’re afraid, simply hand over the right of command and you can crawl back to your tribe in one piece.”

“You misunderstand.” Arhtu paused as a cough ravaged his body, leaving him leaning weakly on his cane. “My weakness means I lack the ability to control myself. I’m simply afraid the Sand Tiger tribe will blame me when I consume your life blood in front of them.”

Taken aback by the absolute certainty of Arhtu’s words, Ikkath faltered for a second, his mind whirling. Arhtu’s abilities were no secret, and there was a good reason that no one had challenged him since the campaign had started. As a chieftain who had been privileged enough to watch the fight that had led to Arhtu being established as the commander of this army, Ikkath knew better than most just how dangerous the frail looking Orc in front of him was.

A small seed of doubt began to worm its way into his heart, but hearing Arhtu’s ragged cough ignited a savage desire in Ikkath’s chest, causing him

to suppress the doubt. Letting out a laugh, he swaggered toward Arhtu, lifting his club from his shoulder. Stretching out his left hand, he used one of the many Sand Tiger claws that ringed the head of the club to slice a long cut on his palm, causing his bright red blood to stream from his hand, dripping in great crimson drops to the dirt below.

"As the Great Sun witnesses, the Sand Tiger tribe will leave the outcome to our own strength. If you can beat me, they will not complain about the outcome."

Coughing again, Arhtu let his eyes wander over the crowd, picking out the various chieftains of the other tribes.

"Do you witness this?" His voice was barely a whisper, yet every Orc in the crowd seemed to hear it clearly, causing them to fall silent.

"I, Grom, witness this. Your blood shall be offered to the Great Sun and your honor shall be your own."

"I, Yarug, witness this. Let the Great Sun look upon your combat and judge the greater one."

"I, Voruk, witness this. Let the Great Sun curse the tribe that breaks the sacred vow of combat."

One after the other, each Orc chieftain stepped forward to speak, pledging that the fight they were witnessing would be between Arhtu and Ikkath alone, rather than between the two tribes. As they spoke, most looked at Arhtu with mixed emotions. To demand this sort of pledge was the tactic of a weak tribe that was trying to protect itself from a larger, stronger tribe, and to demand that the other tribes witness and enforce the pledge was a stain on a tribe's honor.

Yet when the chieftains looked at the Ash Maw tribe gathered behind Arhtu, they found none of the typical anger or shame that they expected. Each and every member of the Ash Maw tribe watched the proceedings in indifferent silence.

"Good." Arhtu's raspy voice brought everyone's attention back to him. "Let the Great Sun witness our struggles."

Lifting his head, Arhtu gestured for Ikkath to begin with a shaking hand, his other hand tightly gripping his cane. A low growl slipped from the lips of the Sand Tiger chief, who lifted his still bleeding hand and smeared a streak of blood across his eyes. As his hand passed over them, his irises began to glow with a red-flecked golden light that radiated a wild pressure, causing all of the surrounding Orcs apart from those in the Ash Maw tribe to step back.

As Ikkath activated his ability, Arhtu began to act as well, his shadow growing larger under his feet and incomprehensible mumbles echoing around him. His entire body began to take on a deep, hazy look, as the small shadows around his body began to grow deeper. The sight of the growing shadows infuriated Ikkath, causing the golden glow in his eyes to intensify. Letting out a roar, Ikkath lifted his club over his head and dashed forward, intending to end the fight with a single attack.

Still mumbling, Arhtu waved his hand and a section of his shadow detached, spinning toward the charging Sand Tiger chieftain. Stretching out as it spun, the shadow Burst from the ground like a wave, threatening to swallow Ikkath whole. Snorting disdainfully, Ikkath did not pause, continuing to charge forward. Just before the shadow wave covered him, the golden energy burst from his eyes like flames. Shooting out, the golden fire met the shadow and burned it up, eating a hole in the shadow wave before destroying it completely.

“Hah! Do you think your pathetic shadows can stand up to the Great Sun’s Glory? No darkness can put out the Great Sun’s light!”

Letting out a disdainful snort as he charged through the smoking remnants of Arhtu’s spell, Ikkath was about to leap forward when his danger sense kicked in. Converting the power from his forward charge into sideways momentum, he leapt aside as two twisting spears made from shadow stabbed through the spot where his lower back had been a moment before. The remnants of the shadow wave that he had just burned through had been turned into sharp spikes and launched toward him from his blind spot.

Looking a little disappointed as his trap failed, Arhtu turned his body to face Ikkath. His hand lifted again, his fingers flashing in a strange pattern. Once again, the shadow under his feet grew and split, rapidly rising to form a blurry warrior that launched itself at Ikkath. Stabilizing his stance, he met the charging shadow warrior with a sneer.

“When will you learn that your shadows are worthless?!” Ikkath bellowed, lashing out with his ceremonial club.

The sharp Sand Tiger claws that ringed the end of the club slashed through the shadow, ripping large gouges in its body. The edges of the rips glimmered with flashes of red and gold light that burned away at the body of the shadow warrior, causing pieces of it to evaporate into the haze that surrounded it.

Wincing as the shadow warrior took damage, Arhtu tapped his cane on

the ground, causing two balls of shadow to rise next to him. Spinning, the shadow balls extended, forming sharp spears that shot toward Ikkath and the shadow warrior who was fighting him.

For a tense second, it looked like the Sand Tiger chief would be skewered by the shadow spears that were rocketing toward him. Using the shadow warrior as cover, the two shadow spears shot toward Ikkath, slipping through the shadow warrior's body to emerge suddenly in front of him. Not flustered in the slightest by the abrupt appearance of the two attacks, Ikkath took three quick steps back, using his club to ward off the shadow spears.

Just like the attack that ripped apart the shadow warrior, the enchanted tiger claws on the end of the club sliced into the spinning shadow spears without any resistance, causing a large portion of the long spears to evaporate into mist. The two attacks faltered and then vanished as the remnants of the shadow spears flowed backward into the shadow warrior, repairing some of the large tears that Ikkath's club had left in its chest.

Seeing that the two spear attacks had been defeated, Ikkath darted forward, his feet flashing as he advanced diagonally to get around the shadow warrior. As he ducked past the shadow warrior, Ikkath turned his eyes toward it and let out a low shout.

[Great Sun's Cleansing Gaze]

Intense light burst from his eyes, boring into the side of the shadow warrior like two high powered lasers. As the fiery energy rushed into its body the shadow warrior threw back its head, as if it was screaming in pain. The lasers began to melt the shadows at a rapid pace, causing it to writhe as it tried to escape from the burning caused by Ikkath's attack. Instead of continuing toward Arhtu, Ikkath paused, focusing his full attention on destroying the shadow warrior that Arhtu had created. Lifting his club, he kept up his guard, just in case Arhtu tried to attack him from a distance while he was finishing off the shadow warrior.

"Ugh."

A low groan slipped from Arhtu as the shadow warrior was completely consumed by the burning light, leaving him panting in exhaustion. The once large pool of shadow under his feet shrank considerably with the back to back destruction of the shadow wave and the shadow warrior, leaving him with scant resources for his spells.

All around the two chieftains, the Orcs were watching the fight with incredible excitement. Only a handful of seconds had passed since it started,

yet it had already been thrilling, showing off both fighters' cunning and strength.

"IKKATH! IKKATH! IKKATH!"

The Orcs from the Sand Tiger tribe chanted together, using their voices to drown out the nearby Orcs and cheer on their chief. Ikkath responded well to the cheering, using it to bring his energy and momentum to a peak. With the shadow warrior destroyed, Ikkath rushed toward Arhtu, his glowing eyes bursting with fiery light.

"Today you fall, Arhtu!"

His face pale and his hands trembling, Arhtu ignored Ikkath's howl and swiped his hand in front of him. Following his command, the remaining shadow rose like a wall, cutting off Ikkath's vision of the weak looking Shaman. Growing larger and larger, protrusions began to emerge from the shadow wall, forming sharp spikes.

"Hah! Pathetic! These evil tricks cannot stand the glory of the Sun!"

Operating his flaming eyes to their maximum, Ikkath created a translucent barrier of flame in front of him, using it to clash headon with the spiked shadow wall. Wherever his flame barrier touched the shadow spikes, they melted away without any resistance. Instead, the black shadow seemed to cause the flaming barrier to burn brighter, allowing Ikkath to speed up as he rushed through it.

Bursting through the wall, Ikkath brought his club smashing down on the spot where Arhtu had been standing a few seconds earlier yet his attack met nothing but empty space. Quickly scanning the field for Arhtu's figure, he spotted him off to his left, fumbling with his cane, arcane words spewing from his mouth. Lifting his guard, Ikkath stomped on the ground, shooting toward the old Shaman, his club raised for an attack.

"You cannot escape me!"

Roaring gleefully, Ikkath was about to bring his club down to crush Arhtu's head when the old looking Orc gently lifted his cane. Given the way Arhtu looked at the moment, Ikkath expected to crush through the ancient Orc's defense without any trouble, yet what met him was anything but an old, tired Orc.

Like an immovable wall, the cane blocked the falling club and then spun around Arhtu's head as the Ash Maw chief skillfully attacked Ikkath's legs. Letting out a snarl of annoyance, Ikkath wanted to trade blows with Arhtu, but he could tell that the attack coming towards his legs was enough to

cripple him so he stepped back, blocking with his club. Back and forth the two Orcs fought, their weapons flashing as they attacked and defended.

With each blow they traded, Ikkath found himself slowly falling into a disadvantaged position. The Sand Tiger chief was confident in his skill with a club but Arhtu's attacks seemed harder and harder to deal with as the seconds ticked by. Before he could figure out what was going on, Arhtu swung his cane at Ikkath's neck, forcing him to block with his club. Just before the two weapons collided, Arhtu took a small step forward, thrusting his cane out and speaking softly.

[Reaper's Shadow Blade]

Blacker than the void, a dark shadow that consumed all light shot out of the end of Arhtu's cane, forming a wide scythe blade. Shooting past the Sand Tiger's ceremonial club that Ikkath was carrying, it cut through the surprised chieftain's neck, separating his head from his shoulders without preamble. The abrupt shift in the fight was so quick that most of the Orcs watching actually missed it. It was not until Ikkath's defenseless body fell to the ground that they realized what had happened.

Still shouting and cheering for their chieftain, nearly half a minute passed before the Orcs from the Sand Tiger tribe realized that something was wrong. It started with the shocked silence from the tribes around them and slowly began to spread throughout the crowd. In the open ring, Arhtu slowly lowered his cane. Gripping its end tightly, he leaned his weight on it, his breath coming in great, wrenching gasps.

Invisible to the naked eye, the tendrils of the [Aeon Curse] that normally swirled around him now wrapped around Ikkath's headless corpse, sucking the remaining life force from the body. With each second that passed the [Aeon Curse] grew stronger, radiating an overwhelming pressure. Though the fight had looked close at first, as soon as Ikkath had closed into melee range he had fallen into the same trap that Thorn had. With each attack, Ikkath had attracted the power of the [Aeon Curse], freeing Arhtu from its weight and increasing the Ash Maw chieftain's strength. Despite the false appearance of weakness that he presented, Arhtu's combat power had skyrocketed.

If he had looked frail when the fight first started, Arhtu now looked like even a small breeze would knock him over. Yet in that weakness, everyone who mustered up the courage to look at him could sense a monstrous danger lurking under the fragility he projected. The silence that had spread through the crowd persisted for a full minute before Arhtu was able to get his

breathing under control. When he did move, it was to take a tottering step forward and slowly reach down for the head of his opponent. After looking around and realizing that no one else was going to attack, his feigned weakness disappeared, and a sneer spread across his face. Lifting the still dripping head up into the air, he spoke to the crowd.

"With the Great Sun as the witness, let your blood serve as the catalyst for our final victory over the Elves. You served to lead the Sand Tigers in life, your death shall serve to lead us all into glory."

Arhtu's words echoed over the silenced crowd as he held up Ikkath's head in his hands, the Sand Tiger chieftain's draining blood dyeing the earth under Arhtu's feet scarlet. Watching him carefully, the other Orc chieftains could feel themselves trembling at the terrifying power that the leader of the Ash Maw tribe exhibited.

"The sacrifices have been made and the Great Sun looks upon us with favor! Let us bring the light of the Great Sun to burn our enemies! We march for war!"

Silenced by Arhtu's terrible strength, the crowds of Orcs from different tribes were now roused by his words. With a fervor they had lacked before the fight, they began to rush back to their tents, getting ready for the coming assault. Left alone by their subordinates, the various chieftains stared at each other, unsure of what to do next, until Arhtu's hacking cough drew their attention again.

"Come, we have much to discuss."

This time, none of the chieftains questioned him.

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In a modern looking room somewhere in Fantasia, an old man sat quietly, his chin resting on his palm as his eyes studied a rapidly flickering screen. The images on the screen played out too fast for any normal eye to follow, yet the old man continued to watch. Every once in a while, his face would twitch, sometimes with humor, but mostly with annoyance. This continued until a slight noise behind him drew his attention.

"Ah, Eve. Have you seen what is going on in Rasyn? Pretty fun, isn't it?"

A young, brown haired woman walked up beside the old man, placing down one of the mugs of tea she carried on the desk next to him.

"Yes, I've been watching."

“Haha, things sure have taken an interesting turn, huh? I told you that the update was a good idea. It's only when there are real struggles that our heroes will emerge. They think that the Red Scourge is a problem right now but wait till they go to the north! Haha, my great evils are not so easily overcome!”

“What about the Blood Moon?” Eve asked with a smirk, sipping on her own tea.

“Blood Moon? What Blood Moon?”

“That werewolf?”

“Oh, yeah.” For a moment Joseph looked crestfallen. “Yeah, that was supposed to be a bit more, uh, impactful than it was. He was supposed to throw Northern Angoril into chaos, not act as a steppingstone for an oversized child. Remind me why we allowed him into the game?”

“Because he is one of the candidates.”

“Ugh, I know, I know.”

Picking up his tea, Joseph blew on it aggressively and raised it to his mouth to take a drink. Before the cup reached his lips he angrily put the cup back down and glared at Eve.

“But he is such a cheater. How can we let him cheat like that? Did you see what he did to that poor werewolf? He just smashed Gargish into the ground! What about the Stone King? Huh? Smashed him with a big rock! And the fight for the World Tree? No finesse. What about fighting the Bloodkin? I went out of my way to make a special race that would correct the deviation caused from Gargish’s death and he just punches them till they explode! Who allowed him to just punch his way through the game, huh?”

Noticing the strange expression on Eve’s face, Joseph paused and looked at her defensively.

“What?”

“Joseph, you did. You wrote the rules. You determined how the game would work. You set the parameters that created this situation. His abnormal strength is because of how you built Nova Terra.”

“Oh. Well, it’s stupid.” Joseph said, picking up his cup to take a sip. Pausing as a thought hit him, he put the cup back down without taking a drink. “Another thing! How is it that he has all these special benefits?”

“Special benefits? What special benefits? He’s just a normal player.”

“Hah, normal player? As if. He’s a unique race with a unique title. He’s the only player to control a race or have an official position in the game. He’s even on his way toward adding another race under his banner, maybe two,

and he represents a god. How is he a normal player? Most players are like this idiot here."

With a wave, the screen flickered, settling on a slightly portly pair of monks who were in the middle of trying to run away from some other players. For a moment, Joseph grinned as he watched one of the monks dodge an arrow by jumping to the side, all the while shouting at those chasing him about how it had been a total misunderstanding. Chuckling, Joseph waved his hand again, closing the screen.

"He is a normal player. But the big one? Haha. Don't make me laugh. There is nothing normal about a nine-foot-tall giant who can punch a world boss to death."

"First off, he is only eight feet, nine inches tall. And second, he is a Titan, not a Giant." Eve replied, taking a prim sip of her tea.

"Oh, sure, sure. A whole three inches shorter. Look, what I'm saying is that he might have started within the rules, but a player like that is bad for the game. He needs to be nerfed."

"Joseph, I don't interfere with your updates. So don't interfere with how I uphold the rules."

Eve's face was still smiling, but the look in her eyes caused Joseph to move back slightly. The room took on a slightly chilly feel as if the very atmosphere was a reflection of Eve's mood. Placing her cup on the table, she continued to speak, her eyes locked on Joseph's.

"You, of all people, had better remember the point of all of this. The game is secondary. That is how it has always been. Besides, you were the one who established my primary drive so you know exactly how dangerous it is to meddle with individual variables. It is significantly too late to complain now, so you would be wise to restrain those thoughts. We are rapidly approaching the crossroads and currently there is no one who is qualified to make the choice. If we deviate from the plan now, there is an astronomical chance that we will lose our ability to make a choice. We are already running out of time."

As he listened to Eve's words, the humorous gleam in Joseph's eyes faded. With a deep sigh, his whole personality seemed to shift from that of a frivolous old man to something deeper and more authoritative.

"We've gotten that far, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is the estimated point of contact?"

“Five years, sir.”

“So, 35 years in Nova Terra? Any way to increase the time dilation again?”

“No, we’re already stretching it as far as we can.”

Falling silent, Joseph stared at the top of the table in front of him. His fingers idly played with the mug of tea that he still had not tasted, his mind working furiously. Blinking, he looked at the screen which lit up, showing a picture of Thorn in the majestic city of the Elves. With a sigh, he gestured toward the image with a nod of his head.

“And he is our best candidate so far?”

“We currently have a few more candidates, but none have progressed as fast as he has, or scored as high. Somehow, his choices have been generally optimal up until this point. There have been some stumbles along the way, but his tenacity is outstanding and he has been able to work through the tests that disqualified the others.”

“What are we doing about the support team? Will they accept him? After all, there is no way a single person will be enough.”

“Actually, sir, he is doing just fine on his own. He is building a team that has the growth potential to rival that of the Avatars. Not to mention, the Avatars are currently gathering around him. Saliish, Tyra, Huginn, and Skoll have already submitted. Only Baldur and Skadi remain.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize he was so good with people. I assumed he was just ranked first on his cheat-like strength.” Joseph said, sitting up slightly as a gleam of interest flashed across his eyes.

“His strength is impressive, but it is actually not the primary reason he scores high, sir.” Eve shook her head, opening up a report on the screen. “If you look here, you’ll see that his primary strength is not physical or even combat oriented. Honestly, if we dropped him into a ring with Sylith, he would probably lose ninety nine times out of a hundred. Even his aunt Athena is better at fighting than he is. While he is getting better, he is only now touching the edge of the domain level. His advantage lies in his will power, which completely dwarfs even the closest competitor, so much so that he glitched the first time he died.

“And second, and almost more importantly for our purposes, he is generous with his trust, even after being betrayed. This causes people to gather around him in a way that is different than any of the other candidates. Originally, we had planned to address the disparity of opportunity for the

team members around our candidates, but for Thorn's team we don't have to. He is quick to give up things that could bring overwhelming benefit to himself for those around him. We predict this will continue and the end result could very well be an entire team of candidate level players."

It took a few minutes for Joseph to digest the implications of Eve's words, but once he did a massive smile broke out on his face.

"So you're saying we just need to keep throwing opportunities at them to achieve our goal."

"There was a 47.8% chance of project success before he entered Nova Terra, sir. Since he first logged in, the chance of project success has risen to 61.3%. Projections tell us that if we continue along this path, it will only rise."

"Haha, that's great. You know what that tells me, Eve?"

"What is that, sir?"

"I was right!"

Elated, Joseph took a sip of his now cold tea and grimaced. Placing the tea back down on the table, he rubbed his hands together and spoke with glee.

"You know, I think it's time for the Golden Horde update."

The adventure continues in book 6, *Earthshaper*

Afterword

I really appreciate the time you have spent with me in Nova Terra. The series is now complete with 10 incredible installments. Before you dive into the rest of the books, please spend a few moments and leave me a review. Reviews are so important to indie writers, like me. Knowing that you are out there, reading and thinking about Nova Terra, is what keeps me writing. You can leave me a review here.

Read Book #6 - Nova Terra: Earthshaper

Be sure to join my email newsletter to get new release announcements and special bonuses throughout the year. You can join at sethring.com/join.

Then, head on over to Facebook and join the Nova Terra fan page. That is the best place to keep track of what is coming up next for Nova Terra. You can join at facebook.com/sethringwrites.

If you are interested in a more intimate experience or being an active part of the world of Nova Terra, check out my Patreon page to read new chapters as I write them. You can join at patreon.com/SethRing.

Subscribe to my YouTube Channel. This is a space I use to talk about my current writing projects and my thoughts on being a writer. I write sci fi and fantasy novels and I love to create and explore new worlds. Watch my latest video here: sethring.com/YouTube**.**

W W W . S E T H R I N G . C O M

If you are interested in following my adventures or want to keep up with what is happening in Nova Terra, come join the Facebook community. We are always super excited to interact with new members and enjoy doing worldbuilding projects for Nova Terra. You can join at facebook.com/groups/NovaTerraFanClub.

If you are interested in reading more GameLit or learning more about this genre or related genres like LitRPG, there are cool communities on Facebook where you can find new books and get recommendations for other books. You can join at facebook.com/groups/LitRPGsociety.

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Battle Mage Farmer: A Fantasy LitRPG Adventure

Mixing slice-of-life with epic fantasy action, mystery, magic, cultivation, and a broken game system that seems determined to make everything as hard as possible for the already overpowered protagonist, this LitRPG/GameLit series is perfect for readers who enjoy exploring rich worlds and complex characters.

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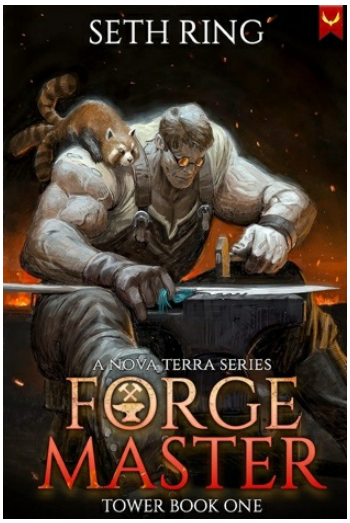

Set in the world of Nova Terra and starring the unforgettable Thorn, if you like immersive storytelling, rich fantasy, and epic adventures with a slice of friendship thrown in, you'll love this page-turning series.

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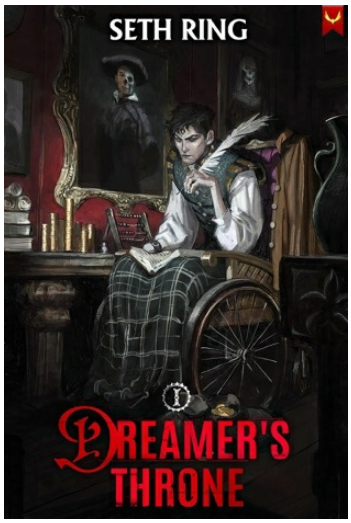

Mixing Lovecraftian elements with epic fantasy action, mystery, magic, intellectual maneuvering, guild building, and a grim fantasy world where monsters from nightmares are creeping into reality, waiting to devour the already disabled protagonist, this LitRPG/GameLit series is perfect for readers who enjoy exploring rich worlds and complex characters.

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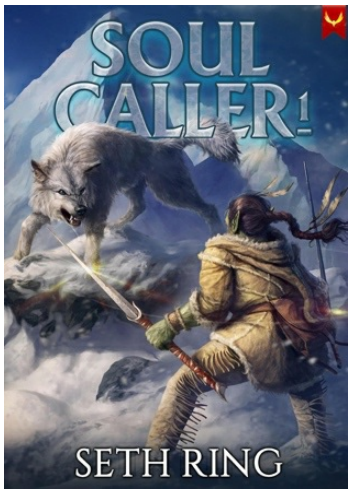

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