

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

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

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

The demon queen. Her armor smoldered with embers that had once been roaring flames, and the dark, leathery wings sprouting from her back were shredded to bloody ribbons.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end, they’d both died.

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

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

Rude light flashed before his eyes.

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

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

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

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

The world collapsed.

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

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

But, like all things, the peace ended.

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

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

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

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

Empty.

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

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

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

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

What was that black gemstone? I oversaw the forging of my armor with my own eyes, but the gemstone was clearly embedded within it. It was clearly some sort of magical bomb. Perhaps it was a failsafe to destroy the Demon Queen even if I died? But... why wouldn't the Guild have told me about it? That gem didn't feel like any form of magic we possess either. Is it possible I was betrayed and someone in the guild was working with the Demons? That wouldn't make sense, though. The explosion should have killed both me and the Demon Queen. I still don't know how I survived. And what is Sunset? That was not a title I had.

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

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

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

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

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

I won.

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

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

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

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

I suppose I can't blame them for not recognizing me. I don't look like what I once did. There's no point bothering to convince them. It may actually be better that people don't recognize me. Maybe I can finally rest and take advantage of the peace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stared in disbelief.

How could they have recovered a body when I'm right here? Why would they lie about that? It would have been easy to say a failsafe destroyed both of us, if that was what it was. But, if they aren't mentioning it... damn them to hell. The Adventurer's Guild betrayed me. That's why there was a trap in my own armor. They never planned for me to survive this war.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So it did end?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The guild – or someone in it – tried to kill me. They're the only ones that ever had access to my armor other than me. They made the damn thing. Why, I don't know, but I can't let them find out I still live. Every single aspect of my armor should have been checked over by dozens of people, which means all of them had to have been involved somehow. Hell, the head of the guild literally handed me the armor and confirmed it was prepared and ready on the day I set out for what should have been my final battle. I don't know how deep this runs, but I can't take any risks.

My very existence proves their lies, and they'll definitely kill again to keep me silent. When I was at the peak of my power, perhaps I could have handled them. But now... I'll need to lay low until I can regain my strength.

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

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

Name: Arwin Tyrr

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

Skills:

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

Titles:

[Scourge] – *You have faced an entire army in combat and emerged victorious. The strength of your physical blows can be intensified by up to a factor of one hundred at the cost of Magical Energy.*

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

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

Achievements:

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

Arwin's hand dropped. His class and skills were gone, replaced by what seemed to be some form of craftsman class. His Tier was back to Apprentice. The vast majority of his Titles and Achievements – gone as well. On top of that, he'd gained a new Title that forced him to consume magical items in order to survive.

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

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

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

I'm finally free. And, so long as the guild doesn't find out I survived, I can tear them down from the inside out... after I rebuild my own life. They'll pay, but I'm not dying for a cause again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I might be in trouble.

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't have time for these damn games.

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

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

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

“That dagger magic?” Arwin asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You," Arwin growled, straightening back up. The gnawing in his stomach was back and stronger than ever, but he couldn't afford to give it heed. He didn't remember how long he had left.

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

"Yes?" the girl squeaked.

"Smithy. Where is it?"

"I – I'll show you," she stammered. "Please don't kill me."

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

“It’s this way,” she said hesitantly.

“Lead. Quickly, now.”

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

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

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

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

“T-this building,” the girl said, pointing at a crumbling stone storefront. What had once been a window was now just a hole, the grey brick around it badly cracked. Weeds had tried to take root around the building, but they’d all withered and died.

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

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

Fragments of dust and rancid wood flew up around him as the door crunched, but Arwin didn't care. His eyes scanned the dust-covered interior of the building, instantly landing on the back, just beyond a counter.

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

What greeted him was far from inspiring. Piles of scrap metal were piled in the corners, and not a single part of it looked like it had been touched in years. And yet, tools still hung from the forge's walls. An anvil sat in its center, beside a pair of rotted buckets that had fallen in on themselves.

Beyond them was the forge, cobbled brick leading up to the crumbled chimney that he'd seen from above. There was still dry wood within it, blackened from being partially burnt. It wasn't much to work with, but it was all Arwin had, and he'd be damned if he went out without giving his all.

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

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

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

There.

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

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

And again.

The fourth time, his efforts were rewarded. A tiny spark leapt as he struck the flint, landing on one of the dry, burnt pieces of wood. Perhaps fortune smiled on Arwin, or perhaps the gods were smiling on him. Regardless of the reason, the spark took.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And yet, a bracelet it still was.

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

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

Achievement: [The First Step] has been earned.

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

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

Metal Bracelet: Garbage Quality

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

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

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

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

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

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

“This is the guy that roughed Blin up?” one of the men asked, glancing at the largest with an uncomfortable frown. “Boss, I—”

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

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

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

Heat coiled in Arwin’s fists, and a cold smile split his lips. He could think properly again. “Get out, you corny shits. I value my solitude.”

“I’m the one who calls the shots here,” the large man said, pointing his sword at Arwin. Magic crackled down the blade, igniting it with hissing yellow lightning. “And you’re paying in blood for what you did.”

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Murderer!” the boss screamed, charging at Arwin. Lightning crackled around his body and leapt from his sword, arcing toward Arwin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Because you helped me. That’s how it works.”

Arwin nearly laughed, but he caught himself at the last second. If that was actually how the world worked, then it would have been a far better place. If that was how the world worked, the guild wouldn’t have betrayed him after he’d given his life for them.

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

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

“Reya.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know. Something. A gang?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mutually beneficial? How so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But I thought–”

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

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

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

Is she screwing with me?

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was time to forge.

Chapter 4

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

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

Practice makes perfect.

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

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

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

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

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

It's hideous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Saluting."

"Don't."

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

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

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

That fast?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A dagger sat on the anvil before him, and it actually looked like a dagger. It was plain, but it was a dagger. Before Arwin could so much as smile, he felt something stir within him as the Mesh burst forth.

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

Your Tier has raised by 1 rank.

[Broken Bearer of Last Light] has been consumed.

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

Dagger: Poor Quality

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

"Fascinating," Arwin breathed, holding the dagger out before him and watching the ember light reflect off its blade. He'd seen many weapons in his years of work. He'd wielded artifacts that could topple cities and tossed them aside when even more powerful ones came along – but not once had he ever seen one that lived, much less had the potential to change. It wasn't much now, but with enough time, it could become quite an interesting weapon.

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

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

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

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

Name: Arwin Tyrr

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

New Skill Choice Available.

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

You may select one of the following skills.

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

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

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

Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing.

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

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

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

“Careful!” Reya yelled.

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

“What?” Arwin asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“One and a half?”

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

“I didn’t hit him that hard.”

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

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

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

Arwin nodded. “Okay. Anyone else?”

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

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

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

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

“Were any of the passersby interesting?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's this?"

"If you're going to go around threatening people, you should have something that lets you back it up," Arwin said. The dagger had an interesting effect, but he wasn't about to go around stabbing people to see how well it worked. Besides, its make was still a little shoddy. It

was a far cry from the beautiful weaponry and armor that he envisioned himself making in the future. “I’d suggest finding a way to conceal it, though. I’d be embarrassed if people thought I was going around selling sub-par equipment.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Master.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Commander?”

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

“Rule 1?”

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

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

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

Chapter 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey! You there!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If anything, the woman just looked confused. Her brow furrowed and she pursed her lips.

“Oh. Is that too much?”

“Yes, it’s too much!”

“What about a silver?”

“You aren’t supposed to be guessing about this kind of thing. Why are you asking me?”

Reya asked. She scanned the road, but it didn’t look like anyone else was there. It was just the two of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figures.

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

“Whoa. This isn’t bad.”

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

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

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

“So it did. What was the secret?”

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

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

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

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

When Reya turned back, the feeling was gone.

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

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

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

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

Tavern my ass. More like a dungeon.

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

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

Chapter 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?” Arwin asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m going to bed,” Arwin said. “Don’t rob me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Short Sword: Garbage Quality

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

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

"I suppose this is the detrimental quality my skill talked about."

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

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

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

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

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

“You're awake!”

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

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

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

“Not really,” Reya said. “Are you hungry? I didn’t get food for you, but…”

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

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

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

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

Arwin’s eyes narrowed. “Out with it.”

“I, uh, may have killed someone.”

Chapter 8

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

“Uh… yeah.”

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

“A member of the thieves’ guild.”

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

“A large one?”

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

Arwin pursed his lips. “I’m not seeing the part where this ended with you stabbing someone.”

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

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

“In the pile with the others.”

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

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

“Why are you giving it to me? You’re the one that killed him.”

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

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

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

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

Arwin grunted.

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

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

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

Arwin shrugged. “Suit yourself. Try to make sure nobody gets their hands on the sword I left in the smithy. It’s liable to blow up the moment someone starts swinging it, and I have no idea how big the explosion will be. It would be unfortunate if my smithy got damaged any further.”

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

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

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

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

A small crowd bustled around the street. There weren’t too many people, especially compared to the capitol, but there were still more than enough to make the city feel alive.

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

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

Weird.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arwin reached up and touched his cheek. His fingers came away gritty and he grimaced.

“Ah. Yes, that would do it. No matter. Do you have metal rods?”

“Rods? You don’t want a weapon?”

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

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

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

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

“You’re a shameless one, aren’t you?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Noted,” Arwin said, gathering up everything he’d bought. “Thanks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I suppose I should have expected this.

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

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

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

“Who're you?” one of the men asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You stabbed someone.”

“They had it coming.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 9

It had been a long time since Arwin had last thought about dungeons, but he was surprised to find that the word brought up warm memories. He’d spent the majority of his earlier

years in this world within the dungeons together with the men and women that had once been his friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am a smith, yes. What of it?"

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

I don't have any mere crafting class, though. I've got a Unique one, and I still have some of my titles. With a little preparation, I think we could handle the dungeon. When I was still the Champion, training would have handled that. But now... no. Training wouldn't hurt, but it's not what I need. If I want to become strong again, I need to build myself a set of equipment so strong that it can let me keep up with the combat classes.

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

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

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

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

“So it’s definitely a *we* thing now?” Reya asked, giving him a cheeky smile.

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

“You aren’t going to make me share more about myself?”

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

Shifting uncomfortably, Reya glanced to the side. Arwin’s eyes narrowed. “What else have you done?”

“You might have to be more specific.”

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

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

“Arwin?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t get mad, but I lost count.”

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

“What do you mean?”

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

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

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

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

“You’re not kicking me out?”

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

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

“Arwin.”

“Right. Sorry.”

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

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

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

Days flitted by, and the thieves' guild still had yet to return. That was perfectly fine with Arwin. He barely left his forge, and Reya proved to be capable in more ways than one. She didn't just bring him food – she also woke him up in the mornings and made sure he went to sleep early enough to avoid passing out for another few days at once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He took a slightly curved metal tube that he'd formed the previous night and slid it over the tang of the blade before taking the whole thing over to the hearth and sticking it into the flames.

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

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

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

Achievement: [More than Average] has been earned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 10

Short Sword: Average Quality

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

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

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

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

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

“Staring is impolite,” Arwin said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll keep my eyes out.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Enjoy!” she said cheerfully.

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

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

Chapter 11

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His mouth opened, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to ask. He wasn't sure what he *could* ask. His hand shifted, moving toward the hilt of his sword. But, before he could touch it, he paused. The moment his hand touched the hilt of his blade, everything would return to how it had been.

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

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

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

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

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

He'd made his move. The sword hung at his side like a brick of lead, but Arwin made no moves to draw it. For years, he'd fought. For years, he'd tried to kill the woman before him. And

now, the proverbial blade was in her hands. If she wanted to keep their fight going, then she'd have to make the next blow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A lot stronger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Which is why we’ll go out hunting.”

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

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

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

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

Chapter 12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It's not working,” Reya said.

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

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

“We're not doing that right now.”

“Why not? It's faster.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m sure someone does.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Arwin?" Reya asked.

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

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

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

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

“Because I realized this isn’t what I want to do,” Arwin said. “I’m glad nobody showed up. I have no desire to outfit more Adventurers that I don’t know – and selling subpar work rubs me the wrong way the more I think about it. When you make someone a weapon, aren’t they basically putting their life in your hands?”

“That seems a bit extreme. It’s just a weapon, and everything is about how the weapon is used, not what the weapon is.”

“To a degree, yes. But when you buy weapons or armor from someone, it means you’re trusting that they’ll hold. Your smith holds your life in their hands. Imagine if your dagger shatters midway through a fight against a powerful monster.”

Or if your smith plants a magical bomb in your armor.

“I guess I can see what you’re saying,” Reya allowed. She glanced over her shoulder at the receding market, then back to Arwin. “But what do we do about money? I thought–”

“We’ll earn it the proper way,” Arwin replied. “Forget selling trash or unstable magical weapons. We’re going hunting. Now.”

“But we don’t have any equipment or healing potions!” Reya exclaimed. She quickly realized she’d raised her voice too loud and lowered it back to a whisper. “Without classes and gear, there’s no way we’ll survive.”

“You have a dagger,” Arwin pointed out. He tapped the hilt of his sword. “And I have a sword. All we have to do is hit the monsters harder than they hit us.”

“You’ll have to forgive me when I say that I think the chances of that aren’t very likely. What about the monsters that are faster than we are? It doesn’t matter how hard we can hit them if we can’t land a blow first.”

“That’s simple,” Arwin replied with a shrug. “Just hit them first.”

Reya let out a series of displeased mutters, but she didn’t say anything else. The two of them continued out of the market, following the side streets until they drew up to the exit of the city.

It was still manned by a guard, but the man didn’t give them so much as a second glance as they passed him by. Once they’d put some distance between themselves and the city entrance, Arwin nodded to Reya.

“You know a little bit about the surrounding area, right?”

“Some,” Reya allowed.

“Great. Take us to the nearest area where monsters congregate. I trust you know of one?”

“I know of the dungeon. There are a lot of monsters around there, but the thieves’ guild is definitely watching it. I think there’s a valley that’s just a few hours away that we could try – but I’m telling you, we’re both going to get killed.”

“And yet, here you are,” Arwin said. “If you actually thought we were going to die, would you be here with me?”

Reya heaved a sigh and stepped off the beaten path, starting along the ankle-high grass and down the sloping hill. Arwin followed after her, the large bundle of weapons still slung over his shoulder.

The trip across the rolling hills took a little under two hours. Little was spoken throughout it, but Arwin didn’t mind. He enjoyed the sanctum of his own mind, and it was a nice day. There was no need to muddle it with fear.

He barely even noticed that they’d arrived until Reya slowed to a stop. They stood at the edge of a very gently sloping valley. There was a small forest within it, and Arwin could hear the chirp of birds and insects from where they stood.

“Here,” Reya said wearily. “I think the monsters in this area shouldn’t be that much stronger than Apprentice Tier. Maybe we could throw things at them in hopes of killing something before it gets close? You’ve got a whole bunch of weapons.”

It wasn’t a terrible idea, but Arwin couldn’t see any monsters yet, and tossing swords into the forest at random felt like a generally poor idea. He started down the valley, making for the forest. “Do you know how aggressive the monsters in this area are?”

“Not really. I’ve never done much more than look, and it was always when I was in a larger group,” Reya replied. She stayed behind Arwin, keeping the dagger out before her defensively. “I remember that there were some pretty big lizard things, though.”

“Lizards? Sounds like those could be useful.”

“Did you miss the big part?”

“Big means there are more spots to stab,” Arwin said. They drew up to the treeline a short while later and Arwin squinted into it. The forest wasn’t too dense at the edges, so he could see a good bit into it.

“Maybe we should be quiet,” Reya whispered. “What if they hunt in packs?”

“You know more about them than I do. Do they?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? I usually just saw one or two.”

Arwin shifted the roll of swords off his shoulders and set it on the ground. He unrolled it and took one of the plain swords he’d made in his left hand, drawing his magical one with his right. Reya’s eyes widened at the sight.

“You know how to use two swords at once? What kind of smith knows how to dual wield?”

Arwin didn’t respond to her question. His attention was transfixed on two motes of yellow light glimmering in the darkness of the forest. They were eyes, each roughly the size of his fist. Arwin bared his teeth in challenge. “I think I found one of your lizards.”

Perhaps it's a bit late to think about this, but it's been some time since I've actually properly fought a monster. It would be morbidly funny if I find out I'm nowhere near a match for them anymore, but confidence is half the battle. I will win because I must win.

Even if he couldn't speak the same language as the monster, he'd spent enough time fighting them to know how to communicate – and direct eye contact was a clear challenge that few would ignore.

Reya stiffened behind him as fallen leaves and sticks cracked. The draconic head of a six-foot long lizard poked out from the darkness, its red tongue flicking out to taste the air. The rest of the monster's body followed after it.

It had long, curved claws that dug furrows into the ground and was covered with glistening green scales. A row of spikes ran along the back of its head and several crooked fangs jutted out from random spots in its mouth.

Arwin reached out to the mesh, and golden lettering shimmered above the lizard's head, visible only to him.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 5]

The lizard's mouth opened in a hiss and its tail whipped out, slamming into one of the trees. Wood shattered with a loud crash and the tree pitched to the side, slamming to the ground. The lizard's head tilted back and it let out a hissing roar.

Only three levels above me in Apprentice and it can already do this much damage. Monsters really do have it lucky, but this thing isn't the only one here that can hit hard.

“I think we might have made a mistake,” Reya said, clutching her dagger and swallowing heavily. “Can we run?”

“I don’t think that’s an option anymore. Remember our conversation about speed? Well, this thing is faster than me. I’ll do my best to keep its attention, but don’t get caught off guard. Fight or die, Reya.”

Chapter 13

Arwin cracked his neck, then took a step forward and reared back, flinging one of his swords at the lizard’s head mid-roar. It struck it with a thunk and the monster hissed in fury.

“What are you doing?” Reya hissed. “You just threw away one of your weapons!”

“I can’t dual wield,” Arwin said with a chuckle. He pointed his enchanted sword at the lizard. “Come on, then. Those scales of yours look like they’d be good to practice making armor with.”

That proved to be the final straw. Arwin still wasn’t sure if the average monster was intelligent enough to understand his insults, but it definitely picked up on the tone of his voice. Letting out a furious hiss, the lizard’s limbs blurred into motion and it charged.

Arwin moved to meet it, old instincts kicking back in immediately. It had been a long time since he’d been in a proper fight, and he didn’t have the abilities he’d had as the Champion, but he still had more than enough to work with.

The lizard's head snapped down to bite at Arwin's neck. He jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding the attack, and brought his sword down on the monster's neck while sending some magical energy through the blade.

A dull hum rang out as the blade rang against the Lizard's scales, failing to penetrate through them. Small ripples of dull, nearly invisible magic remained in the spot where he'd struck the monster.

Arwin jumped into the air as the lizard's tail whipped out and smashed into the ground where he'd been standing. His jump didn't take him nearly as far as he'd planned, though. Arwin dropped back to the ground far sooner than he'd expected and the monster lunged for him again.

Cursing, he threw himself into a roll. A loud crunch rang out as the monster's teeth slammed shut just above him, and Arwin slammed his sword into the same spot he'd struck before. More magical power left his body as the magic resonating on the lizard's scales intensified, but they were still whole and undamaged.

Reya stood on the other side of the lizard, frozen in fear. Arwin didn't blame her – the lizard was admittedly a bit stronger than he'd been expecting. If it was giving him this much trouble, it probably really would have been fatal if she'd fought it.

Well, this was a good exercise to see where I stand in my new body. Time to dial up the heat.

Arwin activated [Scourge] at its max power. Magic pumped through his body, but the lizard was oblivious to it. Having judged Reya a non-threat, it charged at Arwin again. Its massive mouth opened once more and it bit out at him.

Reya called out a warning as Arwin remained solidly in place, but it was too late. The lizard was upon him – and Arwin’s left fist was upon the lizard. His fist slammed into the monster’s open jaw from below, and a loud crunch echoed out.

Its head snapped back, mouth slamming shut. Arwin’s strike redirected the monster and it stumbled past him, tripping over its own feet. At the same time, a flash of pain flooded through Arwin’s fist and he swore.

If it wasn't for [Indomitable Bulwark] halving the injuries I get, I'm pretty sure I would have just broken every bone in my hand. Damn. This thing must weigh a ton.

And, even with the Title, Arwin’s fist stung furiously. He shook his hand off, gritting his teeth as the lizard’s tail hurtled for his head. Arwin ducked out of the way and ran at the lizard while it was still midway through turning back to face him.

The monster was pretty fast whilst moving forward, but it wasn’t anywhere near as swift in its rotations. It let out a screech of fury as Arwin lunged, using another [Scourge] empowered blow to drive his sword forward.

It punched through the scales of its side with a loud crunch, driving deep into the monster’s flesh. Blue blood splattered across the grass as Arwin ripped the blade free and hopped back, just barely managing to avoid the lizard’s tail as it spun again.

If there had been much intelligence in the monster’s head, it probably would have registered that Arwin was more of a threat than he’d initially appeared to be. Unfortunately, there wasn’t.

With another screech, the lizard charged him once more. Arwin could feel his energy starting to wane from the amount of power he'd pumped into [Scourge], but he didn't have any other choice. Using the ability at its max power was the only way he could properly damage it, but it also chewed through his energy at disturbing speeds. He was pretty sure he only had the strength for one or two more blows.

Ducking to the side to avoid a claw swipe, Arwin brought his sword down on the already-ringing section of the lizard's neck with all his might and let out a roar of his own. Scales shattered as the enchanted blade bit deep into the monster's neck.

Almost instantly, the resonating energy finally triggered. A shudder shook the lizard's body as Arwin ripped his blade free and blood sprayed out of the new wound. The lizard wasn't done yet, though.

It jumped at Arwin one last time, trying to crush him beneath his bulk. Even with [Scourge], Arwin knew he wasn't going to be anywhere near strong enough to shove it out of the way.

At the moment, he was nothing but a normal man that could amplify his strength by up to a hundred times. He needed to find a way to raise his base strength if he wanted to toss around something this heavy.

Instead of trying to counterattack, Arwin directed [Scourge]'s power into his legs. He lunged to the side in a burst of speed, hitting the ground with a grunt and rolling across it in a rather undignified manner.

Behind him, he heard the lizard slam into the ground. He managed to stop his rolling and shot to his feet, acutely aware of just how little energy he still had left to work with. The lizard

was already turning toward him, preparing to charge, but its eyes were unfocused. It was losing a lot of blood from the nasty wound in its neck and the one on its side – but it wasn't dead yet.

Arwin tightened his grip on his sword and sprinted at the monster, trying to take advantage of its weakness. It hissed a challenge, preparing to meet his charge. It was ready for him, but it wasn't ready for Reya.

She sprinted at the monster's back, thrusting her dagger into the open wound in its side. Even with all the momentum her charge had given her, she hit it like a toddler sprinting into a brick wall and fell back with a pained grunt, but the damage was done.

Her dagger had driven deep into the monster's already injured side, and it let out a pained scream. It spun toward Reya, making its final mistake. The momentary distraction was just enough for Arwin to close the rest of the distance between them. He brought his sword down, using the last dregs of his magic to drive his sword into the resonating wound on its neck.

The lizard thrashed and screamed as the power thrummed through it, and a mixture from the magic and the deepening wound finally won over. It crashed to the ground, Arwin's sword nearly all the way through its neck, and spasmed in death throes.

One of its thrashing claws caught Arwin on the chest as he tried to step out of the way. His flesh burned as he was thrown to the ground with a pained grunt. He rolled to safety and pressed a hand to his chest, feeling warm blood start to trickle down his chest.

“Arwin!” Reya yelled, running over to him. “Are you—”

The words died in Reya's mouth as she skidded to a stop, staring at the wound. It was little more than a nasty cut. It was bleeding pretty badly, but it was nowhere near the fatal wound it should have been. She blinked in disbelief.

“What? How? I saw its claw go right into your chest!”

“I told you,” Arwin said with a dry chuckle. He pushed himself to his feet, brushing the dirt off his back and sides. “I'm more than a mere smith.”

And still, that was closer than I would have liked. I overestimated my strength – but that was a good baseline for determining where I stand. I can probably handle monsters up to Apprentice 6 if I'm doing everything perfectly, but it'll depend on how they fight. I'm at a huge disadvantage against anything faster than me, and I'm going to need some proper armor.

Reya looked from Arwin to the dead monster, disbelief and awe warring in her eyes. The awe won the fight and she ran her hands through her hair, then down her face. “I can't believe it. You killed a monster. A crafter killed a monster stronger than him.”

“And you helped.”

“And I helped! How is that possible? How are we alive?”

“Pretty simple. We hit it harder.” A grin cracked Arwin's expression at the glare Reya sent him. He trudged over to the body of the dead lizard. Reya's dagger still stuck out of its side, and he nodded to it. “Take your weapon back. Did you get anything for helping me kill it?”

“No. I don't have a class yet.” Reya finally snapped out of it and walked over to join him.

And I didn't get anything either. Makes sense. I'm a crafter. The Mesh isn't going to reward me for killing things – but that hardly matters. All the reward I need is right here in front of me.

Reya pulled her dagger out of the dead lizard with a grunt. She examined it for a moment, then wiped the blood off on the grass and returned the blade to its sheath.

“What now?” Reya asked wearily. “Please don't tell me we're going after another one. We barely made it through one.”

“Depends how fast we work,” Arwin replied as he knelt, wedging his sword beneath one of the scales near the wound and leaning on it. With a crack, the scale popped off and fell to the grass. “I'm not leaving until we scrape this thing dry of any useful materials. You keep watch and let me know if anything else is coming. I'll cut this thing up, and then we can grab everything we can carry and head back to the city.”

Reya swallowed and nodded, squinting into the forest while Arwin got to work.

Perhaps it was because the corpse of the last monster that tried them was sitting in open view, or perhaps it was just sheer luck, but no other monsters emerged to attack over the next hour.

Arwin worked in silence, ripping scales and claws off as efficiently as he could. He'd never stripped a monster before, but to his luck, the lizard's scales were so firm that they were hard to damage unless he actively started wailing on them.

“Is this really going to be enough?” Reya asked. “To beat the thieves’ guild, I mean. There are thirty of them, and some of them are at the top of Apprentice. Their leader is a Journeyman.”

“It’ll be enough,” Arwin replied. “It has to be, and so it will.”

“What kind of logic is that?”

“The logic of a man who is determined to win. It’s logic that you should adapt if you want to survive,” Arwin suggested. He straightened up, looking around at all the materials lying on the ground in wait for him. “For now, help me carry this. We’re heading back.”

Reya nodded and walked over, piling as much of the material into the bundle of swords they’d brought along. Once that was full, they both stuffed their pockets and filled their arms before heading back up the valley and back toward the town.

“We have one day left, though. What are we going to be able to do in one day?”

“That’s a simple answer as well,” Arwin said, sending Reya a glance out of the corners of his eyes. “I’m going to make us equipment.”

Chapter 14

Arwin was unsurprised to find that Forest Lizard scales did not heat particularly well in the forge. In fact, they were slightly heat-resistant. And, even though they were made of harder material than the sub-standard metal he was growing used to working with, they didn’t tolerate shape changes nearly as much.

He lost count of how many scales he mistakenly shattered that day. Even though they'd returned from their trip with a good portion of daylight left, it was now already dipping well into the night and he'd only made minor progress along his plans.

Normally, Arwin was pretty sure that making armor from scales was best done by stringing the scales together like chainmail, but he didn't have the leather to attach them to, nor did he have the talent to work with leather yet.

The only thing he'd really figured out how to do was hit things with a hammer – and that was exactly what he continued to do. He was confident there was a way to work with them, but if he didn't find it before the next day ended, it wouldn't matter.

Arwin chewed his lower lip as he stared at the scale on his hearth. It rested in a bed of [Soul Flame], glowing faintly with heat. He picked the scale up, bringing it over to the anvil to try again.

Almost as soon as it left the embrace of the fire, the scale's bright luster faded away. His lips pressed together in annoyance. It had only taken seconds for it to lose the majority of the heat that it had been building up, and attempting to change it would lead to the same result that he'd been continuously earning that day – another broken scale.

A thought struck Arwin and he turned back to his forge, putting the scale back in. He picked up one of the other scales within the flames, then pressed it between his fingers without taking it out of the fire.

He felt the faintest amount of give. It was so little that there was a good chance he'd hallucinated it entirely, but Arwin latched onto that feeling. He activated [Scourge] and sent energy into his fingertips, squeezing the scale again.

This time, it warped around his thumb. It was far from a perfect bend, but it had moved. Arwin pulled it from the flame, delight spreading across his features as the scale started to cool. He waited for it to lose the rest of its heat, then tapped the scale with his hammer.

It remained firm. Arwin gave it several stronger strikes, but it took a blow with his full, normal force to finally crack the scale. A laugh slipped from his lips and he turned back to the hearth.

Looks like this project will be one without a hammer. I'm going to have to put everything together by hand without taking it out of the hearth. The next problem is figuring out how to connect the scales.

Arwin tried just pressing them together and repeatedly striking the scales in attempt to get them to meld together, but it amounted to nothing. They weren't metal, and they held their shape far too well to merge together.

His next idea proved considerably more fruitful. Arwin made nails from normal metal, then slowly but steadily worked them into the scales. It was a fine line to work on. He did his best to move quickly and keep the nails from getting over-heated, but that meant he had a very limited amount of time to work on each piece before the nail lost too much of its strength and became soft.

If he struck it too hard, the nail would bend or break before the scales would. If he struck too light, the nail wouldn't even get any deeper into the scales. The key turned out to be a steady, constant stream of firm taps.

Nothing too hard, but nothing too soft. And, in that manner, one scale became linked to two and two became three. It was slow, tedious work, but Arwin loved it. Every single scale he nailed together felt like another step along his journey, and it filled him with delight.

He didn't even bother keeping count of the number of rows he'd need to make to outfit himself. Arwin just kept tapping away, sweat dripping down his forehead and rolling down his back.

There was only a little more than a day left before the time would come to use the armor. He didn't have time to fail. He didn't have time to take a break – and he didn't want to. There was only one possibility in his mind, and he was determined to achieve it.

“I told you that I'm not serving meals outside of the tavern,” Lillia said, pressing her lips thin as she glared at Reya. The young woman shifted uncomfortably beneath her gaze, averting her eyes.

The Champion is avoiding me? Perhaps it's for the best. I just about had a heart attack when I saw that oaf standing at my counter like he belonged there. I can't believe he was actually the first one to call a truce.

“Could you do it just this once?” Reya pleaded. “Arwin is really busy. He's... making stuff.”

Lillia raised an eyebrow. “Then he can take a break from making *stuff* and come here. If I want to build a group of regular customers, I need to make sure they come to my tavern, not summon me like some harlot.”

“He can’t take a break! But, if he doesn’t eat, I’m worried he won’t have enough strength to fi – uh, to help.”

To fight? Who in the Nine Underlands is he fighting? There’s no way he actually managed to keep his Champion class, is there? I didn’t feel the strength that he used to have, and if my own Class was destroyed, I can’t see why his would have survived.

Does that mean he’s planning to fight someone without his powers? I suppose that lines up pretty well with him, actually.

“Perhaps he should do a little less fighting and focus a little more on the finer things in life,” Lillia said with a snort. The mere idea of running back off to fight after she’d finally broken out of that endless cycle made her want to retch.

The Champion clearly enjoyed the slaughter far more than she had, but that was little surprise. Humans had always reveled in death.

“It’s not his fault,” Reya protested. She wrung her hands together and threw a glance over her shoulder. Lillia nearly let out a derisive snort. It wasn’t like anyone else was going to be there. Despite her words, aside from Reya and one drunkard that Lillia had yet to learn the name of, she’d had absolutely no customers.

“How is it not his fault if he’s running off to kill people? Sounds like it’s entirely his fault.”

“He’s doing it because I need help,” Reya muttered. She stared down at her feet, clenching her hands. “He’s trying to make armor because I’m in trouble with the thieves’ guild.”

“The what now?” Lillia blinked in surprise. “I think I’m completely lost. What do they have to do with any of this?”

“I’m in trouble with a lot of people,” Reya said, flopping down in Lillia’s chair and burying her face in her palms. Her hands dug into her hair and she pulled at it with a groan, sinking down and letting her head thunk against the wood.

Lillia held a hand out, then pulled it back. She’d dealt with a lot of things in life, but not one of them had ever been comforting someone. It had been so long since she’d cared enough about someone to even think about their feelings that she could barely remember the feeling.

Everyone I’ve loved is dead at the hands of the Champion.

At yet, sitting in front of her was quite literally Lillia’s only customer. The tiny spark that gave her hope that her tavern might one day become a true business. A place full of joy and laughter, where she could live peacefully.

If I don’t do something now, how will I help my future customers? I need to help her.

“Maybe you could start from the beginning?” Lillia tried to make her tone as gentle as possible, but she wasn’t so certain it was working. “I think I’m missing a lot of information.”

“I ran into Arwin a few days ago,” Lillia said, her muffled words spoken into the countertop. “I was with a group of thieves that got mad I wasn’t giving them my life earnings. Arwin killed one of them.”

Sounds about right.

“They were part of a guild?” Lillia asked.

“No. They were just some assholes. The rest of ‘em showed up, and Arwin dealt with them too. I realized he was pretty strong, so I decided to hang around. Thought it would be safe. It was stupid. I should have kept moving. But I didn’t, and the thieves’ guild found me, and then Arwin got involved defending me, and now he’s trying to forge armor that will let him fight them!”

Reya’s words quickened until they were spoken so fast that Lillia could barely make them out. The fact that she was face down on the countertop certainly wasn’t helping her audibility.

“I see,” Lillia said slowly. “So he’s getting ready to fight the thieves’ guild because they’re after you?”

“Yeah,” Reya mumbled. “I feel like such a piece of shit. I know he just wants to be left alone. He shouldn’t be the one solving my problems, and I know I should just leave so he doesn’t have to deal with them. I guess I’m just selfish. I don’t want to keep running, but I’m not strong enough to change anything myself.”

Lillia’s back tickled in alarm. Reya couldn’t leave – that would get rid of one of her three customers, and there was a good chance it scrapped Arwin as well. That would knock her all the way down to just the one homeless man, and she was pretty sure he’d only stumbled into her tavern on mistake.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a little selfish,” Lillia said hurriedly. She reached out, cringing slightly as she set her hand on Reya’s shoulder. She half expected the woman to knock her arm away, but to her surprise, Reya didn’t budge.

“Easy to say when you aren’t the one being selfish,” Reya said. “There are thirty of them. How is Arwin supposed to kill thirty people?”

Nine Underlands. Thirty? At the peak of my power, that would have been a heartbeat of effort. But now... that’s not possible. Maybe in a few months, but now? What is Arwin thinking? Is it possible that he retained more of his powers than I did?

“Perhaps he’s stronger than you think?” Lillia asked. She went to take her hand back, but the moment it lifted off Reya’s shoulder, the girl stiffened. Lillia quickly put her hand back.

“He’s really strong for a smith, but he’s not going to be able to take out thirty fighters. We just went hunting and he just barely beat an Apprentice 5 Lizard,” Reya said miserably. “What should I do? Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t help him fight aside from maybe distracting a few people and gutting them from the dark. That’s not going to do an ounce of anything against thirty whole people.”

He took out an Apprentice 5 monster? I’d guess that’s pretty close to what I should be able to handle as well. Shit. He’s just a moron, then. There’s no way he’s going to be able to handle fighting thirty warriors.

That left Lillia with a pretty large problem. Arwin had never been one to back down from a fight, and Reya didn’t have a choice. That meant two of her customers were headed straight to their deaths.

Damn it all. I can’t believe what I’m about to say, but I don’t think I’ve got a choice.

“I might be able to help,” Lillia said.

Chapter 15

Reya sat up so fast that she nearly slipped out of the chair. Lillia caught her by the shoulders. “Careful!”

“You can help?” Reya asked eagerly. “Really?”

“Calm down,” Lillia grumbled, releasing Reya and letting out a heavy sigh. “Let’s just consider it an advance payment, yes? You aren’t allowed to go to any taverns other than mine. And, in exchange, I help out my most valuable customer.”

“Deal!” Reya said. She paused for a moment and her features crumpled again. “Wait. How are you going to be able to help? Your food is good, but they aren’t going to stop fighting us if you feed them.”

Didn’t you specifically come here just to get food?

“I’m more than just some mere tavernkeeper,” Lillia said. “I’ve dealt with a few rowdy idiots before, and three bodies against thirty is much better than two. If you think about it, that means we each just have to take out ten of them.”

“You know, that’s almost exactly what Arwin told me about himself. And you’re right!” Reya’s eyes lit with just a little hope. “That’s not too bad. As long as they’re all looking in the other direction and completely oblivious to my presence for the entire fight, I could probably do that.”

Do you want them to strip naked and point to their vital spots as well?

“Right,” Lillia said. She could still barely believe a single word coming out of her mouth, but it was too late to back out now. Despite what the humans had claimed about her kind, a demon did not go back on their word.

There was a moment of silence as the two regarded each other. Then Reya’s stomach rumbled.

“Do you think you could still make that food, though?” Reya asked, her cheeks reddening.

Lillia sighed. “Just wait here. I’ll be out in a moment.”

Bearing a plate laden with food, Lillia followed Reya out into the street and over to the smithy. Rhythmic thuds echoed from within it, just loud enough to ring in Lillia’s ears.

Reya stepped right through the crumbling entryway, but Lillia paused just before she entered. Her skin prickled, her body screamed warnings at her not to press further. She was standing at the domain of her greatest foe – the spot where he was most comfortable.

No. I’m not backing out. He walked right into my tavern like he owned the place, and I’m going to do the same thing.

Lillia ground her teeth and stepped inside. Arwin stood, his bare back to them and his arms buried up to his elbows in the roaring flames. He didn’t even look slightly bothered by the heat, and Reya held a finger to her lips as Lillia opened her mouth.

“Don’t distract him too much while he’s working,” Reya whispered. “You know, I could have just brought him the food myself. You didn’t have to come.”

“You’d have gotten used to taking food out of my tavern if I did that,” Lillia grumbled, but she kept her voice low. “I’m not letting that happen. This is a one-time thing.”

“Well, you might be waiting a while,” Reya said. She squinted at the forge. “I don’t think he’s anywhere near done yet, and if finishing that armor will give us a chance against the thieves’ guild, I don’t think we should bother him.”

Lillia pursed her lips. Food was always best when it was fresh. At least, she was pretty sure that was the case. It certainly wasn’t going to get any better if they left it out – but any advantages for the upcoming fight would probably be invaluable.

“Fine,” Lillia said. She glanced around the smithy, then sat down and leaned against the wall, beckoning for Reya to do the same. “In that case, tell me about what we’re up against. Maybe I can try to put some form of plan together while we wait for him to finish.

Reya nodded and sat down.

It was in that position that hours passed. The night squirreled away and the sun rose, but Arwin didn’t budge from his spot at the forge. Lillia was pretty certain he had absolutely no idea that they were even there.

Her discussion with Reya only proved one thing, and that was that they were likely screwed. Going up against twenty-nine Apprentice Tiers and a Journeyman was a ludicrous fight. Sure, it was unlikely that all of the guild would be there at the same time, but there would still be far more enemies that they had any right to take on.

To make matters worse, Reya didn't even have a class. Lillia had been fairly certain that she was a Thief or an equivalent, but Reya didn't even have that. She had no Titles, no Achievements, and no skills. All she had was the dagger at her side.

This might well and truly be screwed.

Lillia pushed herself upright and brushed the gravel off her backside.

He's been working at that armor all night and a good part of the morning. I wonder if he's actually making any progress, or if he's just banging away at nothing.

Ignoring the look Reya sent her, Lillia crept closer to the forge. She kept her distance, making sure not to get close enough to startle Arwin, and squinted into the flames. Her eyes widened as she got her first look on the armor.

Layers of interconnected scales had been tightly woven together into a scale mail shirt. They all glowed with merry orange heat that Lillia could feel even from where she stood. It looked like there were only a few scales left to be placed.

The Mesh tickled at the back of her mind as she studied the armor. It wasn't magical – not yet – but it certainly seemed as if it would be. Despite the person forging the armor, a flicker of awe passed through Lillia.

He can make magical items this soon? It looks like I'm not the only one that got a Unique crafting class, then. I guess I shouldn't even be surprised. We've always been perfectly matched, so I don't know why this would have been any different.

Lillia made her way back to Reya and sat down.

“Well?” Reya whispered. “Is it working?”

“You could look yourself, you know,” Lillia said dryly. She looked back to Arwin, a thoughtful expression passing over her face. “But yes. I think it is.”

Arwin worked the final nail into the armor. His fingers were sore and exhausted, and even though his [Soul Flame] didn't burn him, his entire body felt like it had been baked in an oven.

He barely even noticed. Arwin lifted the scale mail, delight dancing in his eyes as he felt the Mesh come to life within it.

[Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Unique Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [I'm Special] has been earned.

[I'm Special] – *Awarded for forging your first Unique Quality item. Effects: Upgrade one of your existing skills. This achievement will be consumed immediately.*

[I'm Special] has been consumed.

Before Arwin could even think about what the Mesh had said, a list of his existing skills flickered to life before him, blinking impatiently.

[Awaken] (Passive)

[Soul Flame]

Getting his current skills upgraded was just as important as acquiring new ones, but Arwin's nose scrunched in distaste. As usual, the Mesh had given him absolutely no information about what the skill upgrades would actually be.

There were certain Titles and Achievements that gave more information on upgrades that he'd always found invaluable, but he didn't have the benefit of any of those this time. Fortunately, he only had two skills to choose between.

It's not hard to tell what upgrading Awaken would do. I'd get magical items more often, and they'd be less likely to have detrimental effects. Soul Flame, on the other hand, I'm unsure. I'd assume it would become more effective.

Normally, I'd go straight with Awaken. At some point, I'd want to upgrade Awaken regardless. But... if Soul Flame gives me the chance to make stronger weapons, even if they happen less often, wouldn't that be the better choice?

Arwin's jaw clenched. It was just as possible that upgrading Awaken would result in the same improvement. It was difficult to tell because the description of the skill said that the component that affected his chances of making a trait was unknown.

After a few more seconds of deliberation, Arwin selected [Soul Flame].

Both skills were tempting, and he'd just upgrade [Awaken] the next time he got a chance. Going with either one was a bet, and if he was going to bet, he wanted to bet on the one that he had the most information on.

[Soul Flame] – *Passion burns within you with such intensity that it become manifest. You may draw out your Soul Flame, empowering the fire of your forge, but be wary – any*

magical damage done to the Soul Flame will transfer onto your soul. Your Soul Flame can consume magical items, pulling all the traits from within them and allowing you to transfer them onto other items.

A delighted grin stretched across Arwin's face. It wasn't a direct upgrade to his actual items, but considering the random nature of the traits he was able to make right now, this change would be invaluable.

The catch is that I have to take all the traits, so I can't just separate off the detrimental ones, but this will still be useful if I get a strong defensive trait on a dagger or something like that.

Arwin let the skill fade away. He was mildly surprised – and pleased – to find that he hadn't reached the next level in his Tier. It got exponentially harder to advance with every level, and Unique Classes often took even more energy than normal to grow stronger.

To Arwin, that was a blessing. It meant more time to claim Titles and Achievements, which was exactly what he needed. Arwin summoned the Mesh once more, this time studying the newly made scale mail to see what rewards his efforts had reaped him.

Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Unique Quality

[Molten Fury]: This item was not just forged in flame – it is one with it. The wearer of this item gains heat resistance. Upon being struck, this item may forcibly draw magical energy and release a whip of molten flame at the attacker.

[Unique]: Once donned, this item will bond with its owner. It will change sizes so long as material permits to fit them perfectly, and anyone else who attempts to wear it may

suffer retaliation. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

It possesses [1] concealed property.

The armor was beautiful. Its scales rippled in the firelight, shimmering like green gemstones. The description of the armor was short and to the point, but Arwin could see exactly why it had been marked as Unique. The word was rather self-explanatory. Being Unique wasn't necessarily a good thing, but it did mean that the item would be different – and the addition of a concealed property was interesting. He had no way of knowing when it would show up or what it would do, but that just added to his interest.

Of course, Arwin could see the potential risks of the armor immediately. It didn't say how much magical energy it would draw, nor did he have any way to control it. Hypothetically, it could completely drain him the moment he took a single blow. On top of that, there was always the chance that the additional property was actually detrimental and would make the armor worse.

But, despite that, the armor was exactly what he needed. A wild card that would give them even the slightest edge up against the assassins.

He turned to the door so he could show Reya – and froze. Reya was there, but she wasn't alone.

Sitting beside her was the Demon Queen, and her eyes were transfixed on the armor, her mouth slightly askew in disbelief. She'd watched him forge a Unique magical item, and it looked like she'd been there for quite some time.

Shit. How much did she see?

Chapter 16

“Nine Underlands, that’s the most beautiful piece of armor I’ve ever seen,” Reya breathed. “What god do you pray to, Arwin? I’m swapping.”

“It’s just scale mail,” Arwin said, his eyes locked with the Demon Queen’s. “Nothing special.”

“Nothing special my ass,” Lillia said. “How’d you make that? That’s impossible. You—”

She cut herself off before she could continue, but Arwin knew what she’d been about to say.

I’ve only been at this for a short while. I don’t have any formal training as a smith, and even though this item probably wouldn’t be anything special to someone far above our Tier, it shouldn’t have been possible for an amateur. But, here I am. Maybe all the time I spent watching my equipment getting made transferred over.

It was a weak excuse and Arwin was all too aware of it, but he genuinely had no proper explanation for it other than that the materials seemed to beckon to him, begging him to form them into their proper forms. Even in the final stages of the scale mail, he’d felt the call of the scales directing his movements.

“Why are you here?” Arwin finally asked, snapping himself out of his reverie.

“To help!” Reya answered for Lillia. She picked a plate up off the floor and pulled the covering off, holding it out to Arwin so he could see the meat pie on it. “Also, we brought you food!”

It was cold, but Arwin grabbed it without hesitation. He still had some time before he’d need to eat another magical item, so his body didn’t necessarily need food, but the pie looked delicious.

“Thank you,” Arwin said, swallowing before he spoke. “But... Reya, you were meant to keep people *out* of the smithy, not invite them in. Besides, doesn’t the D – ah, doesn’t Lillia have a tavern she needs to run?”

“Unfortunately, I found out that two of my only customers were about to get themselves killed,” Lillia said, the irritation clear in her expression. “I had no choice but to come.”

“To hand deliver the food?”

“No, you oaf. Well, yes. But also to help you with your thieves’ guild problem.”

Arwin nearly choked on his own saliva. He waited for Lillia to burst into laughter at his expression, but her features were dead serious. She wasn’t joking.

The Demon Queen is offering to help us? She’s suggesting that not only do we call a truce, but we actually fight side by side?

“Isn’t it great?” Reya asked. “We actually have a chance of surviving!”

If anyone heard of this, they’d faint in terror. When I was still the Champion, I can remember people theorizing about ending the war by finding an enemy so great that neither the

Kingdom of Lien or the Monster Horde could handle it on their own, so they'd have to work together.

I suppose now we know what that threat is. A second-rate thieves' guild that's after the key to a Journeyman dungeon that I never would have given a second glance at.

A laugh slipped out of Arwin's lips. It was so ludicrous that he couldn't even try to hold it in.

"What?" Lillia demanded.

"Nothing," Arwin said, wiping the mirth from his eyes. "I just never thought that you and I would be working together to fight off a bunch of worthless thugs."

The exact meaning of his words passed over Reya's head, but Lillia understood them immediately. She scrunched her nose and let out a laugh of her own.

"Yeah. I had a similar thought. I guess life finds it funny to play jokes on us."

"You can say that again," Arwin muttered. He glanced around the floor in search of his shirt, then located it near the anvil and pulled it on. Then, after a moment of hesitation, Arwin pulled the scale mail over his head.

As soon as it settled on his shoulders, he felt the material shift. It tightened against him until it sat perfectly on top of his shirt, not too snug but not so loose that it would flop around while he walked. The faint tingle of the Mesh prickled against his skin as he felt himself connect with the armor.

"Looks good," Reya said, giving him a thumbs up.

Lillia reluctantly nodded in agreement, but she still added, "for an amateur."

“I’ve got more material.” Arwin looked back to the still-lit forge. “How long was I working? Do I have time to make another piece?”

“The note said two days, and today is day two,” Reya said. “If they’re going to be really strict on their timing, then I’d assume they’ll show up tonight.”

“It might be better to bring the fight to them. They won’t suspect it,” Lillia said.

“They probably also won’t send their entire guild just for Reya,” Arwin said with a thoughtful frown. “We might be better off waiting for them to show up here, killing the ones that do, and then taking out the rest of them afterward.”

“Which would work if they didn’t have any sort of information network, but they clearly respect that you’re a threat.” Lillia shook her head. “And that means that they’ll be watching to see how things go. If people start dying, the rest of the guild will either show up prepared or will be lying in wait. It’s much more efficient if we cut the problem out with one fell swoop.”

She had a fair point, but taking them out in *one fell swoop* was considerably easier to say than actually do. Sure, getting the jump on the thieves would probably give them a few free kills, but there were still thirty of them. If ten were off watching the dungeon, that still left twenty people to handle between the three of them – two, if Arwin didn’t count Reya due to her lack of experience.

The idea of trusting Lillia... I don’t know. A truce is one thing, but fighting side by side is entirely different. I can barely even remember a time when I wasn’t trying to kill her and she wasn’t aiming to do the same to me.

Arwin had no way to know for certain, but he got the strong suspicion that the exact same thoughts were passing through Lillia's head. There was little choice, though. Unless they abandoned Reya to her fate, they *had* to work together.

There wasn't any way to prove anything or ensure Lillia wouldn't turn against him, she had no way to know if Arwin would hold to his word either. It was like a snake eating its own tail. No matter how hard it tried to consume itself, it would never be able to finish.

The only option was just to stop biting.

"Just this once, then," Arwin said, holding Lillia's gaze. "Until the thieves' guild has been dealt with."

"Just once." Lillia nodded. "I don't plan to make a habit out of killing people. I'm trying to run an upstanding business, so this is going to have to be a cheat day."

"So what are we going to do?" Reya asked, wringing her hands together. "Are we just charging in and killing people?"

"That's going to depend on where their base is," Arwin said. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, holding a hand toward the forge. The [Soul Flame] he still had sitting in it sputtered and flew into his hand, returning to his body as his fist closed around it. "I trust you know?"

"Yeah. I can show you, but they've definitely got lookouts."

"We've already established that it's likely they'll be watching us," Arwin said. "There's even a chance they know what I've been up to. And, speaking of which, hold on."

Arwin directed his attention to his armor, willing it to hide itself from anyone else's eyes. The metal rippled in response, but that was it. Arwin glanced at the others, then tapped his chest. "Well? Can you still tell what it is?"

"Not anymore," Lillia said with a shake of her head. "If I didn't know better, I'd just think it was normal scale mail. You still might stand out a bit, though. I don't see a lot of people walking around wearing Forest Lizard armor."

"Not yet," Arwin said with a low chuckle. He nodded over his shoulder at the pile of pieces left over from the Forest Lizard. "I've still got a good bit of material left, not to mention the claws and fangs. I'm going to need some better tools if I'm going to get around to using them anytime soon, though."

"We should probably focus surviving this fight first," Lillia suggested. She went to continue, then paused as she took a closer look at the pile that Arwin had indicated. "Do... you think you might be able to make me some utensils? I don't have a knife. Or a fork. Or anything, really. I've just got a bent piece of metal that I've been using as a makeshift pan."

"What have you been using to cook if you didn't have utensils?" Reya asked. Lillia looked down at her hands, then back up to her. Reya grimaced and held a hand up. "Never mind. I'd rather be ignorant. Can we go back to the part where we try to figure out how to kill thirty people?"

"That's simple," Arwin said.

Lillia looked to him in confusion and Reya's eyes narrowed as she figured out what he was about to say before he could say it.

“Simple? How?” Lillia asked.

“All we have to do is hit them harder than they hit us.”

Lillia and Reya rolled their eyes in unison. Arwin chuckled at their expressions, then looked around the forge. There wasn't much he needed other than a sword and his armor. It would have been nice to have more equipment, but time just didn't permit it. On a whim, Arwin grabbed his explosive sword and slid it into one of the Brothers Six' sheaths before hanging it on his waist.

“Right,” Arwin said, giving Reya a sharp nod. “Lead on, then. It doesn't matter if they see us coming. It's time we check out this thieves' guild. If we're lucky, we'll be able to come up with a plan once I see what we're dealing with.”

“And if we don't have time?” Reya asked.

Arwin's features darkened and his hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. “Then we'll just kill them the old-fashioned way.”

Chapter 17

The thieves' guild was about a thirty-minute walk away through the alleys. It struck Arwin that Milten was considerably bigger than he'd thought it was, and it had a lot more back streets and dark alleyways than it had initially appeared to.

Something tells me the guard saying they didn't want beggars in the city was projecting a bit. I get the feeling that Milten has more than enough beggars and their ilk to share with the rest of the kingdom and not be left wanting.

But, as he took in the other parts of the slums, he did have to admit that he'd somehow chosen the ugliest, most run-down street in the entire city. Reya came to a stop at the edge of a cobbled road, then nodded across the street to a long two-story building. It was clearly old and run down, but it – and everything else on the street – was still in one piece.

A few people milled about the street both around the building and near the others beside it. The building didn't stand out much aside from its size, but it only took a little attention to realize that it was different from the others.

The people at its front were more attentive than random beggars, and Arwin could see the telltale bulge of weaponry poking against their clothes. His lips pressed thin and he took care to keep to the shadows, not directing too much of his attention to the building to avoid standing out.

"They're organized," Lillia murmured from beside Arwin. Her hands twitched at her sides, and it struck Arwin that she didn't have a sword.

"Should we have gotten you a weapon?" Arwin asked.

Lillia shook her head. "It's fine. I'm not very eager to pick up a sword again anytime soon. There are other ways of dealing with people that work just as well. The problem isn't going to be us. It's going to be how we can handle this many opponents at the same time."

Nodding absently, Arwin rubbed his chin and dug through his mind in search of a plan. Charging straight into the guild was guaranteed to result in their death – there was no doubt in his mind about it anymore.

If they'd been chaotic or unorganized, there would have been a decent chance he and Lillia could have just carved a path through their men and made it out before they could retaliate.

But, with a watch and clear preparation for an attack, mounting an assault against a force ten times their strength wasn't going to work. He needed a different strategy, and it wasn't like he had an army to attack with.

If I was at all stealthy, I'd consider breaking in on my own and just killing the leader. That would throw them into enough chaos to make 'em forget we exist. I don't think that's possible, though. Unless...

"How stealthy would you say you are?" Arwin asked Lillia.

"Not very. I can be hard to spot, but that's a far cry from stealthy."

Arwin thought back to the oppressive aura that covered the entirety of Lillia's tavern and grimaced. That definitely wasn't what they needed. Reya was probably the sneakiest of the lot, and she wasn't going to be able to break into a den of thieves on her own.

I'm so used to taking things on with a group of adventurers that I can barely even think on how I'd do this with just three people. Ideally, I'd just walk straight in and crush everything that fought back, but that's no more realistic than me clanking up the walls in my new armor and hoping nobody notices me.

"I don't suppose you know of some sort of secret passage?" Arwin asked.

Reya shook her head. "Not really. I mean, we could try entering through the sewage, but I don't know where that is."

"I think I'll pass," Lillia said, scrunching her nose in distaste and grimacing. "I think one thing of note is their surveillance isn't *that* good. They still haven't noticed we're here. Or, if they have, they don't care."

“Probably means we’re a relatively minor problem for them,” Arwin said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re a branch of a larger guild. A lot of the small thieves’ guilds work together, and while thirty members is a lot to us, it’s hardly many in the long run.”

“Doesn’t that mean we’ll get into more shit if we kill the guild leader?” Lillia asked.

Arwin nodded. “Yes. Which is why I’m thinking about adjusting my plan. Not that I’ve managed to develop one in the first place, but I think trying to destroy the entire guild by ourselves isn’t the best idea. A more surgical strategy might be better.”

“What are we supposed to do, then?” Reya asked. “They’re not going to stop coming after me, are they?”

“No,” Arwin agreed. “Probably not. But we can make them think twice about it. If we show them that coming after us is more effort than its worth, then we get what we want.”

“How are we going to do that without pissing them off even further?” Lillia asked. “If I had an enemy that fought back, I’d strike back even harder to make sure they knew their place.”

“By hitting them hard enough that they think twice about coming after us again, but getting out before we cause a permanent vendetta.”

“How?” Reya asked.

The inklings of a plan started to tickle at Arwin’s mind. It wasn’t exactly the smartest or most effective strategy he’d ever thought of, but it was the best thing he could think of.

We’ll still probably have to kill a few people, but it’ll be better than having to take out an entire guild on our own.

“It might be simpler than we’ve all been thinking, but a lot of it will depend on you, Lillia.” Arwin said. “Tell me, what is it that you’re still capable of?”

Arwin strode straight up to the front of the thieves’ guild, his hands resting on the hilts of the swords at his sides. As if it hadn’t already been obvious that the beggars at the entrance were more than they appeared, both of them stared at him with bored expressions. If they’d been paying closer attention, they would have noticed that his shadow was considerably larger than it should have been.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Arwin said. He nodded to the door. “I have business with your boss.”

The men exchanged a glance, then chuckled.

“That’s not how this works,” the man to Arwin’s left said. “If you want an audience, then you have to beg for one unless the boss expressly invited you. Did he?”

“No,” Arwin replied. “I don’t believe he did.”

“Then get lost, idiot.” The other man let out a raspy laugh. “Or feel free to stick around and donate whatever you’ve got in your pockets to us. Your choice.”

Arwin let out a sigh. He rubbed his chin between two fingers, then let his hand drop and shook his head. “No, I don’t think that was the answer I was looking for. See, your lot came to my smithy and asked for something of mine. I’ve come to discuss it.”

“We don’t discuss,” the first man said. “Did you bring whatever it was we asked for?”

“No,” Arwin replied. “Do I look like an idiot? If I brought it, I doubt you’d have much reason to bargain, would you?”

“There’s no reason to bargain at all. Bring the shit or get out.”

“I think we’ve possibly misunderstood something,” Arwin said. He drew the first magical sword he’d made, holding it loosely at his side and letting the two men get a good look at its information.

Short Sword: Garbage Quality

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

As their eyes transfixed on the sword, Arwin let [Scourge] slam into his body with full force, driving his open palm into the wall of the building beside him. With a loud crash, the stone shattered. Debris fell down all around Arwin as a cloud of dust rose up into the air surrounding him.

“See,” Arwin said, pointing his sword at the first of the men. “I’m in a rather poor mood. Your folks thought it would be fun to stride right into my smithy and pin a little note to the wall. I didn’t like that much, so here’s how this is going to work. Your guild leader and I are going to have a chat. And, if he hides like a coward in this building, I’m going to tear the whole thing down. Come at me, and I’ll shatter this sword myself and send us both straight to the Ninth Underland. Sound good?”

The thieves stared at Arwin in horror, and he suppressed the grin that threatened to split his face. People on the street hurriedly left, leaving it desolate aside from the guards and the growing shouts of surprise from inside the building. Even though he didn't have the power of a full Champion anymore, Scourge gave him far more power than anyone his Tier had any right to possess.

On top of that, the sword was a perfect threat. Nobody in a second-rate thieves guild like this was going to care about it more than they cared about their own life, and it wasn't exactly easy to counter an explosion.

"You're mad," the first thief said, taking a step back.

"No, I'm angry," Arwin corrected. "And you're my guide. Step to it now, lad. If you don't, I'm going to start killing people."

For a moment, none of them moved. The thief's gaze flicked from Arwin to the sword. Then he swallowed and gave him a nod. "Fine. It's your death warrant. Let's go."

Arwin just gave the man a cold smile, and the two of them headed into the building. The main room was surprisingly nice, with couches ringing its edges and a table piled high with food in the center. Thieves were already racing down to see what the commotion was, pouring into the common room and staring at the hole in the wall in shock. About a dozen of them had arrived, and they all stared at Arwin as he followed the man inside.

Flicking his sword, Arwin impaled a large apple sitting on one of the tables and brought it over to his mouth, taking a bite out of it. The more confident he looked, the less likely anyone would try something stupid.

“Carry on,” Arwin said, waving the sword with the bitten apple on its tip. Everyone’s eyes followed the blade, reading the information the Mesh gave them on its properties. Almost immediately, they paled and backed up.

It didn’t surprise Arwin. *Minor Magical Explosion* wasn’t exactly reassuring, as there was no way to know exactly how small minor truly was. Nobody stopped them as Arwin and the thief across the room and up to a large wooden door at the far end of it.

“The boss is through here,” the thief said, watching Arwin warily, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. “I hope he kills you.”

“Your sentiment has been noted.” Arwin drove his foot into the door, using [Scourge] to add just enough force to his kick to slam it open to reveal a long, well-decorated room. It had a high ceiling and a second floor that was mostly cast in shadows aside from a few lanterns running along its edges.

A man with a salt and pepper goatee and a small moustache sat at a desk, his arms crossed in front of his chest and his green eyes focused directly on Arwin. Rows of tables covered with shimmering items and gold lined the sides of the room, making it resemble the banquet hall of King Midas.

“Did you miss the explosion outside?” Arwin asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind himself.

“I had trusted that my men would be competent enough to handle it themselves. I have better things to do,” the man said, rising to his feet. He moved with the grace of a killer – this man was no stranger to fighting.

“Not the best men if they leave you alone to fight an unknown threat,” Arwin said.

The man chuckled and snapped his fingers. Several clicks rang out, and Arwin recognized them as the telltale sound of crossbows being nocked.

“I’m not alone,” the man said. “But you are. I’ve never had someone so bold as to break straight into my dwellings on their lonesome. Who are you?”

He doesn't have an Identify Skill that'll let him see information about me or my class, then. Good. I was betting on that, but you never know.

“I’m hurt,” Arwin said. A large portion of his shadow broke away and slipped into the darkness, but he didn’t let his eyes follow it. “You sent Jin to my smithy to leave a threat on my wall and you don’t even know who I am?”

“You’re the smith?” the guild leader blinked, then started to chuckle. “A lone smith has come to challenge my guild?”

“Who said I was alone?” Arwin asked. “I’m just the one speaking with you.”

“You’re claiming to represent an organization?” the guild leader watched Arwin carefully, clearly trying to read if he was lying or not. “There was no information about a guild on that street. It sounds to me like you’re bluffing to keep that key your girl stole.”

“We were a bit delayed on announcing it,” Arwin said with a shrug. “Consider this our official announcement. That shitty little street is ours. Keep your paws off it.”

“I think we’ll just take what we want instead,” the guild leader said softly, raising a hand. Arwin’s skin prickled. He couldn’t see the other thieves in the room, but he could tell their weapons were pointed straight at him.

“You know what that sounds like?” Arwin asked, keeping his tone even and tilting his head to the side. “A declaration of a guild war.”

“You don’t have a guild! There’s no war if you’re alone, and the girl certainly doesn’t count. She doesn’t even have a class.”

Arwin smiled. There was a soft thud from the upper decks. Arwin and the guild leader both turned as a man’s head rolled over the edge of the balcony and fell to the ground, striking it with a splattering squelch.

For an instant, nobody spoke. Then guild leader’s eyes went wide. He jerked his hand down. “Kill him! We’re under attack!”

Chapter 18

Five bolts screamed through the air toward Arwin, but he spun, holding his hands over the back of his neck as his eyes. A bolt slammed into his forearm with a thud, but Arwin ignored it and sprinted over to one of the tables, activating [Scourge] and lifting it into the air with a roar. Gold spilled to the ground, and an idle part of Arwin’s mind noted that the clinks it made as it hit the stone weren’t the right pitch. The gold was fake.

Arwin hurled the table – not at the guild leader, but at the double doors. Even as they started to open and the guildmembers tried to pour in, the table slammed into them and drove them shut.

Not deterred, Arwin strode over to another table and lifted it, even as more bolts rained down on him, and threw it next to the first. Each of the tables had to weigh hundreds of pounds. Nobody was going to get through the doors anytime soon.

Another arrow struck Arwin's armor. He grit his teeth as he felt a rush of magical energy pour out of him and into it. The air around him heated as a molten strand of magic whipped from his armor and hurtled into the darkness. A man let out a pained scream, but it was abruptly silenced.

Arwin turned back to the guild leader, ripping the arrows out of his arms and dropping them to the floor. They'd barely penetrated an inch into his skin, and the wounds were nothing more than painful.

Coils of flame danced across Arwin's armor, rising up into the air around him as if waiting for another person foolish enough to test its powers.

"That's two," Arwin said, stalking toward the man. This was the most important part. Killing a few Apprentice Tiers was well within his and Lillia's powers, but taking on a Journeyman was not. They wouldn't be able to take him out before the guild managed to knock the doors down, and then they'd really be in trouble.

That just means I have to scare the shit out of this guy. He doesn't know my exact rank, so as long as he thinks the fight isn't worth taking, we win.

"Who are you?" the guild leader demanded. "You aren't a smith. Was this a setup?"

"Does that matter?" Arwin asked. "I'm not asking for much... what was your name again?"

"Briggs."

"Briggs. Good name," Arwin said. He tapped the sword on the ground as he walked, hoping that taps didn't count as strikes. It would have been morbidly funny if he mistakenly blew

himself up whilst trying to be threatening. “Well, Briggs, I don’t have any problem with you. What I do have a problem with is people shuffling around on the territory of my guild, leaving threats around like they own the place.”

None of the thieves on the upper level were shooting their crossbows anymore. Briggs looked from Arwin to the barricaded door behind him. People were banging on it, but it was clearly going to hold for at least another minute.

“You’re stealing from us,” Briggs growled. “You really think I’m going to give a key to a dungeon up just like that?”

“You’ve already spent two lives on it,” Arwin said. “How many more is it worth? I can’t say I have a taste for killing, but my friends are different.”

He lifted his gaze to the balcony. Briggs followed it, and the man’s face went as pale as a sheet. Standing beside the railing, the head of a thief gripped in its clawed hands, was a Minor Imp.

The monster’s dull red skin glistened with blood and its yellowed claws nearly wrapped all the way around the head in its hands. Jagged teeth filled its mouth, so long that it couldn’t even close its mouth properly.

“Nine Underlands. You’re allied with demons?” Briggs asked, terror seeping into his voice.

The monster dropped the head and stepped back into the darkness, vanishing from sight as if it had never been there.

“I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about,” Arwin said. “You might be seeing things, Briggs. I’ve heard that happens to people that are about to die.”

Briggs swallowed heavily. “You’re mad. What fool is stupid enough to make a deal with a demon? Haven’t you heard what they do to men?”

“I’ve seen it firsthand, actually,” Arwin said. “It’s not pretty, Briggs. It’s unfortunate. Something tells me the Champion is too busy to come all the way out to this backwater city and handle a threat of demons from the lips of a tiny little thieves guild. But, who knows. I could be wrong. What do you think?”

The two men locked eyes, and Arwin could see the exact moment that Briggs’ self-preservation won over his greed. The man’s lips pressed thin and he jerked his chin. “Fine. Keep the damned key. The dungeon is likely worthless.”

“And the girl?”

“By all means, we don’t want her back.” Briggs spat on the floor. “She’s a curse, and I hope you both get devoured alive by the monsters you cavort with.”

“It was a pleasure doing business with you,” Arwin said. A shadow flitted through the room and attached itself to his, and this time, Briggs didn’t miss it. The man’s face paled even further. “Stay off my street.”

“Only if you stay off mine,” Briggs said, finding a tiny spark of righteous fury to draw on. “Back me into a corner and you’ll find out just how dangerous my men are.”

Arwin chuckled. “Don’t worry, Briggs. I don’t have any desires for your street. You can keep it. Just don’t let me catch your men in my shop again unless they’re there to buy something.”

The banging on the door grew louder, and the tables started to scrape along the ground as the thieves on the other side slowly forced it open. Arwin nodded toward the exit.

“You might want to stop them.”

Briggs ground his teeth. For a moment, Arwin wondered if he’d pushed too far and if the man was about to snap and order everyone to attack. The moment passed and Briggs snarled in anger.

“Stop!” Briggs roared. “Go back to your damn stations. Everything is fine.”

The grinding stopped. Confused murmurs rang out on the other side of the door.

“I told you to leave!” Briggs yelled again. “Get back to work!”

Footfalls echoed out as the thieves broke rank and left. Arwin didn’t bother saying anything else to Briggs. There was no point pushing his luck any further. He grabbed the first table with one hand, using [Scourge] to toss it to the side.

The second table followed after it, and Arwin pulled the doors open. He strode out, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of all the thieves as he left the building. Their gazes bore into his back as he continued out into the street, following him all the way until he turned a corner in the alley and was entirely out of view.

Even still, Arwin didn't allow himself to relax for another ten minutes. He followed the alleyways to the best of his memory, then finally came to a stop as he saw two familiar forms. Lillia and Reya sat on a pair of barrels, at the end of the alley.

The shadow at Arwin's feet broke away the moment he saw Lillia, flitting across the ground and entering her own shadow. The alley was so dark that Arwin only noticed because he'd grown used to watching the shadows while he fought, and Reya missed it entirely.

"Arwin! You're back! Did it work?" Reya asked nervously, glancing around the alley. "Are the thieves after you?"

"I doubt I would have made it out of there if it hadn't worked," Arwin said with a dry laugh. He followed Reya's concerned gaze to his bleeding arms and waved her away. "Relax. I'm fine."

"It looks like you got shot."

"I did," Arwin said. "I'm not exactly walking around in full plate here."

Though I really should be.

"I can't believe that worked," Lillia said, shaking her head in disbelief. "You really just strolled in there and they listened to you?"

"Having certain threats in the shadows can go a long way," Arwin said. Now that it was all done, he wasn't so sure how he felt about feeding a Minor Imp a meal of fellow humans. It was probably the only reason he'd managed to pull this off, though.

When Arwin had asked Lillia what abilities she'd retained, he'd expected it to be something to do with the darkness based on how her tavern felt, but he'd been initially thrilled to

hear she could still summon a Minor Imp. The monsters were nasty little buggers that only obeyed their master, and they had the ability to hide in shadows. He'd killed more of them than he could count, and now he'd worked together with one to kill.

“How many of those things do you have to work with?” Arwin asked.

“Why do you ask?” Lillia asked, sending Arwin a suspicious frown.

“Just curious,” Arwin said, shaking his head. They all set off down the alley, heading back toward their run-down street. He'd have more than enough time to come to terms with what he'd done later.

Like it or not, I'm not the man I used to be. I can't be.

Realizing that he'd started to lag behind the others, Arwin increased his pace to catch back up with them. The thieves guild was dealt with – for the time being – and that meant he had time to get back to doing what was important.

I need to get stronger.

Chapter 19

Flame licked at Arwin's hands as he worked the lizard scales together, winding the final scale onto his third attempt at making a piece of armor for Reya. The first and second tries sat in a pile off to his side. The first had turned into a decent set of armor, but he'd failed to capture any magic within it.

The second attempt hadn't turned out much better, but he'd worked out a few issues in his methodology. It was a lot easier to make himself a piece of armor than it was for him to make one for someone else.

That felt like a no-brainer after Arwin realized it, of course. When he was working for himself, he knew exactly what he wanted. And, while he didn't have any complete proof for it yet, Arwin was confident that when his will aligned with that of his materials – that was when he could make a magical weapon.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the easiest to put himself into the shoes of someone else when he was specifically trying to make something for them rather than just a random piece of armor that happened to be magical.

And yet, as Arwin finished working the last scale into the chest piece and held it up before the forge to get a good look at the finished product, he felt the telltale tingle of the Mesh race against his skin.

[Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Average Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Achievement: [Shoe Thief] has been earned.

[Shoe Thief] – *Awarded for forging an item made specifically for someone other than you.* Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

Arwin's lips creased with a smile. If he'd been earning this many Achievements back when he'd been this Tier as the Champion, he probably wouldn't have even flinched when the black gem had blown up.

He already couldn't wait to see what his next skill options would be, but that would come when it came – and, if he was *really* lucky, after he got another Achievement or two. Arwin turned his attention back to the plate mail shirt in his hands, examining it with the Mesh.

Forest Lizard Scale Mail: Average Quality

[Shimmerscale]: This item was made to protect a woman that stumbles into trouble a little too often. Upon being struck, this item may forcibly draw a small amount of magical energy and release a flash of light, blinding anyone looking too closely.

Arwin smiled and nodded. This was exactly what he needed. Even though he hadn't had a specific enchantment in mind when he'd been making the armor for Reya, it was definitely custom made for her.

Well, I was just thinking I didn't have confirmation that my thoughts truly influenced the kind of magic that goes into the equipment. This is that confirmation. I wonder if I can control the exact enchantment somehow.

Arwin dismissed the Mesh, then laid the armor out over the anvil as the last of the heat dissipated from its scales. Even though it wasn't hot to him, it would be unfortunate if Reya tried to put it on and ended up burning herself.

To Arwin's mild disappointment, Reya wasn't there when he scanned the shop for her. It had been a little over a day since they'd gotten back, and he couldn't tell if she was just enjoying

her newfound sense of freedom or felt so bad about having to rely on him and Lillia that she'd been working overtime.

Either way, she'd been out ever since, only coming back to sleep. Arwin considered going to look for her, but a familiar pang in his stomach stopped him before he could start.

It was still small, but he doubted he'd ever forget the sensation. The Hungering Maw was active again, and he needed to feed it a magical item if he wanted to avoid dying. Arwin took Reya's new armor and draped it over a fallen piece of rock to free up the anvil.

I'm not wasting any of the armor, and I'd rather not lose either of the swords. Guess I'll make something new and hope I can get it done before I run out of time. Worst comes to worst, I'll eat the exploding sword. As long as I don't hit anything too hard, I should be fine.

Arwin grabbed a piece of metal and set it in the hearth, using the bellows and the enhanced heat of his [Soul Flame] to bring it up to heat. Once the metal was cherry red, Arwin took it out and set it on the anvil.

His hammer sang as he struck the metal, not even entirely sure what he was trying to make yet. If the metal had something it wanted to become, then he was more than willing to let it guide him.

Minutes stretched on and Arwin returned the metal to the forge, pulling it back out and setting back to work once it was hot enough. The impurities slowly left the metal – or at least, as many of them as one could possibly remove from a piece this low quality.

The faint glow of magic guided Arwin's strikes as he formed the metal into an ingot, then narrowed it out into the shape of a dagger, hardly even aware of his own actions. The gnawing in

Arwin's stomach grew, but he hadn't gotten a warning from the Mesh yet, so he was more focused on making sure that he got it right on the first time.

It took record time for Arwin to finish the metal parts of the weapon. It was nothing more than a blade with a tang jutting out of the end for him to fasten the handle around, but he was still more than proud of his results.

Even though the Mesh had yet to properly recognize the dagger, he could still feel the magic lying in wait beneath its surface. Arwin grabbed some wood and cut away two small chunks, whittling them down with the base of a sword until they were hemi-cylinders.

Arwin then used the unfinished blade to carve out a spot for the tang to sit before putting the halves of the handle in around the blade. He grabbed some of the nails he'd forged, hammering them into place with just a few blows to secure the handle in place.

The faintest traces of magic shimmered around the finished dagger, as if the Mesh could sense that Arwin was done working on it. Realistically, he was pretty sure that it could.

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

[Sharp]: This item is abnormally sharp.

"Wow," Arwin said dryly, the pang in his stomach growing slightly stronger. "Does writing extra information cost money or something? I suppose it doesn't matter considering I only plan to use this for one purpose. I wonder what happens when I take on the properties of being sharp. I really hope I don't grow spikes."

He lifted the dagger up to his mouth, pausing for a moment. The idea of chowing down on a piece of metal still wasn't appealing, but biting into something that wasn't just sharp but *abnormally* sharp felt like it was definitely a good way to cut his insides open.

Then again, not eating this is a good way to blow up. Or implode. I'm not actually sure what would happen if I don't eat magic in time, but I'm not going to sit around and wait to find out.

Arwin started at the back of the blade, taking a careful nibble out of it. The metal melted beneath his teeth, ripping away easily. It still wasn't the most pleasant activity, but the pain in his stomach relented.

Arwin worked his way around the dagger, eating the rest of it without too much difficulty. Every bite he took just turned into what felt like hot, metallic soup in his mouth. A warmth grew, spreading out through his entire body as he finished eating until the pain had completely vanished.

Well, at least I've got a cool party trick. Does that always work, though? Or is it only when I'm hungry? Actually, for that matter, does it even have to be magic at all? If I can eat a magical object, would I be able to eat a normal one as well?

Arwin glanced around the smithy, then grabbed a bar of steel. He raised it before his mouth, studying it doubtfully. It didn't look any more edible than the dagger had, but if he could just chew through anything in his path, that was something he could incorporate into his fighting.

Not that I fancy the idea of trying to chew through my enemies, but if my life is on the line, it can't hurt to find out.

He brought the bar to his mouth and nipped at it. The metal seemed... well, metal. It certainly didn't feel particularly edible, but Arwin wanted to be absolutely certain just in case he was psyching himself out.

Opening his mouth a little wider, Arwin carefully bit at it, applying pressure but not enough to mistakenly break his teeth. And it was fortunate that he did – the bar didn't give in the slightest. It was about as edible as a bar of metal should have been, and that was to say that it wasn't edible in the slightest.

“Damn,” Arwin said, lowering the bar. He turned, only to find Reya standing in the entrance of the smithy, staring at him with wide eyes. She hurriedly cleared her throat.

“I didn't realize you were busy.”

Arwin opened his mouth, then looked back to the piece of metal and tossed it onto the ground, heaving a sigh. “I'm not even going to try to explain. Is that real food?”

“Yeah,” Reya said. She tried to suppress a smirk and failed miserably. “If you were so hungry, you should have gone to get something. I can't bring you food right now because Lillia is insisting that we eat at her tavern, but I didn't realize things got this bad.”

Arwin rolled his eyes. “Laugh it up all you want. It was an experiment.”

“Right,” Reya said, attempting to straighten her face and failing miserably.

Arwin shook his head and grabbed Reya's armor from the stone he'd laid it on, holding it out so she could get a look at it. “Well, when you're done laughing, you can come take a look at what I made for you.”

Chapter 20

The smile vanished from Reya's face instantly, replaced by wide-eyed disbelief. Her mouth dropped open and her gaze fixed on the armor in Arwin's hands. She started to reach out, then caught herself and pulled her hand back.

"You made that for me?"

"I told you I was going to outfit us, didn't I?"

"Well, yes, but you've only made yourself one thing so far," Reya stammered. "And I didn't think you meant you'd make me more *magical* equipment. I thought it was just going to be a leather cuirass or something!"

"I haven't figured out how to work with leather yet," Arwin said. "And I did consider making myself some more scale equipment, but I already know how to make a chest piece and I haven't figured anything else out yet. Do you want it or not?"

"I can't afford anything like this," Reya said. "It has to be worth at least a few hundred gold. If you sold this—"

"I'm not selling it. I decided when we went out to the market a little while ago," Arwin said. "I won't be selling magical equipment to anyone I don't know."

Reya blinked in surprise. "What? But you could be rich! If you can make stuff like this, the Adventurer's Guild would pay thousands of gold just to keep you on staff! Or if you wanted to remain independent, you could probably earn even more."

Arwin's features darkened and he shook his head firmly. "I won't be working for the guild, and I'm not outfitting anyone that isn't with me."

I won't make weaponry for someone that I may have to eventually fight. I don't have any interest in crafting for normal adventurers either – not magical items, at least. The best things I make will be reserved for people that actually deserve them.

Reya bit her lower lip. Her eagerness finally won out over her humility and she edged forward, carefully taking the armor from Arwin's grip. She ran her hands over its surface in mute awe, then quickly pulled it on over her shirt.

She twisted her body, then stretched her arms over her head and swung them around in a few circles. The scale mail clinked slightly with her movements, but it didn't impede them.

"Whoa. This is incredible. I'd have thought it was a Unique item if it didn't clearly say it was Average," Reya said. "This is the nicest thing I've ever owned. Other than that dagger you gave me, that is. I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to pay you back."

"Your continued work will be more than enough. I need my allies to be competent," Arwin said with a wave of his hand. The delight in Reya's eyes was a little too much to handle. It felt eerily similar to the gazes people had given him when he was still the Champion.

But, at the same time, it was different. Arwin had fought for those people, but he'd never truly known any of them. They'd just been a teeming mass in the back of his mind – an ideal rather than individuals.

"It fits, then?" Arwin asked, breaking himself from his thoughts to make sure the silence didn't stretch on so long it grew uncomfortable.

“Like a glove,” Reya said. She glanced at her hands, then cleared her throat. “Actually, it fits like scale mail. But it does it really well, you know? Kind of like a glove, but for my chest.”

“I get the picture, I think,” Arwin said dryly. “I’d suggest keeping that under a shirt rather than over it, or you might get people getting a little too interested. Once you’ve got a Class, you’ll probably get something that lets you conceal the equipment you’re carrying. Then you can wear it normally.”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Reya said seriously.

“Good. In that case, we’ve spent enough time on this. Did you hear anything interesting this past day? Is the thieves’ guild actually holding up to their word and avoiding us?” Arwin headed over to the pile of metal scrap and started to shuffle through it in search of something useable.

“Yeah.” Reya gave him a nod. “At least as far as I can tell, none of them have shown up in the area. I don’t exactly have much of an information network, but I’ve been prowling around the street and it’s been mostly empty.”

“Mostly?” Arwin found a large piece of iron riddled with impurities and picked it up, turning it over in his hands to try and feel it out. “What’s that mean?”

“Well, Lillia’s been doing her best to get more people in the area, and I think her efforts are kind of working. She’s been going out to some of the other streets and even the edges of the city, trying to bribe beggars over to her tavern with free food.”

A small grin flitted across Arwin’s lips. He brought the piece of iron back to the forge and set it in the hearth, letting fire roar up around it and starting to work the bellows.

“Is that so? And that’s working for her?”

“Well, I did say kind of working, not working. I think most of them took the food and left, but I do think I’ve seen one guy come back twice. Her tavern is pretty creepy.”

“It is,” Arwin agreed through a grunt. “She should really play into it more if she wants to draw more attention.”

With the enhanced heat of his [Soul Flame], the iron was soon glowing hot. Arwin took it from the forge and grabbed his hammer, starting to beat the impurities out of the metal.

“Play into it?” Reya tilted her head and waited for gaps within Arwin’s strikes to speak. “What do you mean?”

Arwin didn’t respond until the iron started to cool down and he was forced to return it to the forge. He brushed the flakes of metal away while the piece he was working on heated once again.

“If she’s not going to be able to get rid of the creepy aura, she should pretend like it’s intentional,” Arwin said. “Think about it. Instead of a shitty old building in the corner of the road, it could be a haunted tavern.”

“Nobody would want to go to that,” Reya said with a shudder. “Ghosts are terrifying!”

“It’s fake,” Arwin said.

“What do you mean? I thought you said she should make it haunted.”

“No. She should *act* like it’s haunted,” Arwin corrected. “Think about it. People can pretend like the tavern is haunted, and her servers can wear sheets or something and pretend to

be ghosts. Maybe that's too much, but you can see where I'm going with this, can't you? She could have a spooky theme. The Monster Tavern, or the like. People love stuff like that."

"Huh. I never thought about that, but it would be kind of fun to get waited on by a giant hulking monster," Reya mused. Her eyes lit up and she burst into laughter. "Wait. I've got it. Lillia could pretend to be the Demon Queen! Could you imagine that? Go to a tavern and have the Demon Queen herself waiting on you. I bet she could find some people to dress up as monsters from the horde. Adventurers would love it!"

Arwin turned away from the forge to stare at Reya, but she was so busy laughing to herself that she didn't even notice. His eye twitched.

I can't tell if Reya is an idiot or a genius. She somehow stumbled onto the actual truth of the situation and doesn't even realize it.

"Perhaps that would be funny," Arwin said with a small grin. "I'm certain Lillia would find that idea fascinating. You should suggest it to her."

"I will," Reya said with an excited nod. "Probably tomorrow, though. It's kind of late."

Arwin pulled the metal from the forge and went back to work on it, pounding out the impurities. He once again worked until it cooled, then returned it to the flames. He glanced out the cracks in the wall at the dark purple night sky. Reya was right – it had gotten pretty late.

"I'll be wrapped up here soon," Arwin promised. "I just want to get this finished up before tomorrow."

"What are you making?"

"I haven't quite figured it out yet," Arwin replied. "I'll let you know once I get there."

That wasn't entirely true. He did have an idea of what he wanted to make, but he didn't want to say it out loud yet. Saying it felt like a curse. Logically, he knew it wouldn't change anything, but that didn't change a thing.

Reya just shrugged and watched Arwin silently as he pulled the metal from the fire once more. He set it down on the anvil once more, but this time, he wasn't just trying to remove the impurities. He was shaping it.

Faint shimmers of magic guided Arwin's hands as he hammered the iron into form. He'd chosen this piece for a specific reason, and it wasn't because it was the highest quality piece of metal he had.

In fact, it was one of the worst ones. But, despite that, it had a desire. He could feel the faint draw the metal had – the longing to become something. But, unlike much of the other pieces in the pile, this one didn't want to be a sword or a dagger.

It didn't want to be any sort of weapon. No, this piece wanted to be a pan. That was it. A simple goal, and while Arwin would swear up and down that it wasn't the one he'd set out to make, it did happen to coincide with the request that Lillia had given him.

Strike by strike, the piece of metal slowly flattened out and started to take a flat, roundish shape. It wasn't perfectly smooth, nor was it even close to it. But, as the bed of the pan started to take form in Arwin's hands, he still found himself satisfied with it.

He returned it to the forge once more to finish shaping it, then set it down and grabbed another piece of metal. He heated and shaped it into a handle, then used two nails to connect the handle with the bed, putting it back into the flame and twisting the tips of the nails down into rounded nibs with [Scourge].

His work completed, Arwin took the pan from the fire and set it on the anvil to cool. It wasn't magic – the Mesh didn't recognize his work as anything particularly special, but he didn't care. It was a good pan. At least, it felt like it would be. He was far from a pan expert.

“Can you give this to Lillia when you get food from her tomorrow?” Arwin asked. “She asked for some utensils. I'll look into making some utensils for her later.”

“Okay!” Reya said. “Why don't you give it to your herself?”

“I'll be busy tomorrow. I'm going to be going hunting again.”

“You are?” Reya blinked. “Am I not coming?”

“Not until I get a better idea of what we're fighting in that forest. You can come next time,” Arwin said. “I imagine that you'll be given a Class fairly soon, but we can't have you getting killed before that.”

“Okay,” Reya said, a note of reluctance in her voice. “By the way... what is it that you actually want?”

Arwin tilted his head to the side, holding his hand out to draw the fire out from the forge. “What do you mean?”

“Well... Lillia wants to have a tavern. What do you want?”

Arwin's brow furrowed. He almost said that his only goal now was to live a peaceful life, but that wasn't so true. The Adventurer's Guild had to be dealt with, and the more he forged, the more he realized that he wanted to do more. Just living wasn't anywhere near enough.

I was mostly improving when I spoke with Briggs, but maybe I spoke more of the truth than I realized.

“You know what? I think I’d like to start a guild.”

Chapter 21

Arwin woke to silence the next morning. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as sunlight filtered in through the cracks in the ceiling and walls. His back was stiff from the uncomfortable floor, but he’d yet to get around to buying a proper bed.

Reya slept on the other side of the smithy, curled into a ball beside one of the walls. She’d taken the Forest Lizard armor off and had wrapped herself around it, clutching it like a blanket.

A small smile flitted across Arwin’s lips, and a distant memory prickled at his mind. His mother had gotten him a themed blanket of a movie he’d really liked for Christmas – Arwin couldn’t remember the movie, nor could he remember what was actually on the blanket, but he remembered holding onto it like the most important object in the world.

Arwin ran his hands through his hair, straightening it out a little to avoid looking like he’d just woken up, even if that was exactly what he’d done. He grabbed his two swords and strapped their sheaths onto his sides before heading out of the smithy.

He had a lot of ground to cover today, and the sooner he headed out, the sooner he’d hopefully be able to land eyes on something interesting and bring it back to turn into more equipment.

The street was as quiet as it always was, and Arwin set off in the direction of the gate, musing to himself as he walked.

I'd like to make some greaves and gauntlets next. A helmet and boots are also on the list if I want to really outfit myself to the point where I can hold my own without having to rely on [Scourge].

He could always hunt more of the lizards, but he needed to find a better way to fuse their scales together. Making a chest piece was one thing, but he didn't want to be running around jingling like a jester.

I want plate armor. Heavy, scary ass plate armor. I'm sure I'll be able to get some better techniques to work with some of the more unique materials like lizard scales soon, though, so getting more scales is still a good idea. I can start with that and see where things take me. I doubt I'm far from reaching the next Tier at this point. Probably going to reach it with the next magical item I craft.

Arwin's thoughts occupied him all the way out of town and down the road. He only paid enough attention to his surroundings to make sure he was heading in the same direction that Reya had took him the last time they'd gone to hunt.

Some time later, Arwin found himself rudely pulled from his reverie by a loud crash. He blinked, his mind snapping back into his body as he searched for the source. He'd already arrived at the edge of the valley and wasn't too far from the forest below.

The sound had definitely come from within the forest. Arwin's eyes narrowed as he squinted, trying to make out what had caused it. It wasn't like sounds happened for no reason. Either two monsters were fighting, or –

A man in full plate armor sprinted out of the forest, clutching onto his helmet with one hand as his legs pumped as fast as he could move them. He had a woman slung over his shoulder

with the other hand. Judging by her flowing white robes and the staff she held in her arms, she was some form of mage. With every step the man took, the large satchel on his back bounced frantically. And, even from the distance Arwin was at, he could see the panic on their faces.

No more than a second later, a massive lizard burst free of the treeline. The monster was several feet larger than the previous one that Arwin had fought. Its limbs scrabbled for purchase on the ground as it pursued the fleeing people, in what would have likely been fairly amusing if they hadn't been one bad step away from a grisly death.

There were several cuts along the lizard's body, and some of its scaled had been scorched black. Clearly, the two adventurers had bitten off a fight that was more than they could chew, but at least they hadn't completely failed to hurt it entirely.

Adventurers or not, I'm not going to sit around while someone gets ripped to death in front of me.

Arwin reached out to the Mesh even as he burst into motion, checking how big of a threat the monster posed.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 8]

I think I should be able to handle that with the aid of the items I've made. It would be better if I had full plate mail, but it's already wounded, which gives me an advantage I can use to tip the scales.

Arwin's feet pumped as he hit the ground. The lizard was gaining on the adventurers, but both groups were running straight at Arwin. He activated [Scourge], funneling power into his legs and bounding forward with a roar.

Shifting the focus of the magic into his arm, Arwin reared back and drove his fist into the monster's nose. A wave of magic rolled through him and the lizard's head snapped back, its momentum redirected. It tumbled across the ground and slammed into a rock with a loud crack.

Tremors raced down Arwin's hand and he shook it off with a muted curse, feeling pain pulse in his knuckles. Scourge made it so that his body could handle some of the nastier attacks he could make, but it didn't remove their impact entirely.

I'm pretty sure I just fractured a knuckle.

Even so, the strike had been to devastating effect. The lizard's scales had cracked around the impact zone and when it rose again, it staggered woozily. Blood dripped from its eardrums and its eyes were unfocused as it turned toward Arwin, baring its teeth in a warning hiss.

Arwin flexed his other hand and drew his sword, pointing it at the lizard and baring his teeth in challenge. He'd already eaten a good ways into his magical reserves, but he had enough for one or two more max power strikes.

That would be enough time for the adventurers to run for freedom, and with any luck, it would finish the lizard off as well and he'd be able to strip the entire thing of everything it had without having to share.

But, to Arwin's surprise, two pairs of footsteps ran up beside him. The man and woman skidded to a stop beside him.

"You've got good timing!" The man yelled, slamming his face visor down and drawing his own sword. "We've got your back!"

A wave of energy passed over Arwin, its warmth wrapping around his arm. He felt the cracked bones in his hand shift and re-connect. An immediate rush of relief washed over him, and the woman on his other side gave him a firm nod.

“I don’t have much energy left, but I can heal one more wound,” the woman said, her voice terse from exhaustion.

I honestly would have preferred if you both ran, but I suppose I can’t complain about them being respectable.

The lizard let out a screech and shook itself off. Its tongue flicked out and its claws dug into the dirt, launching it forward as it charged at them once again. Arwin and the armored man both stepped forward.

A glow enveloped the other man’s sword and he let out a battle cry, bringing it down for the charging lizard. The monster’s tail flicked out and he was forced to duck out of the way, his blow scraping across its scales but failing to land a meaningful strike.

Arwin took the opportunity to strike at the lizard with his own sword, thrusting it for one of the monster’s eyes. It hissed and pulled back, narrowly avoiding the strike. It retaliated with a swipe of its claw.

He twisted to the side, avoiding the majority of the attack but failing to dodge it completely. With a loud clang, the lizard’s claws cut through his shirt and hit the scale mail armor beneath it.

A rush of heat ran through Arwin's body as the armor activated, yanking away a portion of the power he'd been saving up for another [Scourge] empowered attack. Before he could even curse, a whip of molten fire snapped out and struck the lizard straight across the face.

It let out a pained scream and staggered back, flailing blindly. The other adventurer lunged, taking advantage of the monster's distraction to drive his sword for a large wound just below its shoulder.

His sword lit with a golden glow even as it drove deep into the lizard's flesh. It screamed in pain, and the man was forced to abandon his sword within it and jump back to keep himself from getting crushed.

He wasn't quite fast enough to completely dodge out of the way and the monster's tail snapped out, catching him in the leg and shattering armor and bone alike. The man cried out in pain and crumpled to the ground, falling onto his back and scrabbling to move himself away from the monster.

The Lizard thrashed as it tried to free the blade free from itself. Arwin ducked under a claw and jumped over its tail, driving his open palm toward the other man's sword. He drew on most of his remaining reserves to activate [Scourge] and drove his palm into the hilt of the blade.

It sunk all the way into the lizard, wreaking havoc on its internal organs and punching straight through its heart. The monster let out one final pained hiss and crashed to the ground before Arwin, lifeless.

Arwin turned as the woman ran up to the fallen man's side, a faint white glow emanating from her hands. She tugged on the armor on his legs, but the injury had warped it so badly that it was impossible to remove normally. Arwin strode up to join them and knelt beside the woman.

“Move,” Arwin said gruffly. “If you heal him now, the armor will just rip his leg up.”

He grabbed the top of the man’s greaves and, finally using the last dregs of power he had left, activated what he could of [Scourge]. Gritting his teeth with effort, Arwin pried the greaves open like a lobster shell.

It creaked in protest but pulled back, revealing the man’s mangled leg. Arwin pulled until it finally snapped and fell away. The woman immediately sent her magic into the wounded adventurer and his leg straightened, the injuries slowly fading away.

He’d been hurt considerably worse than Arwin had, so the healing took nearly thirty seconds. None of them spoke until the man finally let out a breath and flexed his toes. “Thanks, Anna. Good as new.”

“Forget me, you idiot,” Anna said, looking to Arwin with an appreciative smile. “What’s your name? You saved our asses.”

“Arwin.”

“I’m Anna, and this is Rodrick,” Anna said, helping the man sit up. “I don’t know if I’d recommend going into the forest right now. The monsters in there are all way more aggressive than they normally are. We had a small group of them collapse on us and we barely made it out.”

“There are more coming?” Arwin asked in alarm.

“No, this was the last of them,” Rodrick said with a laugh. “You really did save our asses, though. I was basically all out of energy, and Anna wasn’t far behind. Anyone ever tell you that you’ve got great timing?”

“I try,” Arwin said, letting out a huff. He pushed himself back to his feet.

“Are you an adventurer?” Anna asked. “I haven’t seen you around Milten.”

Arwin hesitated for a second, then shook his head. “No. Nothing like that. I’m just a…”

Just a what? I can’t say I’m a smith. Shit.

“...a wanderer,” Arwin finished lamely.

Rodrick pulled his helmet off his head, letting a mop of brown hair fall around a handsome face. “Just a wanderer, huh? Well, for not being an adventurer, you’re one strong bugger. Any way we can pay you back?”

“I’ll take the lizard’s body,” Arwin said, jerking a thumb toward it. “They’re useful.”

Rodrick tugged at his ear, then shrugged. “If that’s all you want, sure. Normally, people don’t help out for that little. You aren’t going to ask for gold or something?”

I could have done that? Well, too late to do it now. The body is more useful anyway.

“This is more than enough. No need for me to be greedy.”

“World could use a few more people like that.” Anna sent a pointed glance at Rodrick, whose cheeks went red.

“We would have been fine if we had a full party. We almost handled all those lizards on our own. Imagine how much better it would have gone if we had someone else to keep them off you,” Rodrick said, clearing his throat sheepishly. “Anyway, thanks for the help, Arwin. If we ever see you in a tavern, I’ll get you a drink.”

“Thanks,” Arwin said, starting to turn toward the lizard. “I’ll be going, then.”

“Actually, do you have a moment?”

Arwin and Rodrick both turned to Anna in surprise.

“What is it?” Arwin asked.

“Well, you handled yourself pretty well and traveling alone is dangerous,” Anna said.

“Do you think you might like to temporarily join our party?”

Chapter 22

Arwin nearly choked on his own saliva. “I’m sorry?”

“You don’t just ask people to join your party, Anna,” Rodrick scolded. He adjusted the remains of his greaves, looking down at the shredded remains of his pants and coughing into his fist. “We could use another member, though. No commitments or anything, but I’d really like to get a bit deeper into the forest.”

Arwin nearly refused on the spot, but he hesitated before the words could leave his mouth. In his current form, he really couldn’t fight more than one monster every hour or two before running out of energy.

Having some help from people that knew what they were doing would be pretty useful. Anna and Rodrick seemed fairly genuine as well. Of course, they were still adventurers – but having two extra bodies to stand by him so he could push deeper into the forest was hard to deny.

Reya isn’t going to be ready for anything like this for a bit. She doesn’t know how to fight and doesn’t have a class yet. These two are trained. I think it might actually be beneficial to take them up on their offer.

“Just for today,” Arwin said after a few more seconds of deliberation. “But it isn’t going to be a regular thing, and you’ll have to help me carry some of the loot. You can keep anything we get that isn’t from the monsters, but I want the bodies.”

Anna and Rodrick exchanged a glance, then both nodded.

“That works!” Anna said. “We need around an hour to recover.”

“That should be enough for me as well, and I need to take this thing apart anyway.”

Arwin jerked his chin toward the body of the Forest Lizard. If they were going deeper into the forest, he doubted he’d be able to strip every single piece of every single monster he fought, so the claws and teeth would have to be abandoned. The scales were considerably more useful to him at the moment, and they were also much easier to carry.

By the time Arwin finished with his work, his hands were covered with blood and he had a small pile of scales at his feet. He’d discarded all the damaged ones – it wasn’t like they were going to have any shortage of material, so he had no reason to bring along anything that wasn’t high quality.

Arwin wiped his hands off on the grass and rose to his feet. Rodrick and Anna sat a few paces way from him, where they’d been watching him descale the monster. Both had offered to help, but neither had a sword or a dagger small enough to safely remove anything without damaging it – and Arwin wasn’t about to lend his potentially explosive weapon out.

“All finished?” Rodrick asked, mirroring Arwin and standing up. He brushed the dirt off his backside, then helped Anna up. “I’m just about ready to go, so you’ve got some good timing.”

“I just need find a way to carry this,” Arwin said, chewing his lower lip and scratching his back sheepishly. “I didn’t bring a bag.”

“I’ve got you.” Rodrick pulled the bag off his back and unbuckled the belts holding the top down, revealing it to be largely empty aside from a change of clothes and an empty potion vial or two.

He and Arwin scooped the scales into the bag, filling it a good half of the way up. Compared to the number of broken and damaged scales littering the ground, it felt like a rather small amount.

I definitely would have gotten more if the thing wasn't so beat to hell. But, if I kill a few more of them, it'll hardly matter. I'm more interested to see what this forest has to offer.

“Thanks,” Arwin said with a nod as the two of them straightened back up and Rodrick slung the bag back over his shoulder.

“No problem. It’s easy enough, but you might want to get a bag at some point in the future if you’re going adventuring alone.”

“I’ll add it to the list.”

“How deep into the forest are you comfortable going?” Anna asked. “We’re just trying to get some kills to get stronger, but I’ve heard there are some pretty choice monsters deeper in there. There’s also the Unique roaming around somewhere.”

Arwin tilted his head to the side, his interest piqued. “A Unique monster? Do we know anything about it?”

“You don’t?” Anna sent Arwin a shocked look. “Isn’t that the main reason to come here?”

“I just like scales.”

Anna’s eyes flicked down to his exposed scale mail and she covered her mouth, letting out a small laugh. “Okay, fair enough. There’s a Wurm somewhere in the forest. Nothing too crazy, rumored to be at low Journeyman Tier. But still, it’s a Wurm. Could you imagine if it had a horde?”

Could you imagine what I could do with that thing’s body?

Wait, that sounds off. I didn’t mean—

“No need to be scared,” Rodrick said, completely misreading the expression on Arwin’s face. “Wyrms stick to their dens. They’re related to dragons, but in the same way that a normal lizard is related to the bugger we just killed. It might have a horde and some interesting shinies, but nothing that it’ll abandon to kill us.”

Unless you’ve got fresh meat of anything they consider prey on you. That’s a great way to lure them out of their nests, though. Wyrms are dangerous because they fight in enclosed spaces. Get them outside and they’re easy pickings.

“Arwin?” Anna asked, a note of concern in her voice. “If you’re not comfortable with the Wurm, we could always stick to the edges of the forest. There are more than enough monsters to fight in the area.”

“No, no. I just got distracted,” Arwin said with a wave of his hand. Either Rodrick and Anna didn’t know how to fight Wyrms or they just didn’t mention it because they had no plans of fighting the monster. Either way, he wasn’t anywhere near prepared to handle a Journeyman Tier. Not yet, at least.

“I’m good with going deeper, but let’s take things slow,” Arwin suggested. “You said the monsters were being unusually aggressive, right? It’s pretty warm out, so it could be mating season.”

Anna stared at him. “What?”

“What?” Arwin mirrored. “Is something wrong?”

“What does mating season have to do with how the monsters are acting?” Rodrick asked. “And why do you know that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Arwin countered. “If you want to master fighting an enemy, you need to understand them. It’s not enough to just know how to swing a stick around. Knowing the circumstances that changes monsters’ actions is just as important as being able to fight individual monsters.”

“You... study that?” Anna asked slowly. “Is that what you are? Some form of monster researcher?”

Oh, shit. Is this really not common knowledge? I thought everyone knew about it, but I did spend years studying monster behavior whilst fighting the Demon Queen. It was hard not to pick up on a few things. I figured the Guild would have taught something as basic as this, though...

“It’s just a hobby,” Arwin said with a dismissive wave. “Either way, if it’s mating season, we just have to avoid the groups of monsters and go after the loners that couldn’t get the interest of another monster. We should be able to avoid getting swarmed that way.”

“That’s... kind of sad,” Rodrick said. A grin spread across his face and he gave Arwin a sharp nod. “But, if it works, that would be huge. I was starting to wonder if we needed to get a bigger party or if the monsters were forming into a horde.”

“Well, we don’t know for sure. I’m just taking a guess at it,” Arwin said with a one-shouldered shrug. “Only way to find out is to head in and see what we find.”

“True enough.” Rodrick hoisted his sword and gestured to the forest. “Shall we?”

Arwin nodded, and the three of them set off into the woods.

Sticks crunched beneath their feet as they walked, Arwin and Rodrick taking up Anna’s sides to make sure the more vulnerable mage couldn’t get ambushed. As they continued, Arwin found that he was spending considerably more attention on his new companions than he was on his surroundings.

This was far from the first forest he’d been in, and it wasn’t anything to write home about. It had trees, dirt, and a general scent of distant rain. He’d probably been in about twenty others just like this one, and the only thing missing from those scenes was the thick stench of blood.

Anna and Rodrick, on the other hand, were new. Arwin had traveled with a lot of adventurers. He’d been pretty confident that he’d met just about every kind of person that entered the trade.

All the men and women that joined to pursue riches, and the ones that just reveled in slaughter. The rare ones that did it to protect others, and the ones that liked being the center of attention.

These two didn't seem to fall into any of the categories. As they walked, instead of keeping to a tight formation, they spoke in hushed words, tiny smiles and laughs dancing between them.

It was like they were out on a picnic, not in enemy territory. Arwin couldn't tell if it was driving him up a wall or intriguing him. He'd bantered with his former colleagues, but only before and after the jobs were done, or if they were doing something so easy that it didn't require any attention.

Rodrick and Anna weren't nearly that strong. They should have been as careful as possible, checking every shadow to make sure nothing lurked in it. But, instead, they were having fun.

They're being fairly quiet, so it's not like they're stupid. They're just... carefree. Odd. It's certainly more relaxed than I'm used to, but it does make me wonder what'll happen when we get closer to a monster.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. Rodrick held a hand up and Anna abruptly snapped her mouth shut, freezing in place. Arwin mirrored the motion, having seen similar gestures more times than he could count.

Rodrick nodded into the forest, then leaned in closer to them to whisper.

"I'm picking up some movement in that direction. Sounds like a few different things." Rodrick tapped the side of his helm and sent a look at Arwin. "I'm a Warrior, by the way. Have a few sense enhancements."

“How many of them are there? Are they headed toward us?” Anna asked in a hushed tone.

“Can’t tell. Probably four. And they don’t seem to be heading in any direction in particular. They’re just moving around next to each other.”

“Maybe Arwin was right,” Anna said. “Let’s just avoid them. Can you pick anything else up?”

Rodrnick started to shake his head, but he stopped a second into the motion. A small grin passed across his lips and he turned to the side, squinting through the trees. “It’s kind of distant, but there’s something shuffling around over there. Not too big, I don’t think. It’s not cracking a lot of leaves.”

“Sounds like it could be a good target,” Arwin said.

Fast swap from being relaxed to working. They aren’t new to this.

“Lead the way, then,” Anna said.

“With pleasure,” Rodrick said. “Say, how do you think the lizards taste?”

A bit like really dry chicken.

“Probably horrible,” Anna said.

“Probably,” Rodrick agreed. He set off into the forest and the others moved alongside him, their conversation dropping off as they did their best to avoid making any more noise while closing in on their prey.

Chapter 23

It wasn't a lizard they found but a large, silver-furred wolf curled up against a tree. Rodrick was the first to spot it, but by the time he'd pointed the resting monster out, Arwin had already located it himself.

There were probably a number of things he could do with a wolf pelt or its claws, but none of them were anything he knew much about yet. Still, it would have been rude to refuse to fight something purely because he didn't need to.

Besides, maybe I could make a rug out of it or something. Or a bed. Now that I think about it, I could definitely use it.

Rodrick gestured to the wolf, then raised his sword and nodded to Arwin, indicating that he'd attack first and that Arwin could follow up behind him. Arwin inclined his head in agreement, and Rodrick crept forward.

He moved with surprising grace, avoiding most of the dry foliage on the ground as he advanced. Whether by accident or on purpose, they were downwind of the monster, so it wasn't going to pick up on their smell.

Rodrick's sword shimmered with light as he lifted it into the air and brought it down with a sharp chop. The monster's eyes snapped open at the motion, but it was too late. It barely even got a second to react before the blade struck home, carving through its neck and killing it in a single blow.

That was well executed.

“Clean,” Arwin said with an approving nod. “Have you been an adventurer for a long time?”

“Nah,” Rodrick replied with a shake of his head. “My dad was a woodsman. Taught me a bunch of stuff before he retired. I only became an adventurer after I met Anna. It’s just that a lot of the skills overlap.”

That would explain his more carefree attitude. If he’s spent his whole life in the forests, then it would only be natural for him to be more comfortable within them.

“How does a woodsman not know about monster mating seasons?” Arwin asked.

Rodrick’s cheeks reddened and he cleared his throat as he wiped his sword off on the grass. “I wasn’t a woodsman. My dad was. I was, ah, how do you put it? More—”

“More interested in being a flirt,” Anna finished with a smirk. “He only went into the woods to hunt things to show off to me. Can’t say it didn’t work, though.”

“And, more importantly, it looks like Arwin was right,” Rodrick said. He glanced around, then lowered his sword. “No monsters. They’re all off screwing each other.”

“Mating season it is,” Arwin said. “There’s a phenomenon where all monsters start mating at the same time in an area, even though they’re entirely unrelated species that have no compatibility. One group starts, and then the others all follow.”

“Sounds like they’re hor—”

Anna shot Rodrick a sharp look and he cut himself off with a cough.

“Well, shall we continue?” Rodrick asked.

“Sure,” Arwin said. “But first, let me try to get the fur from this wolf. It could make a nice rug. By the way, how was it that you and Anna got surprised if you can hear this well?”

“That would be because I was being lazy,” Rodrick admitted as he rubbed the back of his head and his shoulders slumped. “Having my hearing like this takes a toll on me. Gives me a headache like no tomorrow with all the noise I have to filter through, and we’ve gotten pretty used to this area since we moved to Milten a few months ago. Didn’t think I’d need to be using all my strength out here.”

“Complacency is usually the way people get killed,” Arwin said as he dug his sword into the wolf and started to separate the flesh from the pelt as best he could.

I wish I had a dagger, but I’m not taking back the one that I gave Reya. It’s not all that useful to me, and using it to gut animals would be a huge waste. I’ll make another when I get back.

“It sounds like you’re speaking from experience,” Anna said softly.

“I am.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope we haven’t offended you.”

Arwin shook his head. “The dead aren’t going to sleep any better if I tiptoe around them. It’s in the past. Just be careful if you don’t want to join them.”

After Arwin liberated a rather ragged pelt from the wolf, he and his newfound party trawled the forest for three more hours. Using Rodrick’s advanced senses, they avoided several other large groups of monsters and picked off the lone ones they came across. Between avoiding

the groups and the time it took Arwin to remove the pieces from the monsters, they only ended up killing three more – one wolf and two lizards.

Arwin draped the wolves' pelts over his shoulders and stuffed Rodrick's bag completely full of scales until it bulged at the seams. Even though they'd only taken out a few more monsters, none of the fights had been anywhere near as dangerous as the first.

When they made their way back out of the forest, Arwin couldn't deny that he was pleased. It was a far better haul than he could have gotten on his own, and now he had enough materials to really practice with the scales and hopefully find some new ways to put them together.

The trio made their way back to Milten, only coming to a stop when they passed through the gates and entered the city.

"Whereabouts do you live?" Rodrick asked. "I don't mind dropping your stuff off for you."

Arwin paused. He hadn't thought through what he'd do with all the loot *after* they got back. Nobody other than Reya and Lillia knew where he lived, and he rather liked it that way. Of course, he'd have to reveal it at some point when he started selling his normal weaponry, but the only thing he had to show was a broken-down smithy that definitely didn't look livable.

"Not everyone wants to share where they live," Anna scolded. "Just give him your bag. He can give it back next time."

There was an unspoken invitation in her words, and it was one that Arwin was surprised to find he wasn't opposed to.

“What do you think?” Rodrick asked.

“I wouldn’t mind it,” Arwin allowed. “I’m not sure when I’ll next be hunting, though.”

“That’s fine. Just ask for Rodrick or Anna at the Glowing Swordfish,” Rodrick said. “It’s an inn we’ve been hanging out in. Fair warning, though. Place is run by a greedy asshole that’ll try to charge you for breathing. Just ask one of the patrons for us, not the bartender. He completely runs our pockets. I’d kill for a tavern that actually lets people stay without trying to rinse them clean.”

“Stop complaining,” Anna said. “We’re lucky there was an inn that accepted adventurers that weren’t part of the Guild.”

Arwin blinked. “Wait, you aren’t in the Guild?”

“No,” Rodrick said. He pulled the pack off his shoulder and held it out to Arwin. “Didn’t make the cut when I tested for them a year ago. I reckon I could make it now, but haven’t bothered. Anna was part of them, but she left when I couldn’t get in.”

“You aren’t missing out,” Arwin said. He took the pack from Rodrick with a nod. “Thanks for this. Did you want to take anything out before you gave it to me? I’ll give it all back, of course. It just might be a day or two.”

“We’ll be fine,” Anna said with a smile. “Looking forward to working with you again.”

“Likewise,” Rodrick said. He raised a hand in farewell and set off with Anna at his side. Arwin turned and left in the other direction, making for the dark alleyway at the back of the city that he called home.

I can't wait to see what I can make with all this extra material.

“You look more energetic than normal today,” Lillia said as she stepped out of her kitchen with a plate of what she was *fairly* sure were pancakes. She’d learned the recipe by spying through the window of another tavern the previous night and had memorized the majority of the ingredients that went into them.

Getting her hands on the ingredients had been considerably harder, but she’d managed to scrounge up enough coin from what Reya had been paying her to splurge. She set the pancakes on the table and Reya’s eyes widened.

“New dish?”

“Yeah. What do you think?” Lillia asked, taking a step back.

“Well, it’s kind of hard to see in the darkness,” Reya hedged. “I do see a stack of stuff, though. That’s probably a good thing.”

Damn it. I really need to do something about the environment if I ever want to get more customers.

“It’s fine!” Reya said hurriedly. “I’m sure it tastes great! I can’t wait to eat!”

Lillia stepped to the side and Reya shifted. A small frown flitted across Lillia’s face.

“What are you doing?”

“Doing? What do you mean?”

“You’re hiding something.”

“What? How’d you know?” Reya demanded, glaring in Lillia’s direction. She missed by a few inches, but she was just a human, so Lillia didn’t blame her.

Damn darkness.

“I know a lot of things. What do you have? Ingredients?”

“Something better,” Reya said. She lifted her hands, setting a package on the table. It had been wrapped in discarded brown paper and had an odd, oblong shape. “It’s for you.”

Lillia pulled the papers apart, her nose picking up the faint scent of blood. She was pretty sure Reya had found the paper discarded at the butchery, but the package didn’t smell nearly enough of meat to be –

Her eyes widened. Before her eyes, which were adapted perfectly to see in the dark, was a beautifully made pan. She ran her hands over its surface, feeling the individual hammer strokes that had molded the metal.

“Where’d you find this?” Lillia asked in awe. “It’s incredible. Did you steal it?”

“Nope! Arwin made it for you! I did steal the paper, though. You should probably wash the pan before you use it. The paper was lying crumpled out back of a butchery when I found it, and I think a few people might have stepped on it. Still, some wrapping is better than none.”

“Arwin made this?” Lillia asked, tearing her gaze away from the pan and looking to Reya.

“Yeah. Last night. He said he’d try to get some utensils as well at some point.”

I didn’t think he’d actually make me anything. Is he expecting pay? I barely have enough money to keep cooking right now. Or is this a trick? It’s not magical is it?

Lillia squinted at the pan, but it appeared to just be a normal pan. There was always the chance it was Unique and could hide its properties, but that felt like a little too much to do.

Besides, they *had* called a truce.

“I – oh. That was... kind of him,” Lillia said, the words feeling strange in her mouth.

“Was there something he wanted in return?”

“It’s a gift, as far as I know,” Reya said. “He just said to give it to you.”

Why didn't he bring it himself then?

“Oh!” Reya exclaimed, cutting off Lillia’s thoughts. “We also talked about your tavern.”

“You did?”

“Yeah! Arwin thinks you should make it scarier.”

Lillia stared at Reya. “You think I should make my already inhospitable tavern... worse? Is he trying to make sure I never get a customer?”

Reya shook her head hurriedly, holding up a hand as her brow creased in thought. “Wait, I got too excited and ended up misspeaking. Not just scarier. He thinks you should lean into the stuff about you more, and I think he’s right. It’s really hard to change yourself into something you think will attract people, so you should focus on the things that you already do and make those better instead.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Lillia said. “You’re saying I should make it even *darker* in here?”

“Not darker. Scarier. Make it more like the lair of a monster, and then sell it as a monster inn or something. The rest of the alley already fits that motif anyway. I was thinking you could

dress up as the Demon Queen! It would be hilarious. People would love the atmosphere because of how ridiculous it was.”

Lillia choked, coughing as her saliva went down the wrong pipe. She pounded a fist against her chest and cleared her throat, staring at Reya through squinted eyes. The girl looked completely sincere.

What in the Nine Underlands, Arwin? I thought we had a bloody unspoken agreement!

“That was Arwin’s suggestion?” Lillia asked in disbelief.

“No, I came up with that myself. He just said you should dress yourself and the other waiters – when you get them – like monsters. Don’t you think that would be pretty unique?”

Lillia tilted her head to the side. It was tempting to laugh in Reya’s face, but she was so genuine that she had to take a moment to actually consider the idea. And, to her surprise, it wasn’t as horrible as she thought.

Things were often easiest to hide when in plain sight. Going so far as to pretend to be the thing that she quite literally was – that was so ludicrous that it was unlikely anyone would ever see through it.

“Hmm,” Lillia said, mulling over the sound as she rolled it around in her mouth. “I can’t believe I’m admitting this, but that actually sounds like it might have some potential.”

“We could start bringing some bodies to hang from the walls,” Reya offered.

Lillia grimaced, but it slipped off her face as excitement started to take root. “Let’s hold off on that and stick to small things for a bit longer, shall we? I’m going to need to get some money if I want to do anything, but I think you might have given me some ideas as to how.”

Chapter 24

Arwin's hammer broke.

If anything, it was a surprise that it had lasted this long. He'd been working on trying to hammer the scales whilst they were still in the hearth, which probably hadn't been his smartest idea, but he wanted a way to connect them that was better than scale mail.

Even though Arwin had taken care to avoid letting the wood get too close to the fire, there was only so much he could do. It wasn't like the hammer had been in great shape to start with, and the extra stress on it finally proved to do it in.

Arwin didn't even bother trying to pull the handle from the fire. He watched it burn beside the red-hot scales, his nose screwed up in annoyance. It had been two days since he'd gotten back from the hunting trip, and he'd spent both of them completely focused on working with the scales.

If he'd focused on making what he already knew how to make, it wouldn't have been a problem to make a few more magical items. But, instead, Arwin put everything he had into figuring out how to make himself greaves.

He'd made a pair of scale mail greaves without too much difficulty, but they'd taken hours and just didn't sit right with him. It wasn't like they were bad – for his first attempt, they were pretty decent. His practice had started to spill over, but they still weren't perfect.

The second attempt had ended with similar lackluster results, which had led him to his attempts to hammer the scales together into a single plate rather than individual links. Arwin had

been pretty sure that he'd been making progress – but all of that had ended with the breaking of his hammer.

“Well, that’s annoying,” Arwin said. He tossed the head of the hammer in his hand, chewing his lower lip as he tried to figure out what to do next. There wasn’t a good answer beyond the most obvious one – he had to go buy a tool to work with.

At some point, I need to make myself a hammer, but I need a hammer to make a hammer. Now isn't that a paradox? Armor first, though – or greaves, at the very least. I feel like a moron walking around with just my chest piece.

That meant he needed to go shopping, and shopping meant he needed money. He'd been unwilling to sell anything subpar the last time he'd gone to the market, but things had changed slightly since then.

Arwin had absolutely no plans of putting anything magical up for sale, but even though the scale mail greaves weren't the greatest things he'd made, they were definitely still nothing to be ashamed of.

Reckon I could probably sell these for enough money to buy myself a hammer and maybe some more metal to work with. The problem will be actually selling them in the first place. Nobody wanted to buy anything the last time we went to the market.

Either way, I might as well return the bag to Rodrick and Anna while I'm at it. I don't want to hold onto this thing forever when they're waiting for it back.

Arwin gathered the two pairs of greaves he'd made and slung them over his shoulder. He snagged the bag that Rodrick had given him and headed out of the smithy. Reya was still out

doing whatever it was she did during the day, but Arwin wasn't all that concerned about someone breaking in. He had all his magical items on him and it wasn't like there were many people on the street in the first place.

He made his way through the city, keeping to the side of the road to avoid drawing too much attention. Arwin was more than aware that his clothes were still the ratty, filthy ones that the Brothers Six had worn, and he probably didn't look particularly friendly in them.

Just another thing I need to eventually invest in. Gah. I really need a good way to start making money, but I refuse to make magical weapons for random people. Selling these greaves will be a good start.

Once I build a name for myself, maybe I could interview people that want magic items. I could even sell it as me personalizing it for them, and then just refuse to make things for people I don't like.

I rather like the idea of that, actually.

A small grin slipped across Arwin's features and his pace increased as he continued through the city. He didn't actually know where the Glowing Swordfish was, but after wandering around pointlessly for a while he accosted a few passersby until one of them directed him in the direction of the inn.

The Glowing Swordfish was a three-story stone building that looked like it had been made in the previous century. Shingles hung crooked on its tall roofs, and many of the windows had been boarded over.

A wooden sign bearing the faded carving of a blob with a point at its end that was probably meant to be a swordfish hung askew above a wooden door whose knob had fallen off. Arwin approached it and hooked a finger into the hole to pull the door open.

The smell of dust and stale bread greeted him as he stepped into the common room, which was surprisingly busy despite the depressing exterior – and, for that matter, interior. There were half a dozen tables with mismatched chairs scattered around the room across from a bar that seated four people.

Around three quarters of the tables were populated with adventurers, and fairly decently equipped ones at that. Many of them had armor that made Arwin's Mesh tingle in recognition, but he couldn't see the information on most of their equipment, which meant they'd gotten strong enough to hide it from weaker outsiders.

That wasn't saying much given Arwin's return to the Apprentice Tier, but it felt off to see so many relatively strong looking adventurers sitting around in such a dump. He would have wondered if the food here had something special about it if he couldn't smell it in its complete and utter mediocrity.

A chubby man in a dirty smock that Arwin presumed to be the bartender stood at the other end of the bar, his nose buried in a book. Arwin took a moment to study the bar, checking to see if it was doing anything to draw customers that Lillia could do.

The thought caught in his head a moment after he thought it and a small frown flitted across his lips.

Why do I care what the Demon Queen is doing with her time? She's not hurting anybody, and that's all that matters. It was my job to kill her, not help her.

Arwin shook his head and glanced around the tavern in hopes that Rodrick or Anna would already be down eating somewhere. Unfortunately, he had no such luck. They'd specified that he wasn't to ask the bartender about them to avoid getting scammed, but the idea of just belting their names out at the top of his lungs didn't feel particularly inviting.

Oh well. I don't feel like dancing around this for too long.

Clearing his throat, Arwin drew in a deep breath and called out Rodrick's name. Several people glanced up at him, but not a single one so much as reacted. An annoyed frown played across the bartender's face, but he didn't speak a word.

Looks like they're used to it. How cheap do you have to be to refuse to let people know when others show up looking for them? Wouldn't you make way more money by having an inn that people want to stay at?

Arwin didn't have to sit around wondering for long. After about a minute, footsteps rang out against the stairs as Rodrick headed into the bottom floor of the inn. Arwin barely recognized him in his normal cloth clothes rather than his armor.

"Good to see you again," Rodrick said when he reached the bottom of the stairs and made his way over to Arwin.

"Came to deliver your bag." Arwin held it out to Rodrick. "I appreciate it."

"Any time," Rodrick replied. "Really, we're the ones that got away with the biggest wins. You barely dealt the finishing blow on anything."

Arwin shrugged. He wasn't about to tell Rodrick that dealing the finishing blow was completely worthless for him. Whoever finished the monster off drew more of its life energy into

themselves and advanced to the next Tier faster – but when Arwin didn't get energy from killing things at all, it didn't even matter if he participated in the fight at all.

Now that I think about it, aren't crafting classes almost guaranteed to get more skills than combat ones are? You grow at a much faster rate when killing monsters than it feels like you do by crafting. I wonder if that's intentional – like a way to balance things out.

“Don't worry about finishing blows. I was interested in the materials far more than anything else,” Arwin said with a shake of his head.

Rodrick looked to the greaves on Arwin's shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “It looks like you put them to pretty quick use. You brought them to a smith to see if they could make anything good?”

“Something like that,” Arwin said. “I didn't love how they turned out, though.”

“Why?” Rodrick asked. “They look decent enough. Do you prefer heavy armor or something?”

“I do,” Arwin said. “But they're also non-magical, which is less than ideal. I'd prefer my gear to be of higher quality.”

A bark of laughter slipped out of Rodrick's lips and he slapped Arwin on the shoulder, nodding as if Arwin had just said a hilarious joke. “Wouldn't we all? I tell you – I wouldn't settle for anything less than Legendary gear, and it's all got to be part of a synchronized set. Nothing else is worthy.”

A full set of legendary gear would be rather nice, actually. I'm not sure what the funny part is meant to be. Does Rodrick not have any magical gear at all?

“How much are you looking to sell that stuff for? I usually use heavy gear as well, but my greaves got mauled – though I suppose you were there for said mauling. I need a replacement and haven’t found anything in budget yet,” Rodrick said.

“I haven’t put too much thought into it yet,” Arwin admitted. “I was planning on taking them to a smith and seeing if they’d buy them at a cut cost to sell themselves.”

“Buy from one smith, sell to another? What are you trying to do, start a crafter turf war?” Rodrick snorted. “What about twenty-five gold? You’d probably be able to get better if you went to a real merchant, though.”

Twenty-five isn’t bad. I paid about ten for a bunch of materials from Taylor, the other blacksmith. He blatantly overcharged me, so I think I’d be making decent money from this. Enough to save myself some trouble, at the least.

“I wouldn’t argue that at all, twenty-five sounds good to me. You might want to make sure they fit, though,” Arwin said, holding the greaves out to Rodrick, who dug around in a pouch at his side to count out the gold.

“We’re not that different in size, so it should be fine,” Rodrick said, exchanging the gold for the pair of greaves with a nod. “And you cut me a pretty good deal, so I don’t mind if it’s a bit loose. Damn, though. Look at these things glitter in the light. They’re pretty.”

Rodrick held the greaves up, to the dirty windows, and Arwin was pleased to agree that they shimmered pleasantly. Even though they weren’t magical, he was pretty pleased with how they’d turned out.

“I hope they serve you well,” Arwin said.

“I’m sure they will. I’m pretty sure you cut me a great deal. What are you going to do with the other pair?”

“Probably still try to sell it. A little more gold would go a long way.”

“How much?” a woman asked. Arwin and Rodrick both turned toward its source – a middle-aged woman sitting at a table alone, clad in normal clothes but with a well-worn sword hanging at her side. There was a twinkle of interest in her blue eyes, hidden behind strands of black hair. “I haven’t seen anyone try to make anything out of Forest Lizard scales before. You found a pretty interesting blacksmith there, lad. If you’re still looking to sell, then I’d be willing to bargain.”

Chapter 25

“You want to buy these?” Arwin asked, trying not to sound surprised. Sure, he’d fully planned to find someone to sell his work to, but Rodrick almost felt like he didn’t count. He’d met the other man already and they’d worked together, so it was different.

The woman at the table – at least as far as Arwin was aware – was someone he’d never seen before. A small part of him was mildly surprised that someone he didn’t know would want to buy some of his work.

“That’s what you’re aiming for, isn’t it?” she asked, holding a hand out. “I’m Tix?”

“Arwin.” He shook her hand.

“Pleasure, Arwin. Mind letting me take a closer look at those fancy little things?”

Arwin shrugged and handed over the greaves. Tix ran her hands over the scales, checking the inside of the armor out. Her expression was unreadable, but Arwin could tell she was interested by how much time she spent staring at the way he'd woven the metal through the scales.

He derived no little amount of pride from that. It had been a huge pain to weave metal and scale together, and even though it wasn't a style he had any interest in making a lot more gear in once he found a better way or material to work with, it had still been a lot of work.

"This is quite the piece," Tix mused. "What was the name of the smith that made these? They're not from around Milten."

"He's a little reclusive," Arwin said. There was no need to throw caution to the wind quite yet. "How'd you know he's not from the area, though?"

"Nobody in this backwoods little town bothers experimenting," Tix replied with a smirk. "The person that made this was clearly trying to improve, not just churn out the same piece of shit over and over again."

"Well, I'll pass your compliment along if I ever see him again," Arwin said.

"That's not to say this is perfect. There are some pretty obvious imperfections," Tix said, tapping some points on the greaves where the metal hadn't been perfectly bent or twisted and where some of the scales had been slightly tarnished. "Still, this is a nice piece. You sold one to the other bloke for twenty-five gold, yeah?"

"I did," Arwin confirmed.

"I'll do the same, if you're offering it."

“That was a friend rate,” Rodrick pointed out. “Shouldn’t you offer him a bit better?”

Tix shrugged. “I’m buying it as a novelty, not to use. You never know where people will go in the future, and it could be worth a lot in the future – or perhaps it’ll be worthless. Twenty-five is a fair price for the time Arwin would save trying to sell it to some hawker that would take two hours before settling on thirty.”

“Fair enough,” Arwin said with a shrug. “Twenty-five works for me. I’m not planning to make a living off selling scale mail greaves, so that’s more than enough coin for my purposes.”

Tix pulled a small bag out of her pocket and counted coin into it, tossing it up to Arwin. He grabbed it, then tucked the bag into a pocket.

“Pleasure,” Tix said. “Did you say where the smith lived?”

“No,” Arwin said. “I did not.”

“Real reclusive, eh? Well, do you know if he’s got any plans of showing himself in the near future?” Tix asked, tucking the greaves under an arm and rocking back in her chair. “I’d love to have a chat with him.”

“I don’t know, but if he does decide to do something, I’ll let him know to try and get the word out,” Arwin said smoothly. Getting extra gold was great, but he wasn’t about to give away his living situation to someone he didn’t know.

“Any idea where word might get out?” Tix asked, tilting her head to the side. “Maybe an inn that he frequents? Here, perhaps?”

Something gripped Arwin. He wasn’t sure quite what it was, but he spoke before the thoughts fully processed in his mind. “I heard that someone was thinking about starting a

monster themed tavern somewhere in the city. Maybe an inn too – I’m not sure. It was just rumor, but the smith said he’d likely be around that area. He liked how secluded it was. Keep an ear to the ground for that.”

“A themed tavern?” Tix inclined an eyebrow, then smiled. “That sounds rather fun, actually. Thanks for the information and the greaves, Arwin. Today was just a little bit more interesting than I was expecting.”

With that, Tix pushed her chair back, downed the rest of her tankard, and headed up the stairs at the far side of the dining room. Arwin and Rodrick watched her leave, then exchanged a glance.

“You know her?” Arwin asked.

“No. Never seen her before,” Rodrick replied. “She carries herself like a warrior, though. Seems like a pretty strong one at that.”

“I was thinking the same.”

“Speaking of warriors,” Rodrick hedged, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. “Were you planning on heading out to hunt monsters again anytime soon? Anna and I are running a bit low on gold and we need to start taking on jobs again.”

Arwin scratched the side of his chin. Right now, he was a little more concerned with upgrading his smithy and getting back to work than he was with killing more monsters, and he still had a good amount of scales to work with.

“I’m not sure I had anything planned yet, but I suppose it depends what you were doing. My... friend is working on setting out to earn herself a Class, and I was planning on helping her

get that fairly soon. I have some preparation I need to do before I set out hunting again. When were you planning on leaving?"

"No rush, I'd say." Rodrick cleared his throat, then amended himself. "Okay, a little rush. The end of the week?"

It took Arwin a few seconds to remember that it was Thirdday. The days had lost a lot of their meaning when he was locked up in the smithy working.

Six more days, then. I can handle most of what I need to do by then, and I'll be needing to make a magical item to eat as well soon. I'll probably have used up most of my supplies by then as well.

"That should work," Arwin said. "I might even free up a little earlier, but if you end up finding a different person to head out with you, feel free to work with them. If not, I'll swing by the inn again in a few days."

"Perfect," Rodrick said with a grin. "Thanks again, Arwin. I've never been happier to have gotten my ass saved from a horny lizard by a random homeless man, but I'm looking forward to working with you again."

Arwin glanced down at his clothes. "Is it really that bad?"

"In more ways than one." Rodrick tapped his nose pointedly, then smirked. "We can't all be perfect, though. I've dealt with some nasty bastards in my time, and I know Anna has seen worse. Some adventurers wouldn't know what a brick of soap was unless it had a Title associated with it."

Arwin coughed into his fist as Rodrick chuckled and waved farewell, heading back up the stairs to his room. He left the inn, his pockets fifty gold heavier. It had been a long time since Arwin had done any proper shopping, so he wasn't exactly certain how far fifty gold would actually take him, but based on what the smith had sold him for ten, he was pretty sure it would be enough.

His first task wasn't getting more materials, though. As tempting as that was, he had a basic level of hygiene that he still had to keep, and Arwin didn't want to think about how long it had been since he'd last properly cleaned himself.

He stopped by a tailor, buying three sets of clothing that he was pretty sure would fit him. He went with one of the cheapest options they had, opting to pay just two gold for the lot. None of it was worth writing home about, but it was better than what he was currently wearing.

Arwin then set a course for the nearest bathhouse and lightened his purse by a gold, getting nine silver back in return. That in its entirety took about two hours – Arwin barely wanted to leave the bath once he got in, but he eventually dragged himself out and changed into his new clothes before setting off to handle the real task for the day.

Priority number 1 is a hammer, one made entirely from metal rather than one with a wood handle. After that, I can split the gold between materials and things I can use to repair the smithy a bit. It really does need some patching up. A proper bed would be good too – I don't want to sleep on a wolf pelt.

Arwin meandered his way across town and to the market square. He wasn't sure where to get most things in Milten, but he did know the location of a blacksmith. This time, though, he'd just be a normal customer.

Taylor's smithy had a few people milling about in it when Arwin arrived, which was just fine with him. He didn't need the extra attention right now. His eyes scanned the room and quickly landed on a plain metal hammer made from rough black metal at the back of the store.

Picking the hammer up, Arwin tested its weight in his hands. It felt good. Not too heavy, but definitely heavier than the previous one. It had a sturdiness to it that sat right in Arwin's grip.

Solid. This should suit my needs perfectly for the time being.

Arwin spent a little time looking around the rest of the store, taking in the weapons and armor hanging from the walls. The majority of Taylor's goods looked to go for between ten and one hundred gold, depending on their detail and size.

A few of them, such as an ornate breastplate, were a much heftier four or five hundred gold, but none of it caught Arwin's eye. All the items were mundane.

The more I think about it, the more I wonder how rare magical items actually are. When I was the Champion, everyone had them. But I suppose those were the best of the best – is it difficult to get magic weapons as a random adventurer? I'll have to be really careful with how much I share if that's the case. I don't want some crazed guild to try to kidnap me or someone to beat down the doors of my smithy begging for an item.

Arwin brought the hammer up to the front desk and laid it down before Taylor.

"Ten gold," Taylor said, glancing at the hammer whilst in mid conversation with another customer. Arwin didn't say anything – he just quietly dug the gold out, set it on the counter, and departed the shop with his new hammer in tow.

Perfect. Now, some things to make that damn place a little more livable. First off, it needs a door. A door and two beds. The other stuff can come later. Who sells beds, though?

Arwin looked around the market for a few minutes, not particularly optimistic about his chances. A carpenter would definitely be somewhere in the general area, but there was no way Milten had enough demand for beds that there would be an entire store for –

There was an entire store for it.

Arwin squinted at the wooden building in a mixture of shock and disbelief. Faded paint across the arch above its door identified the building as *Sleepy John's*. And, through the dirt-covered windows, Arwin could just barely make out rows upon rows of beds within the store.

Barely able to believe it, Arwin stepped through the door and was instantly greeted by the strong smell of dust and cobwebs. A small bell rung, announcing his arrival, and a tired looking man at the back of the store raised his head from where it rested at a desk.

“Oh. Welcome in,” the man said through a yawn. “Can I do something for you?”

“I – uh, how much is a bed?” Arwin asked, looking around the surprisingly large store. It was hard to believe that it made anywhere near enough money to be this large. He was the only customer in sight.

“Depends on the bed. You looking for something fancy?”

“Something relatively easy to move and not too expensive. I need two of them, so being on the smaller would actually be nice as well. Have anything for ten gold or less?”

“I’ve got an eight-gold option. Comes with a frame and a feather mattress. Just don’t ask me what the feathers come from. I don’t know, and you don’t want to know. It’s eight gold.”

Arwin snorted. He looked around the store again, but there wasn't a single part of him that wanted to spend more time in here than he had to. "Two of those, then. Do you have a cart I can use to carry them?"

"We'll deliver it."

Bullshit. You can't sell more than one bed a week. How do you possibly afford to not only have a store like this but also deliver stuff to your customers?

He glanced around to see if there were bandits hiding in the rows of beds to ambush him, but that would have required someone else to have been in the store. Finally, Arwin shrugged. As suspicious as it was, he doubted Milten would allow a business to blatantly rob people in broad daylight. That was the job of Milten's government, not the stores.

"Sixteen gold, then?"

"Plus four for delivery."

Ah. That makes a little more sense. Four gold for delivery seems really damn steep, but I don't want to lug two beds across town.

"Fine," Arwin said, pulling twenty gold out and walking across the store to hand it to the employee. In turn, the man handed him a small wooden badge. Arwin felt the Mesh tingling within it as it rested in his hand.

"Just keep that on you and the movers will find you by tonight," the man said, yawning. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"No, I'd say this is it," Arwin said. He tucked the badge into his pocket. "Thanks for your time."

The merchant didn't even respond. He just sank back into his desk and laid his head in his arms, falling asleep. Arwin made a beeline out of the store, then glanced back at it as he headed down the street just to make sure it was still there and hadn't been some form of illusion.

Ah, well. That's that. I have what I needed. Time to get back to work, then. I know I'm close to making some proper scale plate greaves, and I'm going to make them before it's time to train Reya with Rodrick and Anna at the end of the week.

I'm looking forward to this.

Chapter 26

Scales glowed in the flames of the hearth, heated as far as the [Soul Flame] could take them. Arwin hefted his new hammer, adjusting his grip on the hilt. The rough metal wasn't the most comfortable, and it was a good bit heavier than his previous hammer.

Sitting around and staring at the scales isn't going to do anything, though. Only way to learn is to try.

Arwin arranged two of the scales so that they overlapped slightly, leaving them within the hearth. He then hefted his hammer, holding it near the hilt to avoid getting a little too much momentum in the swing and risk damaging the hearth.

Maybe I need to find a way to super-heat the surface of my anvil instead of working inside the hearth? That could work as well, but it's a problem for a different time.

The hammer fell, striking the scales with a loud thud. Sparks flew up and a powerful vibration raced down Arwin's arms with such force that he nearly dropped the hammer, even though he hadn't even hit the scales that hard.

"Shit," Arwin muttered. "Forgot that metal carries the vibrations far better than wood. That's going to be a pain in the ass."

Arwin activated [Scourge] and steadied his grip on the hammer before striking the scales once more. The vibrations still slammed into him like a runaway horse, but he weathered them and swung the hammer once more once they faded.

With every strike, Arwin could see the material of the scales start to meld together. It was far from perfect, but it was working. His idea had been correct – so long as he tried to forge them within the fire, they could connect.

It didn't take long for Arwin to completely connect the two scales, but he was far from done. As soon as he'd confirmed that their material could be connected, he set about building a set of greaves.

Even though he was distributing his usage of [Scourge] to withstand the hammer, Arwin's magical reserves couldn't last forever. He continued working on the project until his energy expired, then rested – leaving all the scales within the flame – until he'd built up enough to get to work again.

In that cycle, Arwin continued to work on the greaves. The ring of his hammer echoed through the old smithy, each strike another step toward his lofty goals. Sweat rolled down Arwin's face and dripped from his lips as the heat caressed his body.

Even with his magically enforced strength, soreness and exhaustion bit at Arwin's body. His arms ached and his back groaned with every swing. While he was far from weak, he didn't have the muscles he once did as the Champion – and that was just how he liked it.

Every blow was another step toward power. His own step. Not granted to him by the guild. Not given to him by someone that had already supposedly thought through every inch of his progression to ensure it would be ideal for the future of the Kingdom of Lian.

There was none of it.

All that remained was Arwin's body, the roaring hearth, and the scales within it. Blow by blow, hour by hour, Arwin forged.

He wasn't sure how much time passed as he worked. At some point, he was aware of Reya passing through behind him, but Arwin was so focused on the greaves that he barely registered it beyond a passing thought.

His ears rung violently, and the smell of steel and cinder filled his nostrils. He'd stopped sweating at some point, his body no longer possessing the water to lose. The temptation to stop was there – but it wasn't nearly as strong as the siren call of success.

Arwin's fingertips tingled with power from the Mesh as it swirled around him and the pair of glowing greaves that were steadily coming together before him. They guided his movements, just as eager to become whole as he was to make them.

And then, tremors running through his entire form from the repeated shocks the hammer had delivered unto him and with just the dregs of his magical power left, Arwin found that there was nothing left to do.

All the pieces of the greaves he needed were finished. He wasn't done yet, though. They had to be connected and slotted together before the pieces were fixed in their proper places whilst inserting hinges to avoid limiting movement.

Arwin was exhausted, but he would be damned if he waited to do that later. He grabbed a handful of the nails he'd forged, dropping his hammer and setting to work with his hands. After the nails were heated to molten temperatures, he got to work working them into the scales in the same manner that he'd woven them with, pressing the nails into the tough material and then warping them into clasps so the greaves could close around his legs.

He worked over every single piece of the armor with painstaking effort, connecting joints and testing them to ensure they functioned properly. And then, once he'd finished one leg, he moved on to the other.

Arwin wasn't sure where the energy to continue came from. Part of him suspected that he just hadn't realized how tired he was, but it was a moot point. His mind had made the decision that he would continue until the work was done, and his body would obey.

But finally, his work came to an end. Arwin finished the last touches on the second leg and, even as he let his hands come to a rest in the curling flames, he felt the Mesh come to life within the armor.

[Forest Lizard Scale Plate Greaves: Unique Quality] have been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

Your Tier has raised by 1 rank.

Arwin waved the Mesh's words away. He'd deal with the advancement in a moment – right now, the most important thing to him was seeing if his work had yielded results. There was always the potential of a detrimental trait that could completely ruin all his efforts. Information shimmered to life in golden letters before Arwin as he watched with bated breath.

Forest Lizard Scale Plate Greaves: Unique Quality

[Heat Resistance]: The wearer of this item gains heat resistance.

[Shock]: The tremors of a thousand mighty blows run through this item, attuning it to kinetic energy. This will passively store a portion of any impact it receives, lessening the damage to its owner.

[Awe]: The tremors within this item long to be released. Upon reaching its limit, this item will free the kinetic energy within it at once, empowering its owners next movements for a short amount of time. The timing and duration of this effect cannot be controlled.

[Unique]: Once donned, this item will bond with its owner. It will change sizes so long as material permits to fit them perfectly, and anyone else who attempts to wear it may suffer retaliation. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

Arwin let himself have a relieved smile. He hadn't just gotten greaves. He'd gotten exactly what he needed. He'd have to test just how much energy the armor would absorb, but even a small amount would go a long way in making him considerably tougher to injure.

The extra effect of speeding him up was also interesting. It was clearly partially detrimental without the ability to control its activation or duration, but power was still power. It

just meant they would be harder to use. Beyond that, the skill was incredible. It was an alternative to using [Scourge] to empower his legs, which would save him a huge amount of magical energy.

On top of that, getting movement skills for a non-combat class was probably borderline impossible. Arwin hadn't spoken to any smiths extensively before, but not once had he ever seen one of them sprinting at the speed of a warrior, even for a short amount of time.

"Absolutely fantastic," Arwin breathed. The armor had kept the heat-resistant properties of the scales and was already cooled off, so he started to pull it on. He couldn't bring himself to leave them off any longer and risk somehow letting someone else don them first.

Arwin didn't imagine there was someone sitting around and waiting to put his pants on, but there was no need for paranoia when the problem was already solved. As soon as he fastened the final clasp, he felt the armor shift and tighten around his legs.

He moved his weight from one foot to the other, then raised a leg. The armor shifted seamlessly, perfectly melded to his form. He could still feel its weight, but they weren't nearly as hefty as metal would have been.

"Light. Effective," Arwin said, well aware he was complimenting himself. His smile stretched even wider and he ran his hands through his sweat-soaked hair.

I feel better than I've felt in years. This is amazing.

Arwin walked in a circle around the smithy, then hopped from one foot to the other. Everything about the greaves felt completely natural. He picked his hammer up, giving it a few test swings to see how it felt.

An eruption of soreness in his muscles quickly made Arwin reconsider that decision. He stumbled, nearly dropping the hammer in his haste to lower it. There was only so far that his adrenaline and elation would take him.

Exhaustion had been knocking at the door for longer than Arwin was aware, and he was suddenly reminded of just how thirsty and drained he felt. He blinked heavily, bracing himself against the wall and weathering the wave of weakness that passed over him.

Once it passed, Arwin sent a thought to his greaves, causing them to hide their properties from any prying eyes. If anyone figured out he was strolling around in two Unique items, he suspected that he'd be in trouble.

There had been a time when he hadn't thought much of it – Unique items varied greatly. They were barely even a proper rarity, as they could both be better than Legendary items or worse than Garbage ones. But the more Arwin realized that not many people actually possessed magical items, the more he realized that it wouldn't matter *what* his items did. What would matter would be the fact that he had them.

Arwin licked his parched lips. Even though he didn't have to eat anything other than magic, a nice drink sounded fantastic. He sent a glance around the smithy, but it was empty. Based on the sunlight filtering through the cracks in the wall, it wasn't quite nighttime yet either.

It was time to see what rewards all the achievements he'd earned over the past few days had earned him. He called out to the Mesh.

Name: Arwin Tyrr

Class: Living Forge (Unique) (Tier: Apprentice 3)

New Skill Choice Available.

[More than Average] has been consumed.

[Shoe Thief] has been consumed.

Two of your Skill options have been upgraded.

You may select one of the following skills.

[Bleeding Heart] (Passive) – *Repeated attempts to protect your allies grants all the armor you wear faint magical properties. All those you consider an ally within a set radius of yourself will receive a portion of the defenses your armor grants you, scaling based off your Tier.*

[UPGRADED] [Arsenal] – *You live and die on your equipment, so you might as well make it part of yourself. Bind yourself to [3] pieces of equipment, summoning and dismissing it at will. The number of equipment you can bind to scales with your Tier, up to a total of 10. Unbinding a piece of Equipment will make this skill inactive for 1 day.*

[UPGRADED] [Firewrought Blow] – *You have spent so much time within the flame that it has become a part of you. Spend a portion of magical energy to empower your next hammer strike, releasing a burst of Soul Flame upon impact.*

Chapter 27

Arwin studied his new skill options for several minutes, re-reading them to make sure he perfectly understood every single one. All the achievements had definitely been worth the effort – the results he'd received were incredible.

Firewrought Blow was a good combat skill on its own – but there was more to it than just a mere attack. Sure, releasing a blast of fire when hitting something was useful, but it wasn't just any fire. It was Soul Fire – which meant any upgrades he got to his [Soul Flame] would affect it as well.

On top of that, he could use the ability whilst forging. That would probably go a long way in improving his abilities and letting him forge new weapons. It was an incredible ability – but the others were just as interesting.

Bleeding Heart caught Arwin's attention even though it hadn't been upgraded by the Achievements. It wasn't immediately useful, but the better equipment he got, the more powerful it would become. If the other two abilities had been just about anything else, Arwin would have chosen it on the spot.

It would make training Reya so much easier, and if I want to start a guild, then abilities like this would be invaluable. But [Arsenal]...

At first glance, [Arsenal] didn't appear incredibly strong. It was basically a glorified storage method, but it only took a little thought for Arwin to realize just how dangerous the ability was.

It let him summon and dismiss equipment *at will*. There was no delay. He could carry a set of the heaviest plate armor in the world around with him, swapping into it the moment he needed to fight.

And, beyond that, he could swap weapons mid-fight as well. A sword swing could turn into a hammer blow, and that effect would be compounded even farther the more equipment he got. The potential for the ability was basically limitless so long as he had the right gear on hand.

Every single one of the abilities was tempting, but it didn't take Arwin much longer to come to his final decision. He selected [Arsenal] without an ounce of regret and the glowing words of the Mesh shimmered and faded away, his choice complete.

Arwin wasted absolutely no time in testing it out. He pressed his hand to his chest, feeling the tingle of the Mesh as he drew it to his will. The pressure in his ear changed with a subtle pop as he bound the Forest Lizard Scale Mail to himself.

No sooner than he imagined the armor disappearing did it vanish with a pop. He could still feel a faint pressure on his chest even though the armor wasn't there anymore. With another thought, Arwin summoned it back.

The armor reformed instantly, as if he'd never taken it off. Arwin grinned, then bound his greaves and sword as well. He dismissed and resummoned each piece a few times before dismissing all of them.

[Arsenal] felt completely natural to use, as if it had always been a part of him. A small thrill of excitement ran down his back. Arwin had never been one who had particularly looked forward to fighting, but he really wanted to see what the new ability would do for him in a real fight.

It'll take some training and better equipment before I can truly master [Arsenal], but I can already picture just how effective this will be.

Arwin wiped the sweat from his forehead and let out a satisfied sigh. He was more than pleased with the results of the past few days, and now he'd bought himself some time to relax and do a little more preparation before he took Reya out with Rodrick and Anna.

Maybe I'll just take a day off and enjoy not having to do anything at all. After that, I want to start looking into getting some more armor made for Reya and the others. Maybe I'll figure out what I'll need to make my hammer as well.

So much to do, so little time. I don't even know where to –

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

“Oh, goddamn it,” Arwin muttered, a familiar clench wrapping its icy grip around his stomach. It didn't feel like it had been that long since the last time he'd eaten a magic item, but evidently the time had flitted by far faster than he'd realized. “At least I got a whole day of warning this time. Can't complain about that. Guess I'm smithing more before I do anything else.”

Arwin's gaze passed over the forge. He didn't really want to spend a huge amount of effort in making an item he was just going to consume to survive, but it would be a good idea to get around to making some magic items he could eat in a combat situation that would give him a boost in power with Hungering Maw's beneficial ability that let him temporarily absorb a trait from an item.

More shit to deal with later. For now, I just need to focus on not dying.

It only took Arwin another half an hour to forge a crude magical bracelet. It had a detrimental effect that made it so that attacks against him had a chance of summoning a small gust of wind, but Arwin didn't particularly care – he just stuffed the whole thing into his mouth so he could get on with his day.

The pain in his stomach didn't recede. Arwin's brow creased. He waited for a few seconds, trying to see if he'd somehow tricked himself into thinking the ache was there when it wasn't, but there was no mistaking it.

The pit in his stomach was just as intense as it had been before if not worse. It was as if he hadn't eaten anything. Arwin stood frozen in place, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. He'd done what the ability required him to.

“Why isn't it working?” Arwin muttered to himself, starting to pace around his anvil as he racked his mind in attempt to figure out where the mistake was. But, try as he might, only a single thought came to mind.

A chill ran down Arwin's back and he grabbed several pieces of metal, returning to the forge and throwing his [Soul Flame] into it. If he was wrong, he'd be even more screwed than he was now.

I've got to be fast, but not too fast. I can't afford to make another crappy item. This one is going to need to be decent.

Arwin waited until the metal was hot enough, then got to work forging once more. With the metal as his guide, he set about making a plain dagger. It wasn't anything special, but it still took considerably more time than the bracelet had.

After about two more hours of work, Arwin was done. An average quality magical dagger sat in his hands, still warm from the forge. Its only Trait was being more resilient than normal, which was perfectly fine with him. Arwin stuffed the weapon into his gullet, devouring it in two bites.

The pain relented almost instantly, and Arwin felt a surge of energy course through his body as he absorbed its Trait. A relieved sigh slipped from Arwin's lips, but it carried with it the disturbing knowledge that his guess had been right.

[The Hungering Maw] doesn't just need me to eat magical items. It needs me to eat stronger magical items. I can't just sit around and keep making the same crappy bracelets or I'll starve to death. If that holds true... God, will I be eating Legendary weapons at some point?

A laugh of disbelief forced its way out of Arwin's lips, and he sat down on his anvil, running his hands through his hair. The costs of what he'd have to do if he wanted to survive were going to be astronomical.

That didn't stop a small voice in his head from pointing out that, if he pulled it off, his power would eclipse what he'd wielded as the Champion by an enormous margin.

The Mesh was nothing if not fair. If he was walking around eating powerful Unique and Legendary weapons just to survive, the Mesh would have to be giving him equivalent benefits. He couldn't imagine how big the boons would be to someone who was forced to consume a Legendary weapon every week, but he knew they'd be immense.

"All I have to do is survive," Arwin muttered to himself. "In the end, this doesn't change my plans in the slightest. I knew I had to get stronger. This is just a bit of encouragement."

Very strong encouragement. Nothing more motivating than not spontaneously combusting – or whatever it is that would happen to me if I don't feed the Hungering Maw.

Stone shifted near the door. Arwin glanced over as Reya walked inside, raising a hand in greeting when she realized that he wasn't working the forge.

“Arwin! I was wondering if you were ever going to stop. It's been like four days,” Reya said, shaking her head in disbelief. “Don't take this the wrong way, but are you okay? I'm starting to think there might be something seriously wrong with you. Did you even stop to eat?”

“Yes. It was just a very brief stop.”

That is technically not a lie.

“Right,” Reya said, not looking like she believed him in the slightest. “Where'd your armor go? The last time I was in here, it looked like you'd nearly finished it. What happened?”

Arwin's response was to summon the greaves using [Arsenal]. Reya's eyes widened as the scale plate armor materialized around his legs.

“I can't see any information on it, but they just appeared out of thin air. Does that mean—”

“They're magical,” Arwin confirmed with a slightly smug nod. “I did it.”

“Another Unique item. You're ridiculous. How is it that you can keep making these? Do you have some magic dust somewhere that you're just sprinkling on everything you make?”

“I'm just incredibly talented,” Arwin said, keeping his face completely straight.

Reya squinted at him. “Was that a joke? Did you just make a joke?”

“No. I would never do something like that.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking as well,” Reya grumbled. Her frown fell away.

“Thanks for getting the beds, though. They’re amazing. I honestly can’t remember the last time I slept on something soft.”

“Beds?” Arwin blinked. He vaguely remembered ordering them at a sketchy store, but he didn’t recall anything ever actually showing up. He’d been so caught up in his smithing that he’d entirely forgot about the purchase.

“Yeah. Right there.” Reya pointed to the corner of the smithy and Arwin turned to follow her gesture. Sitting at the side of the smithy, nestled into a corner that was a little less cracked and broken up than the rest of the building, were two beds.

What the hell? When did those show up? I didn’t notice anybody.

“I – uh, yeah. I did buy those,” Arwin said.

“Why does it sound like you’re trying to convince yourself? Did you not buy them?”

“No, I did. I just didn’t notice that they’d shown up,” Arwin said, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a frown. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’ve been caught up working. Has anything important happened?”

“Nothing vital.” Reya shook her head. “I’ve mostly been hanging around Lillia’s tavern and trying to help her out with a few things whist keeping an eye out and making sure nobody too weird shows up at our door.”

“Too weird? We’re the only ones on the damn street aside from Lillia and the one drunkard that passed through.”

Reya glanced at Arwin out of the corners of her eyes. “That’s not entirely true anymore. Someone else was here! Someone new!”

“Today?”

She cleared her throat. “No. He showed up yesterday and ate at Lillia’s tavern while I was there, then left pretty soon afterward. But still, a new customer! She was really excited.”

“That is good news,” Arwin said, pulling the [Soul Flame] from the hearth and back into himself. “And I’ve got more of it.”

“You do?” Reya blinked. “What is it?”

“You said four days have passed? Then... in three days, we’re going hunting.”

“We are? What for? More materials?”

“That’s part of it, but it isn’t the main goal,” Arwin said with a small smile. “We’re going to get you your class.”

Chapter 28

“Seriously?” Reya asked, her eyes going wide. “You aren’t messing with me?”

“Why would I joke about something like this?” Arwin asked. He stretched his arms over his head and yawned. Now that his work on the greaves was done and he’d gotten his tier advancement, he was exhausted. “I’m dead serious.”

Reya swallowed. “I – thank you. I don’t know if it’ll work out, but I really appreciate it. I’m not so sure I’ll be able to get a class. If I could, wouldn’t I have gotten one by now?”

“We aren’t always dealt the hand we want, and the Mesh can be strange. From my experience with it, the thing you desire will come to you so long as you work toward it. If you don’t have a class yet, it’s not because you can’t get it. It’s because you haven’t been in the situation where you’ve been doing what you truly want to.”

Reya didn’t look completely convinced, but she gave Arwin a nod. “Okay. I’ll trust you, so just tell me what to do. Shouldn’t I... I don’t know, train or something?”

“Do what you want. I’m not expert on this,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “For today, I’m done doing anything other than sleeping. I’m about an inch from passing out on my feet. Just make sure you’re around three days from now.”

“I will!” Reya promised hurriedly, her eyes flashing with a mixture of excitement and determination. She caught herself and cleared her throat sheepishly. “Thank you.”

“Stop thanking me for something that hasn’t happened yet,” Arwin grumbled. He trudged over to his bed and tested it with a hand. It sank beneath his palm – not as much as he might have liked, but it was still far softer than the floor.

One more step toward making this place a real home.

Reya edged toward the door. “I’m going to go practice, if that’s okay. I don’t think I’m going to be able to sleep anymore.”

“Suit yourself, but don’t be out too late and end up exhausted when the time comes for us to do the real work,” Arwin warned as he sat down on the bed. “Just relax. You’ll be fine. I’m confident you’ll do just fine. And, even if you don’t, I won’t let you fail.”

A soft breeze passed through the open doorway, reminding Arwin that he still needed to get a door for it – and to find a way to patch the walls while he was at it. It was past time to make the smithy into a proper building rather than just a crumbling pile of stone.

“Why?” Reya asked softly.

Arwin’s head tilted to the side. “Why what?”

“Why are you doing so much for me? You’ve never asked for anything in return other than the most basic information on the area. I just don’t understand what you get out of this.”

“Do you need a reason to help someone else?” Arwin asked after a few moments. He wasn’t so sure he had an actual answer to Reya’s question. He didn’t have a reason to help her – not a logical one, at least. “I’m helping you because we’re a guild.”

“Not in name,” Reya said, clenching her hands and averting her gaze. “We aren’t registered, and there’s only two of us! How can two people be a guild?”

“A guild is not about its size.”

“The Adventurer’s Guild would beg to differ.”

“I don’t give a shit about them,” Arwin said brusquely, waving his hand with a snort. “A guild isn’t about the number of people in it. It’s about the people that are. It’s not like getting officially recognized as a guild changes anything anyway.”

“I guess not. But... why me?” Reya asked. “I’m not special.”

“That’s hardly true,” Arwin said with an amused snort. “To be frank, you’ve got more problems than anyone of your standing has any right to. It’s beyond me how you’ve gotten yourself into this much shit, but that’s a talent. It doesn’t matter in the end. You’re the one that

decided to throw her lot in with me, and I'm not going to leave a member of my guild unable to properly defend themselves. Everyone has problems, but the guild can't always help every single individual member. It's the responsibility of the guild leader to make sure everyone can handle their own problems whenever possible. And, when a problem that's too big for one person to handle on their own shows up – that's what the guild is for. That's all."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"That's fine," Arwin said, pulling his dirty shirt off and tossing it to the ground as he got into the bed. "You will."

Reya stood in the doorway silently for a few seconds. Then she gave him a small nod before turning and slipping into the night. Arwin watched her leave, then laid his head back against the mattress and let out a satisfied sigh.

It had been so long since he'd properly rested on something comfortable that the instant he let himself relax for an instant, sleep rushed up to pull him into its embrace.

When Arwin woke the next morning, Reya was still out. He didn't particularly mind – there was more he had to handle before it was time to go out on their trip, and he'd need as much time as possible to get it all done.

There was also a small part of him that felt it better for Reya to not be present for his current work. If she was around, she'd see what he was working on, and then the surprise would be ruined.

Arwin ambled over to the forge, sending a spark of [Soul Flame] into the hearth and pumping it with the bellows. Once the fire was roaring, he tossed some scales into it and waited for them to heat. If Reya was going to go out and fight monsters without a class, she needed a way to avoid getting killed by the first blow she took.

Anna seems like a good healer, but no healing magic is perfectly reliable. Fatal wounds can happen faster than anyone expects. Prevention is far superior to reaction.

And, with that thought in mind, Arwin got back to work. He worked the scales, piecing them together one by one within the crackle of the flames. He worked quickly, moving faster than he had when making the greaves.

A part of that was because he knew how to work the scales better, and a part of it was because he didn't need to make perfect armor this time around. He could feel the pull of the scales as he worked, but it wasn't as strong as they had been for the greaves. They were muted, and it wasn't hard to guess why.

Right now, Arwin needed to complete a set of armor for Reya that would last her until she had her class. She already had a chest piece, so what she needed now was something for her lower body. There was no point to make it too specifically tuned, though – it would likely become irrelevant if her class ended up being something that couldn't use it. Making magical plate armor for someone trying to move stealthily would be quite the waste.

What I need is a set of armor perfect for someone who hasn't gotten their class yet. Something that protects them but doesn't constrain them to a specific fighting style. Something fast, effective, and easy to move in.

Arwin didn't know what Reya's measurements were – a problem that the scales fortunately seemed to understand. He still wasn't sure how much of it was their own desire and how much was his own magic, but as time slipped by, a set of greaves started to take shape in the forge. They were mostly made from scale mail, but he added curved plates to protect her knees and solid lines down the outside of the legs that would hopefully serve to deflect a glancing attack better.

Arwin didn't work through the nights this time around, not wanting to be exhausted when it came time to set out with Reya. He stopped whenever it grew dark, retiring to his new bed and leaving the armor in a pile under it so Reya didn't see what he was working on.

His work came to a close on the third day, just before the morning of when they'd set out with Rodrick and Anna to get Reya her class. Reya – at least as far as Arwin was aware – had no idea of what he'd been working on.

She'd spent the last few days out and had always come back late and weary, dropping into bed without much more than a muttered greeting. He could see the stress weighing on her shoulders, but there wasn't much he could say to alleviate it.

Reya was already asleep by the time Arwin finished, which made it considerably easier for him to put everything away without her seeing it. He slipped all the pieces of the armor under his bed, then laid down on top of it and let himself drift off to sleep.

When the night came to a close and Arwin's eyes drifted awake the following morning, he found Reya already awake and pacing in front of the door. Her eyes snapped over to him as soon as she noticed he was awake.

“Is it time?” Reya asked, wringing her hands together and shifting from foot to foot.

“You don’t have to be worried about it. If things don’t work out, we’ll just try again a different day,” Arwin said through a yawn. He rose to his feet and stretched his arms out, rolling his neck and wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Not if I die,” Reya said.

“You’re not going to die. We’ve got two other adventurers with us, and they’re both pretty good at what they do. One is a healer.”

“But what if I slip while I’m fighting? I’ve only properly fought other people. We’re going to go fight some really powerful monster or something, aren’t we?”

“What makes you think that?” Arwin tilted his head to the side with an amused grin. “We could just be going after some weak ones.”

“If I haven’t gotten a class yet, then killing a bunch of pushover monsters isn’t going to change anything.”

“That’s likely true,” Arwin allowed. “Technically I think it would depend on exactly *how* you killed the monsters, but fighting something stronger is more likely to get you a good class. If we can get you an Achievement or Title in the process, even better.”

“Before I even get a class?” Reya shuddered. “Are you trying to get me killed? All the Achievements for that kind of thing always come from defeating something way stronger than you. I’ll get ripped in half!”

“No you won’t,” Arwin said. He knelt beside his bed and pulled out the greaves that he’d hidden beneath it the night before. Reya made her way over to him, looking curiously over his shoulder.

“What’s this?” Reya asked. “That looks a bit... small for you.”

“You would be correct.” Arwin’s voice was as dry as the desert. “It isn’t for me. It’s for you.”

Reya snickered and rolled her eyes. “Right, sure. Did you get commissioned by the other adventurers or something? I bet these would go for a good amount. They look great.”

Arwin just raised an eyebrow. Reya’s smile flickered and fell away. She looked from the armor to Arwin, then swallowed. “You weren’t joking?”

“Dead serious. It’s to keep the dead in the serious and not in you if you get hit by something nasty,” Arwin said. The joke had sounded considerably better in his head, but Reya was so engrossed with the armor that she didn’t even notice.

She hurriedly donned the greaves and fastened everything before rolling her shoulders and hopping from one foot to the other. The set he’d started some time ago was complete – at least for the time being. The greaves weren’t magical, but they were still more than enough to keep her safe.

I hope they are, at least.

As far as Arwin could tell, the armor fit her perfectly. A small smile flickered across Arwin’s face. He’d been more than a little worried that it would have been the wrong size, but his powers hadn’t failed him.

“I think this might be the nicest thing anyone has ever gotten for me, much less made,” Reya murmured, running her hands along the scales in delight. “This is incredible. It’s such a

huge step up from what you were making just recently as well. Were you holding back on purpose? Wait. I can't afford this, and you already gave me a magical chestpiece. I—"

"You aren't buying it," Arwin said through a laugh. "It's a gift. Just keep yourself from getting killed and I'll consider it a worthwhile investment."

Reya blinked heavily. She bit her lower lip, then turned away from him and wiped her face with the back of her hand. When she looked back, all that remained on her features was a determined expression.

"I'll make sure I live up to this," Reya promised. "I don't know what we're doing, but I'll do it."

"Let's just start by surviving," Arwin suggested. He tried not to show how pleased he was that Reya liked the gift, but he was pretty sure his efforts failed. He clapped her on the shoulder, then nodded to the door. "Come on. Let's put that new armor to use. You've got a class to claim."

And I have some new abilities to test out.

Chapter 29

Arwin led Reya to the front of the Glowing Swordfish, where Rodrick and Anna were already standing outside and waiting for them. Rodrick, who was wearing the old set of scale mail greaves that Arwin had sold him, did a double take as he saw the armor Reya was wearing.

“Arwin,” Rodrick said, raising a hand in greeting. “This little lady must be your friend, then? It looks like she’s certainly outfitted for a fight. More than I am, actually.”

“That’s because you keep breaking your armor,” Anna admonished. She sent a small smile in Reya’s direction. “It’s nice to meet you. Arwin bailed us out of some trouble a little while ago. I’m Anna, and the oaf beside me is Rodrick.”

“I’m Reya. It’s nice to meet you.” Reya shifted, clearly uncomfortable with all the attention being directed toward her.

“Did you bankrupt yourselves on getting all that armor? Or is that smith friend of yours doing loans?” Rodrick asked. “That’s some real nice looking gear you’ve got. It’s probably too late for me to order anything right now, but you’ve got to tell me who’s making this stuff.”

Reya sent a surprised glance at Arwin, and he realized he’d forgotten to tell her that he’d hidden his identity from the two adventurers. He just shrugged, speaking before Reya could say anything.

“I’m sure he’ll come around eventually, but we’ve got things to do today. Shall we get on with it?”

Thankfully, Reya picked up on what was going on and said nothing that would jeopardize his identity. Even though it probably wouldn’t have been a big deal one way or another, it was still a bit of an inconvenience that Arwin preferred not to deal with on this particular day.

“Gladly. Lead the way,” Rodrick said. “Back to the forest, I assume? Pretty good distribution of monsters in there that shouldn’t be impossible for someone new to the job to handle, especially with armor like that.”

“It’s a good spot to start,” Arwin agreed. “Hopefully the monsters there have calmed down a little bit. It’ll be a little annoying if we have to constantly avoid large groups.”

They all set off down the road, making for the town gate. Arwin couldn’t help but notice that Reya was getting a few lingering glances from passersby. Nothing too concerning, but her armor was definitely drawing attention, and possibly a little more than he’d originally planned.

This is good. At this rate, I might get enough attention that people come looking for the smith that made her armor. Then I’ll be able to sell non-magical equipment and start making some money without worrying about arming someone with a terrifying weapon that they don’t deserve.

“So, what kind of class are you looking to get?” Rodrick asked as they left the city and started through the hills. “Some kind of warrior?”

“I’m not sure,” Reya admitted sheepishly. She scratched at the back of her head and craned her head back to look at the receding city behind them. “Probably not someone that’s on the front of the battle.”

“A mage of some sort?” Anna guessed. “Magic can be incredibly rewarding. It’s a lot of work and can be pretty risky, though.”

“I’ve always wanted magic,” Reya allowed slowly. Rodrick was shaking his head before she finished her sentence.

“Don’t go muddling her goals, Anna. Anyone can get magic. Mages just focus entirely on it, and you get blown over by a light fart because of it.”

“You’re not wrong,” Anna admitted with a laugh. “I don’t have any good ways to defend myself. If I was a combat mage, then I’m sure I’d be able to blow things up before they got to me. I went with healing instead, though. It wasn’t easy, but there’s few people that help a group more than a healer. I just can’t fight very well.”

“Not being able to fight seems like a pretty significant drawback,” Reya hedged.

“It would be if I didn’t have this idiot to stand in front of monsters for me,” Anna said with a laugh, shoulder-checking Rodrick. He shifted to the side and rolled his eyes – Arwin was pretty sure Anna couldn’t have moved him if she’d wanted to, so he was just going along with it.

I almost forgot how close they were. It reminds me of things I’d rather not remember.

Arwin shook his head to clear his thoughts while Reya worked to gather her own.

“I think I’d rather be a bit farther away from the thick of things whenever possible, but being able to hold my own when the time calls for it would definitely be nice,” Reya said. She idly ran her hands over the hilt of the sheathed dagger at her side.

“Maybe some form of archer?” Rodrick guessed.

More like an assassin, I’d say.

“I hope not,” Anna said, giving Reya a quick look. “She’s not carrying a bow. You’re not going to get an archery class if you don’t have a bow on you.”

“I’m a horrible shot, so archery isn’t really my thing. Daggers aren’t bad, though.”

“A rogue, then,” Rodrick concluded. “That makes sense. You’ve got the right build for it, and you look pretty fast. Suppose the only way to find out is to actually see, but that’ll happen soon enough. I haven’t seen many rogues decked out in fancy armor, though.”

“It’s more about the way she fights than what she’s wearing,” Arwin said with a shake of his head. “As long as she doesn’t rely on the armor to block every single blow, Reya should be able to get the class she’s looking for. It’s just a precaution.”

The other two adventurers nodded, and they all fell silent for the rest of the trip away from the city. Some hours later, the four arrived at the valley leading down into the forest. It was mostly silent, the only sounds being the faint chirp of the birds and the rustle of wind through the leaves.

“Start behind us,” Arwin advised as they started down toward the treeline. “We need to make sure your opponents are the appropriate level of strength. Challenge is good, but putting you up against something you have no way to defeat is just suicide.”

“Trust me, I won’t take a step that you don’t tell me to,” Reya promised. “I’m not so sure I’ll be able to handle anything here myself, but I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” Anna said with a comforting smile. The group continued on, and Rodrick moved up to the front to use his enhanced senses and guide them toward a possible target.

This time, no lizards were waiting in ambush. They walked for several minutes, taking a few turns. Rodrick occasionally paused and held up a hand to listen closer but would then resume moving in another direction shortly afterward.

After a few minutes of walking, Rodrick drew his sword. Anna moved to stand behind him and Arwin readied himself, using [Arsenal] to summon his sword to his hands. He didn’t call his armor out yet, not wanting to encumber himself until he actually needed the defense.

“Lizard up ahead,” Rodrick said. “At least, I think it’s a lizard. About the right size for one, a little bit on the small side. This could be you, Reya.”

Reya licked her lips and tightened her grip on the hilt of her dagger. Her eyes darted around the forest and Arwin could practically see her breathing get faster. She bit her lower lip and gave them a sharp nod.

“Okay. I- I’m ready. I think.”

“We still have to make sure it’s the right strength,” Arwin reminded Reya. He followed Rodrick’s gaze and squinted into the darkness of the forest before them to see if he could make anything out, but the monster was still too far out.

They all crept forward, taking even more care to remain silent. If the lizard hadn’t noticed them yet, then they had a chance to get the jump on it. And, if Reya was looking to be a stealthy class of any sort, that was probably a step in the right direction.

It didn’t take long for their efforts to be rewarded. After passing just a few more trees, they arrived at the edge of a small clearing with sunlight filtering in through a gap in the canopy. A lizard laid on its back, its feet curled up before it as it basked in the light. The monster was indeed one of the smallest that Arwin had seen thus far – Rodrick had done a good job in avoiding all the stronger enemies.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 2]

“That’s the one,” Arwin whispered, nudging Reya’s shoulder. “Go. If you slit its throat before it notices you, you should be able to kill it before it can even fight back. It’ll be easier if you go from a bit to the left so you’re downwind of it.”

Reya swallowed. Her fingers twitched and she gave Arwin a curt nod before creeping away from the party and toward the lizard. The others all watched her leave quietly, not wanting to distract her.

“I’ll keep an eye out for anything else in the area,” Rodrick said in a soft tone. “This should be a pretty fast kill, though. That lizard is completely oblivious to everything. It’s got absolutely no idea we’re here.”

“Almost makes you feel bad for it,” Anna said, her hands clenched around her staff as her eyes traced Reya’s steps.

Interesting. She’s actually concerned for Reya even though they only met a short while ago. I made the right move in throwing my lot in – at least temporarily – with these two. They’re decent folks.

“It’s a monster,” Rodrick said. “It wouldn’t feel bad for us if we got caught with our pants down.”

“Maybe not, but isn’t that the very reason we’ve got to be better? We have the capacity to be more, so we should be.”

“We’re not getting into this argument again,” Rodrick grumbled. “You can be kind to other people and intelligent beings, but no feeling bad for the bloodthirsty creatures that want nothing more than to rip us to little shreds and snack on our bones.”

“Not every monster is unintelligent,” Arwin said quietly.

Rodrick sent him a surprised glance. “You’re the one that brought us out here to hunt, man. Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” Arwin said, and he meant it. “A lot of innocent people get hurt in war, and I don’t think that all monsters are intelligent. Creatures like the lizard in front of us aren’t mentally developed enough to have much intelligence beyond their desire to kill and survive. But others are different. There are... occasions where killing them may not be the right choice.”

“How so?” Anna asked curiously. “I haven’t met many warriors that hold that viewpoint. You’re certainly an odd one, but don’t take that in the wrong way.”

“I won’t,” Arwin said. He paused, watching Reya as she snuck closer to the lizard. They were close enough to intervene if something went wrong, but not so close that he could completely block a blow if she completely screwed up. “And it’s just something that comes with experience. Some things don’t need killing.”

Reya arrived beside the lizard. It had still yet to notice her presence – it really was the most oblivious creature that Arwin had seen in a long time. All that remained was for Reya to deliver the killing blow.

Her knuckles whitened around the hilt of her dagger. She started to draw it but froze midway through the motion. Seconds ticked by. Arwin’s brow furrowed as Reya let the dagger slide back before it could clear the sheath.

Does she not want to let Rodrick and Anna see that it’s magical? She should just be able to put her back to us so they don’t see the blade, and I’m sure she’s got another dagger from those idiot brothers I had to kill.

Reya backed away from the lizard, letting her hand drop from the blade as she drew back alongside them, her jaw clenched.

“Not this one.”

“Why not?” Rodrick asked. “It’s a free kill.”

“I’m not killing something that can’t fight back that doesn’t deserve to die. It doesn’t feel right. If I’m going to off something without it knowing, I need a reason for it. Just stabbing a lizard bathing in the sun is wrong.”

“It’s a lizard,” Rodrick said. “It’s probably too stupid to even realize what death is.”

Reya bit her lip and nodded. “I know.”

“So?”

“I’m still not doing it. I’m sorry.”

Arwin studied Reya for a second, then glanced back to the lizard. It really did look quite content. He shook his head, his lips curling in slight amusement. “It really does look too peaceful. The next fight isn’t going to be this easy, though. Are you sure it’s wise to pass up a free kill?”

“I’m sorry,” Reya repeated. “But it just feels wrong. I can’t do it. I’d rather take a harder fight.”

“Well, she knows what she wants,” Rodrick said with a shrug. “That’s half the trouble with the Mesh in the first place. Your call, lass. I can find us another monster in the area, but Arwin was right. I doubt we’ll get a chance as good as this one again.”

“Better a difficult fight than a cheap one.”

Not exactly the words of an assassin.

“Onward, then,” Arwin said with a nod. “Rodrick is correct. Standing by your ideals is something that many forget to do in the pursuit of power. Let’s go find you something that’ll fight back.”

Chapter 30

Arwin’s thoughts drifted as Rodrick led them in search of their next potential monster for Reya. Her refusal to kill the monster echoed dimly through the halls of his mind. It wasn’t like the lizard was really worth thinking about, but he couldn’t get it out of his head.

He’d killed thousands – probably more, if he was honest with himself – of equivalent monsters. And, despite everything, Arwin didn’t regret any of the kills he’d made. They’d been done to save himself and to protect others.

It wasn’t the fact that he cared about the lizard’s life either. He hadn’t been exaggerating about its intelligence. The monster wasn’t anywhere near smart enough to understand what had happened.

Really, calling it a monster is a rather odd choice. Lillia is a monster as well – a demon. And yet, there’s no more relation between her and that lizard than there would be with me and a dog.

I’d have put the lizard down if it had been me that was fighting it, and I likely still would now if it tried to attack me or stood in my way. But... perhaps it is worth adjusting my thinking a little more.

Not all the monsters I encounter are going to be as soulless as this one. Some may have some degree of intelligence, and if the Adventurer's Guild is not my ally, then am I truly their enemy?

“What’s wrong?” Anna whispered, moving closer so her voice wouldn’t carry too far into the forest. “Is something happening?”

“Nothing like that,” Arwin said with a small smile. “I was just lost in thought. Reya’s an interesting one, isn’t she?”

“The way you say that makes it seem like you’re older than she is. Are you her brother or something?”

Arwin chuckled. “We don’t look that alike, do we?”

“Siblings are made in spirit, not flesh.”

“Fair enough.” Arwin inclined his head in surrender. “No. She’s not my sibling. She’s just someone that I’ve picked up on my journeys that needed a little bit of a helping hand. Her perspective is surprisingly fresh. Makes me think about some stuff that I didn’t think I’d be thinking about.”

“That’s one of the things I like most about adventuring,” Anna said with a soft smile. It fell away as her features darkened, and she glanced to the side. “Meeting new people and finding out just how different they are to you. It is – was – incredible.”

“Ever regret leaving the Guild?” Arwin asked.

“Not for a second.” Anna sent a look at Rodrick’s back and the smile returned to her lips. “I’d trade it and more away every single day just to keep things the way they are. Sure, I’d love

to try to strive for more and the Adventurer's Guild was a great way to do that, but the cost of remaining there was more than what I was willing to pay."

"I know what you mean."

They came to a stop as Rodrick lifted his hand. Reya, who stood a few paces ahead of Arwin, just beside Rodrick, stiffened. Something shifted in the shadows of the trees before them, and the tingle of the Mesh brushed across Arwin's skin.

There was a loud crunch as leaves and sticks were crushed beneath the weight of something large, and the flash of yellow eyes within the forest told Arwin that a monster had spotted them coming.

[Forest Lizard – Apprentice 3]

"Shit. Didn't notice the bugger because he was up in a tree. You think you can handle this one?" Rodrick asked in a low tone, placing his hand on the sword at his side. "Apprentice 3 might be a bit rough for someone without a class."

"You're the one that said that I'd not get another easy shot," Reya said, setting her jaw. "It's not going to get any easier if I keep waiting."

"We'll have your back," Anna promised. The lizard let out a warning hiss, and Reya drew her dagger. For a moment, Arwin was worried that she'd just revealed the magic weapon to the other two, but the Mesh didn't register the blade.

It was just a normal weapon, not the one he'd made.

That's probably for the best. I like these two, but power can make people do some pretty bad things. Better to take it one step at a time and avoid any unwanted incidents.

“Remember that it’s more important to survive the fight than kill your enemy,” Rodrick said. “Live and you can fight again. Victory means nothing if you don’t live to tell the tale.”

“Says the man who goes down in almost every fight,” Anna quipped. “Get out there, Reya. You have this in the bag.”

The lizard’s tongue flicked through the air. It let out a warning hiss, crawling toward them with measured movements that did nothing to betray the explosive power that Arwin knew to be within its body.

Reya held her blade before her and edged closer to the monster, staying on the tips of her toes. For a few moments, the forest was silent save the sound of her feet scuffling across the dirt and the lizard’s dull hisses.

Then they burst into motion in unison. The monster’s thick tail whipped out, hurtling to slam into Reya’s side. Reya skipped back, dodging the attack with far more room than she needed to have moved, and then sprinted forward with a cry.

The lizard snapped out at her and Reya stumbled, throwing herself into a roll to avoid the attack. She landed gracefully and sprung back to her feet, staggering and narrowly avoiding the monster’s fangs as it snapped for her head.

Arwin’s body tensed and the urge to rush into the fight gripped him, but he restrained himself. The Mesh wouldn’t recognize Reya’s work if he ran in to save her. She needed to handle this on her own – and he needed to trust that she could do it.

And that's not to mention the way she must be feeling. Ever since she threw her lot in with me, I've been bailing her out of trouble. She doesn't feel like she's in control of herself, and if I step in again here, that feeling may cement itself even further.

“Aim for weak points!” Arwin called out. “You can't break its scales with the dagger, so bide your time until you have an opportunity to strike! Don't overextend too early.”

If Reya heard him, she gave no acknowledgement. She bounced from foot to foot, watching the lizard warily and prepared to jump out of the way of its next attack. Even though she had no experience fighting monsters, only a fool would have said that she wasn't used to combat.

She moved with the grace of a street urchin that had grown up dodging pursuing guards their entire life, and while that wasn't enough to put her toe to toe with some of the rogues Arwin had known in his years, it was more than enough to give her a fighting chance against a lizard – even if she didn't have a class.

The monster lunged, snapping at Reya and trying to strike her with its long claws. She dipped to the side, then lunged as it tried to regain its balance. With a cry, Reya brought the dagger's point down toward one of the monster's bulging eyes.

It twisted its head at the last second, and the loud scrape of her dagger against the scales ground through the air. The blade shattered from the force of the impact. Arwin took a step forward, but Reya wasn't done yet.

She threw herself out of the way, discarding the broken remains of her dagger, and ducked behind a tree a moment before the lizard's tail smashed through the trunk, sending splinters and dust flying everywhere.

The tree pitched forward and crashed to the ground with a resounding thud. Reya dashed out from behind it, leaping into the air and throwing herself straight at the lizard's head in display of either stupidity or bravery and possibly a mixture of both.

Arwin felt the Mesh tingle in his mind as Reya ripped a dagger free of her belt. He only had an instant to look at it before Reya plunged the weapon into the lizard's eye with all her might and momentum, functionally sheathing it within the monster and snuffing the tingle in his mind before it could reveal any information.

The monster let out a screech of pain and Reya launched herself off its body, narrowly avoiding a tree branch as she hit the ground, holding her arms close to her chest to avoid breaking anything.

She rolled several feet and thumped to a stop against a tree, scrambling to her feet the moment she stopped moving. The lizard let out a hissing scream, thrashing and spitting as blood dripped down the side of its head and splattered against the forest floor.

"Don't rush to finish it!" Rodrick warned, his expression just as scrunched in worry as Arwin felt. "Take it slow! You're on the right track!"

Reya's breath came out in short, adrenaline filled pants. Her hands and limbs twitched as her brain sent furious signals to them, but she forced herself to stay still and watch the monster.

The lizard was far less patient. It let out a scream and charged toward Reya. Its steps were lopsided and heavy, but that didn't stop it from closing the small gap between them in just seconds and lurching in an attempt to take her down with it.

Reya dropped to the ground, and the lizard hurtled over her head like a scaly missile. It slammed into a tree, shattering it, and rolled across the ground in a flailing mess of limbs – and then it vanished.

Arwin blinked, then looked to the others. They looked equally as confused. There was no sign of the lizard. If it wasn't for all the destruction in the area around them, it would have been as if it had never been there.

“What the hell?” Arwin asked. “Where'd it go?”

“Are you okay, Reya?” Anna asked.

“I'm fine,” Reya said, pushing herself up to her feet and frowning. She squinted into the forest. “What happened?”

Arwin walked in the direction the lizard had gone, his sword held at his side and ready to spring into action. He couldn't place exactly what was causing it, but the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

He inched closer to where the lizard had vanished, peering into the darkness, and froze as the breath caught in his throat. There was a huge hole, roughly the size of a house, in the middle of the ground.

And, looking straight out of it were two large green eyes, each the size of a shield. Glistening gray scales made up the draconic body surrounding them, and the tip of a forest lizard's tail stuck out of a mouth chock full of pointed yellowed teeth.

Arwin's skin tingled as the Mesh identified the creature before him, but he barely even needed it.

[Forest Wyrms – Journeyman 8]

A series of cracks split the air as the Wyrms chewed once, its powerful jaws grinding straight through the lizard's scales and bones alike. It chewed once before swallowing the lizard in a single gulp. A dull rumble built in its chest as it reached up with a clawed hand nearly as large as Arwin and pulled itself out of the hole.

Arwin took a step back, staring up at the massive monster as its maw split open. Hot breath bearing the scent of carrion washed over Arwin as he locked eyes with the massive monster.

It was a whole tier stronger than he was, and even with the help of the others, they were nowhere near strong enough to even think about trying to defeat it.

The only thing that the eyes of the Wyrms held was death – and, judging by the way its tongue flicked out and tasted the air, it was still hungry.

Chapter 31

There was only one thing that Arwin could think of doing that wouldn't result in their immediate death.

“Run,” Arwin breathed, spinning and dashing in the opposite direction.

He grabbed Reya by the arm, yanking her along and out of her stunned reverie. Rodrick and Anna both fell in beside them, their legs pumping as they ran as hard as they could. Behind them, a roar split the forest and the Wyrms burst into pursuit.

“What in the Nine Underlands is the Wyrm doing here?” Rodrick screamed, throwing a glance over his shoulder and nearly running straight into a tree in the process. “It’s meant to stay underground!”

“I don’t know!” Arwin yelled back. Trees shattered behind them as the Wyrm plowed straight through their trunks, too large to even bother trying to avoid the obstacles. “Focus on running, not thinking!”

He dodged away from a tree, nearly tripping over himself as another roar ripped through the forest. Hot air wafted over his back, and Arwin didn’t want to think about how close the huge creature was to them.

“I don’t have to kill that, do I?” Reya screamed. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to get close to its eyes!”

“Forget killing it! Just run!”

Arwin’s feet slammed into the ground as he empowered his steps with [Scourge], using just enough to keep up with the others. It was only a temporary solution, though. There was only so far they’d be able to run before the Wyrm caught up with them, and if it was still chasing after them after they escaped the forest, they were all dead.

We’re only still ahead at all because the big bugger has to run through trees while we can avoid them. In open air... there won’t even be a fight. I need to do something to get this thing off us.

“Keep going!” Arwin yelled. “I’m going to try to stall it!”

“Do you have a death wish?” Anna yelled back. “You’ll get eaten in one bite!”

“So will the rest of us if I don’t do something. Just keep going and don’t turn back.”

Arwin spun, activating [Arsenal] and summoning his greaves and scale mail chest piece into place on his body. He wasn’t sure how much good they’d do against a monster this powerful, but he couldn’t afford to keep anything in reserve if he wanted even the slightest chance of surviving the next minute.

I might be able to survive one or two direct hits, but after that it’s over. That’s probably not enough for my greaves to properly absorb enough kinetic energy to fight back, but if I can take a few glancing blows, I might have a chance at hurting the Wyrms enough that it gets scared off.

The Wyrms skidded to a stop before him, confusion flashing in its large eyes. This monster – unlike the lizards – was definitely intelligent. It might not have been as smart as a human, but there was thought behind the green disks.

Arwin could see it trying to figure out why he’d stopped running. Prey didn’t stand in place. Prey screamed and fled, and his deviation from the norm made him, at least for a flicker of an instant, a threat.

“Come on then!” Arwin roared, raising his sword overhead. And then, in what was possibly one of the greatest displays of stupidity in his life, he charged at the monster that was twice his tier and triple his height.

From the Wyrms’ perspective, he was probably something around the equivalent of an armored Pomeranian with an attitude, but this Pomeranian had a sharp stick in its hands. The Wyrms pulled back, letting out a confused hiss.

Arwin took advantage of its confusion to close the distance between them. He drew power from within himself and shoved it into [Scourge], empowering his arms with all the magic they could handle before bringing the sword down on the Wyrms arm with all his might.

A resounding clang rang out through the air, and more magical energy left Arwins body as the sword drew on him, trying to imbue the spot he'd struck the Wyrms with resonance. As he lowered his sword, a chill swept over Arwins spine.

The scales were completely undamaged aside from a small crack running along one of them. He'd hit the Wyrms with the strongest blow he could muster in his current state, and he'd probably barely even tickled it.

For an instant, Arwin and the Wyrms stood in silence. The Wyrms stared at him, as if baffled that something would be so stupid as to even *try* striking it. Then it roared. Hot, rancid breath washed over Arwin, buffeting his hair back.

The Wyrms raised a foot and brought it down for him, trying to squash Arwin like a bug. He dove to the side, hitting the ground in a roll and coming up just inches away from where the monster's foot landed.

It was fast for its size, but he already knew that. Arwin rolled to his feet and let out a cry of his own to keep the Wyrms attention on him. He had to buy more time for the others to escape – but that didn't look like it was going to be hard.

The Wyrms eyes were locked straight on Arwin, and it wasn't impressed by his displays anymore. It reared back, casting a shadow over the forest as it rose onto its haunches, and then leapt forward.

Arwin drew on [Scourge] and thrust power into his legs, bounding out of the way. The Wyrms tail whipped around as it landed, hurtling for Arwin's chest. He only had an instant to react, and he chose to use it to jump, bringing his chest out of the way and leaving his legs in the path of the tail.

An immense force slammed into Arwin's lower body, spinning him like a top. He flew back and slammed into a tree with a loud crash. The air was knocked from his lungs and he dropped to the ground amid a rain of leaves, landing on his feet with a pained grunt.

Energy hummed within his greaves and Arwin's body throbbed – if it hadn't been for the combination of their absorbent properties and [Indomitable Bulwark], he was pretty sure the Wyrms strike would have snapped him clean in half.

The Wyrms looked just as surprised as he felt, but Arwin didn't give it time to gather its thoughts. He charged forward again, dismissing his sword as he ran so his hands were free. He desperately wished he had a blunt force weapon that he could use to shatter the monster's scales, but all he had was his sword.

A huge clawed hand swiped through the air and Arwin threw himself to the ground, rolling beneath it and jumping back to his feet, his sword reforming as he brought it down for the same spot he'd struck the Wyrms in before.

Once again, a resounding clang echoed through the forest. The Wyrms snarled and snapped at Arwin. He jumped back, just barely clearing its jaws. The monster's head slammed into him like a wrecking ball and sent him rolling across the ground. His sword flew from his grip, spinning across the ground and embedding itself by the base of a tree.

His greaves hummed with power as they absorbed more energy from the blow and Arwin shot back to his feet. He extended his hand and the sword vanished from where it had fallen, reforming in his palm.

That's convenient. I wasn't sure what would happen if I lost a weapon. Now I know.

The Wyrn roared, watching Arwin warily. It wasn't about to charge him mindlessly again – he had yet to actually hurt it, but he'd survived two attacks now, and the monster wasn't dumb enough to dismiss that idly.

Well, the others should have had time to escape by now. All I have to do is find a way to get out of here myself... but I'm not so sure that's possible. Even with Scourge, this thing is going to outrun me and I've got no way to know if it'll stop at the edge of the forest.

Shit. I might be in trouble.

Advancing far more carefully this time, the Wyrn loomed over Arwin and reared back, preparing to lunge at him. It wasn't going to be particularly easy to dodge an attack when it was taking this much effort to line it up, but Arwin wasn't so certain that he'd be able to survive if the beast literally dropped itself on top of him. It must have weighed several tons.

Defense isn't an option. My only hope is to hit the bastard hard enough that he gets scared off. That might be a bit of a stretch, but it's the only way I can make it out of this.

Arwin tensed, preparing to move at just the right moment. If he hit the resonating area once more and poured in all the power his greaves had stored, there was a chance he'd actually hurt the Wyrn.

The problem was that he doubted the huge monster would be willing to let him get another blow off. It was paying far too much attention to him now. In his past life as the Champion, Arwin would have called for someone to draw the beast's attention with ranged attacks so that he could get closer, but there was nobody but him.

Even as his mind raced, he knew that there were no more options. He wasn't going to be able to outrun or dodge the Wurm again, but he'd be damned if he went down running like a coward.

"What are you scared of?" Arwin roared, beating a fist against his chest. "Try me!"

The Wurm obliged. It pounced, stretching its arms out to catch Arwin. He dashed to meet the strike instead of avoiding it, hoping to take a glancing blow and trade one in exchange. He brought his sword down on the Wurm's leg with all his might, releasing all the power that his greaves had stored within them.

There was a brilliant flash. Magic poured out of Arwin's sword and slammed into the Wurm an instant before its massive body crashed to the ground. Arwin managed to twist out of the way, saving his upper body from getting crushed, but his right leg was considerably less fortunate.

Even with [Indomitable Bulwark], he felt the bones in his leg shatter. Pain ripped up Arwin's waist, winding into his spine and gripping him in icy claws. He snarled in pain even as the Wurm let out a pained cry and leapt to its feet like it had been stung.

The scales on its leg were cracked, and blood trickled past its claws, dripping to the ground. Arwin drove his sword into the tree behind him and dragged himself upright, baring his teeth.

“I’ve got more where that came from,” Arwin promised, ripping his sword free and pointing it at the Wyrn. He didn’t even try putting weight on his leg – he was pretty sure the bones in it weren’t just broken but completely pulverized.

At least my greaves are probably full again. I can get one more nasty blow off before I go down.

The Wyrn’s lips pulled back in a snarl, but it didn’t attack immediately. Arwin nearly laughed. As massive and powerful as the beast was – it was afraid. A Journeyman level monster feared a mere smith.

“Come on!” Arwin screamed, pounding a fist into the tree. The wood shattered beneath his [Scourge] empowered blow and it pitched back, crashing to the ground behind him.

The Wyrn took a step forward. A rock whistled through the air. It was no larger than a palm, but it flew with surprising accuracy and struck the Wyrn straight in the center of its eye. The monster let out an annoyed roar and snapped its head around to look over Arwin’s shoulder.

Rodrick stepped out of the forest, tossing another rock up and down in his head. “Over here, you big oaf!” Rodrick yelled. “I’ve been thinking I wanted some fancy new armor, and I think you’re wearing my scales!”

You bleeding idiot. Why are you here?

The Wyrn roared, turning away from Arwin and taking a step toward Rodrick. Its foot hit the forest floor with such weight that it trembled, making Arwin stumble as pain arced up his injured leg. The Wyrn might not have understood Rodrick’s words, but it definitely didn’t like having things flung at its eyes.

And, as soon as the monster's attention was averted, Arwin felt a hand fall on his shoulder. A wave of warmth rush over his body. The demolished bones in his leg knitted themselves back together and his torn flesh healed until the pain had completely vanished.

Anna stepped out beside him, a weary expression on her face. "I won't be able to do a powerful spell like that again. Help Rodrick."

He didn't have any time to ask Anna and Rodrick what they were doing here. For better or for worse, they'd remained. Arwin rolled his shoulders and took a step forward, pounding a fist against his chest to draw the Wyrms' attention back to him.

"I'm still here," Arwin snarled, pointing his sword up at the monster's head and locking eyes with it. "Didn't anyone ever tell you to finish what you started?"

Chapter 32

Another rock flew the air and – with unsettling accuracy – struck the Wyrms straight in the eye for the second time that day. It let out an annoyed screech. As it turned back toward Rodrick, Arwin lunged, swinging his sword for the small crack on its leg.

The Wyrms noticed his attack and flicked its claws at him, trying to carve Arwin apart before his blow could connect. Using a blast of energy from [Scourge], Arwin leapt over the monster's leg and slammed his sword home once more.

More magical power raced out of him and into the wound, sending a dull thrum up into the air. The Wyrms roared and lunged at Arwin, forcing him to use even more of his power to throw himself to safety.

Arwin could feel his magical reserves starting to run out. He'd been using [Scourge] at max for the entire fight, and his sword drained power at a massive rate. He probably only had one or two more moves left in him before he was completely dry.

The Wyrn, on the other hand, had been barely injured. The damage to its leg wasn't much more than a nasty scratch, but the fact he'd managed to do anything at all to the enormous beast was a feat in itself.

"Get out of here!" Arwin yelled. "We can't win this!"

"We aren't leaving you behind," Rodrick yelled back. "You can't win this either!"

Arwin didn't have a response to that. He grit his teeth and held the Wyrn's gaze as it contemplated its next move.

At least Reya got out. Now only three of us will get killed.

"Hey, asshole!" A woman's voice rang out from the trees, and Arwin nearly slapped himself in the forehead. "Give me back my dagger!"

A rock whistled out from the darkness, striking the Wyrn in the forehead and bouncing off harmlessly. Reya stepped out of the shadows and flung another rock, this time missing the monster entirely.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Arwin demanded. "Did nobody listen to a single thing I said?"

"It has the dagger you made for me," Reya spat. "I'm not leaving without it."

"I can make you another damn dagger!"

“Not if you die,” Reya countered. She threw another rock at the Wyrms, which now looked more baffled than anything else. Arwin nearly laughed in spite of their situation. In comparison with everything else in this forest, the Wyrms were the absolute peak. Nothing should have so much dared to look in its direction, but now a group of fleshy monkeys were flinging rocks at its head.

“How exactly do you think you’re going to get the dagger back?” Arwin asked. “Were you planning on crawling into its mouth and asking politely?”

“Do you think that would work?”

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Arwin snapped. The Wyrms bared its lips in a warning growl, but Arwin hardly even cared. It wasn’t like the monster could do anything else to them, and every second that passed gave him a little more magical energy back. If it was going to sit around in befuddlement, then it only helped him. “You’re meant to listen to my orders.”

“Well, don’t give stupid orders.”

“Surviving isn’t stupid. You know what’s stupid? Coming back to fight a high level Journeyman monster when you don’t even have a damn class yet.”

“You’re the one that told me I was going to get a class today!” Reya snapped. “I’m doing that!”

“Getting yourself killed is not getting yourself a class!”

The Wyrms looked from Reya to Arwin, the disbelief in its eyes turning to hunger as it reared back and let out a roar. They both looked back to the huge monster.

“What do we do?” Reya asked.

“We can’t beat this thing. Our best bet is to hurt it enough that it decides we aren’t worth eating. Don’t get close, your armor isn’t going to save you from any of its attacks. Just… fling rocks and don’t close.”

Arwin beat his hand against his chest again to draw the Wyrms attention back to him. The maneuver worked a bit better than he’d been hoping for and the monster finally lurched back into motion, flinging itself at him like a crazed flying squirrel.

He swore and activated [Scourge], empowering his legs and throwing himself out of the way. Arwin hit the ground in a run and skidded to a stop, spinning back to face the monster even as it rose back to its feet.

A rock dinked off the back of its head, but the Wyrms didn’t so much as glance back. It was fed up with the game and determined to finish off Arwin once and for all. Ripples of resonance still washed out from where Arwin had struck it several times before.

If I can reactivate the magic one more time, I might be able to actually do some decent damage to this thing. But there’s no way it’ll let me at it again. I need –

Reya, devoid of armor, a proper weapon, and possibly her sanity, charged the Wyrms with a cry. It took Arwin by such surprise that it took him a moment to realize what she was doing.

The Wyrms was equally as surprised, but it recovered quickly and spun toward her, its maw snapping open. The scales covering its body rippled as the muscles beneath them tensed, preparing to pounce.

Arwin burst into motion. He didn't have any other choice. His armor would keep the claws of a normal lizard from ripping Reya to shreds – it wasn't a magical wall that would stop the weight of the Wyrms.

The Wyrms saw Arwin's approach out of the corner of its eye. Its tail shot out and Arwin jumped – but the Wyrms wasn't trying to knock him out of the way. The massive appendage wrapped around his chest. He barely managed to lift his arms into the air before the tail tightened, starting to squeeze.

Arwin's armor cracked and groaned, desperately trying to hold the monster off and failing spectacularly. He wasn't far from its leg, but his sword arm was pointed entirely in the wrong direction.

The Wyrms lunged, aiming to swallow Reya whole. She tried to throw herself out of the way in the same way that Arwin had, but she didn't have [Scourge] to help her. Rodrick ran toward Reya, but he wasn't going to make it in time.

Arwin drew on every last ounce of magic he had, letting [Scourge] erupt through his entire body. He let out a snarl, shoving the Wyrms's tail back just enough to slip free of its grip even as it started to clear the ground. Arwin launched himself forward, moving with the Wyrms's momentum to launch himself up the side of the body.

He was too close to the monster to rear back and swing his sword without hitting something else on accident. With only instants to act, Arwin brought the blade up – but not toward the monster.

His teeth slammed down on the blade, shattering the metal. Energy poured into Arwin's mouth and spread throughout his body. He ripped power from the sword, draining the rest of the weapon until it was ash in the wind within just milliseconds.

Then, with a defiant roar, he drove his fist into the cracked scales. The power that the sword had once held was temporarily infused within him, and Arwin spent every last drop of power he had pushing it out through his fist, activating his greaves at the same time.

The ripples of resonating energy detonated with a brilliant crack. The Wurm screamed in pain, twisting at the last moment. There was a loud screech and Reya went flying, but Arwin hit the ground before he could see the extent of the damage.

A brilliant flash of light lit up the air and the Wurm roared in surprise, buying them precious seconds.

Arwin rolled across the ground, crashing into a tree with enough force to knock it back. His enhanced defenses were the only thing that kept him from passing out. Bright stars flashed before Arwin's eyes and he drew in a hissing gasp.

Pain rocked through his back as he forced himself upright, squinting through darkness dancing at the edges of his vision. The Wurm had landed several dozen feet from him, its momentum having carried it deeper into the forest and through a dozen trees.

The scales on its right foreleg were badly damaged, and blood poured down it like a small river. Letting out a wail, the enormous monster tried to put weight on its leg before yanking the foot back into the air.

Its eyes swiveled to stare at Arwin. Hunger and hatred mixed with fear within them as he staggered upright, baring his teeth and breathing heavily. He had absolutely nothing left – but the Wyrm didn't know that.

“Come on,” Arwin rasped.

The Wyrm didn't move.

“Come on!” Arwin screamed, pounding a hand against his cracked chest piece. The world swam around him and trees danced when they should have been still.

The Wyrm turned. It slunk back into the forest, limping to avoid putting weight on its injured leg. Deep, echoing thuds echoed through the darkness and faded into the distance. All that remained of it was a drying puddle of blood on the ground and a single, cracked scale.

Arwin turned toward the others, leaning heavily against the tree. Reya laid on the ground several feet away from him, sprawled out beside Anna. Arwin staggered toward them, barely able to keep himself upright.

“Reya! Are you–”

Reya pushed herself over. The front of her chest piece, running from her shoulders down to just above her waist, had been ripped to shreds. Several furrows ran through her skin, but they were no deeper than half an inch. The armor had absorbed the majority of the damage.

“Look at that,” Reya said with a weak smile. “It held up after all.”

A laugh slipped out of Arwin's mouth, rocking his body with such intensity that he had to grab onto a tree to keep from falling over. And, in his laughter, he just barely noticed a flicker of golden light dancing through the air.

Achievement: [Shieldbreaker] has been earned.

[Shieldbreaker] – *Awarded for shattering the armor of an enemy more than 1 Tier stronger than you.* Effects: You may choose to add the [Shieldbreaker] trait to 1 item you forge. *This achievement will be consumed upon use.*

Arwin had absolutely no idea what Shieldbreaker did, but he could venture a guess – and it sounded like it would be perfect for his hammer when he got around to making it.

“Arwin?” Reya whispered, pulling him from his thoughts. She spoke so silently that he barely overheard her over the rush of blood in his ears.

Arwin turned toward her. “Yes?”

“I got a class.”

Chapter 33

The group hightailed it out of the forest as quickly as they could, only pausing so Arwin could grab the scale he’d broken off the Wurm. Anna had used just about all the healing magic she had to repair Arwin’s leg as quickly as she had, so she had to sling Reya’s arm over her shoulder and help her stumble through the trees.

Rodrick offered similar help to Arwin, but he refused it. He was dazed and completely drained of energy, but not to the point where he couldn’t walk on his own. And, even if he’d needed help, he was too curious about what class Reya had been offered to consider it.

They continued until they'd left the forest and put about ten minutes of travel between it and themselves. Reya and Anna finally flopped to the grass, laying flat on their backs. Rodrick and Arwin sat down beside them.

"I can't believe we're alive," Rodrick said, laughing into the palms of his hands. "The gods damned Wyrms. Can you believe that?"

"What in the Nine Underlands was it doing outside?" Anna demanded, sounding considerably less happy. "Wyrms don't go above ground! Everyone knows that!"

Arwin would have loved to correct her, but Anna was right. Everything he knew about Wyrms agreed with her claim. They were wingless, basically large dragon-lizards that relied on idiots stumbling into their nests rather than proper hunting.

"You're right," Arwin said. "I don't know why it was so aggressive, but there's nothing wrong with celebrating life. Reya, how are you doing?"

Reya poked at her damaged armor. "Alive. It stings really bad, though. But... my class. What do I choose?"

"You haven't told us what you got yet," Rodrick said.

Reya sent a glance toward Arwin, and he shrugged. Anna and Rodrick had returned to save his life when they hadn't had to. If Reya wanted to trust them, it was her decision, not his.

"I'm sorry I don't have any more healing left right now," Anna said apologetically. "We could cover our ears if you'd prefer?"

"It's fine," Reya said after a few moments. "You won't tell anyone, right?"

“Not a soul,” Rodrick promised, pressing a hand to his chest. “But I will be telling the story of how a girl without a class charged a fucking Wyrn like she was the Champion himself. I don’t think I’m ever going to forget that sight.”

Reya’s cheeks reddened. “Arwin needed a distraction to hit the Wyrn again, and it wasn’t going to do anything if we kept throwing rocks at it. I figured drastic measures were in order.”

“What, did you plan on getting stuck in its teeth while it chewed you?” Anna asked with a mixture of humor and admonishment. “You need to live through the fights you win, you know.”

“I lived!”

“Barely,” Anna muttered. She rubbed her arm, then shook her head. “Whatever. I’m not your mom. But, if you’re going to say what classes you can choose from, do it quickly. I’m going to die from anticipation.”

“I got three options,” Reya said. “The first one is Warrior.”

“Good class,” Rodrick said.

“You’re biased,” Anna replied without missing a beat. “Warrior can be a good choice if you’re interested in being at the front of a fight, but that didn’t sound like what you were hoping for. What about the other options?”

“The second one was the Berserker,” Reya continued. “It’s Unique.”

“Holy shit,” Rodrick said. “I’ve heard of that one. The normal version of it, at least. Real nasty warriors, very difficult to stop once they get going. That’s a really good class. I can see why you got it, considering you charged a Wurm with no way to fight it.”

“What about the last one?” Arwin asked. Berserker still wasn’t what Reya had been looking for, and he’d known his share of berserkers. The class was definitely powerful, and a Unique variant of it would be even stronger, but it didn’t fit Reya’s personality at all.

“Warden,” Reya said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Unique. Again.”

Rodrick let out a whistle. “I’ve never heard of that. Anna?”

“Same,” Anna said with a shake of her head. “What about you, Arwin?”

To Arwin’s surprise, he hadn’t heard of it either. It wasn’t like he knew of every class in existence, of course, but he’d expected to at least recognize the name if not understand it perfectly.

“I’ve got no idea. Never heard of it,” Arwin said. “What does the information about it say?”

“It’s a class meant to control and restrain opponents rather than outright killing them by pitting our willpower against each other. It isn’t very descriptive.” Reya bit her lower lip in thought. “None of them are what I thought I’d get.”

It sounds like she might have actually gotten Warden because she chose to spare the other lizard, not because of the Wurm. Interesting. I don’t want to influence her choice, but a class that I’ve never heard of is almost certainly more powerful than any of the other options.

Then again, if the berserker has some form of draconic or Wyrms influence on it, that could be pretty nasty.

“What are you thinking, then?” Rodrick asked. “You’ve got some really nasty selections there. I could see all of those being very powerful in the future.”

“I didn’t think I’d get the chance to choose at all,” Reya admitted. She touched one of the wounds on her stomach and winced slightly, pulling her hand back and rubbing her fingers together, smearing the blood across them. “There’s only one of these that I think I could see myself doing, though.”

She reached out, touching something invisible in the air. Faint golden sparkles swirled around her, sinking into Reya’s skin and flaring behind her eyes. She stiffened, then drew in a slow breath as her eyes unfocused, likely reading information about her new class.

“What did you go with?” Rodrick asked.

“Warden,” Reya replied, tearing her gaze away from the invisible presence of the Mesh before her. “I don’t want to be a warrior and running around with my top off didn’t seem very appealing.”

Anna let out a snort. “Can’t say I blame you. Berserkers all have a death wish anyway. It’s a good class, but I think you probably made the right choice. You might have a little difficulty finding anyone to train you, but I suspect it’ll be worth it in the long run.”

“I hope so,” Reya said. She touched the wound on her chest again, and Anna smacked her hand away.

“Stop doing that. You’re going to get dirt in it, and it’ll be harder to heal. Infections are much more difficult to repair than normal injuries.”

“There’s a difference in healing wounds?” Reya asked.

“Yeah. The worse the damage is, the harder it is to heal. Pretty straight forward. It gets more complex when viruses and diseases get involved, though. You can get little living things running around in your body wreaking havoc, and healing magic can’t kill stuff. It’s not pretty.”

Reya swallowed and pointedly stuck her hands beneath her backside to keep herself from touching the wound again. “Okay. Can you heal it soon?”

“In a few minutes. I don’t have enough energy yet, and I want to get it all at once rather than sealing the wound over and leaving something behind that’ll scar too badly.” Anna glanced over her shoulder at the forest, then shook her head. “My legs are still shaking. I don’t understand why that Wyrms was there.”

“Monsters don’t change their routines unless something makes them change,” Arwin said with a thoughtful frown. “And for the Wyrms to change how it typically acts means that it’s likely we aren’t seeing the cause but rather the effect. Something happened in the forest.”

“The Wyrms is the strongest monster in there,” Rodrick pointed out. “What’s going to be enough of a threat to it that it would have to start being more aggressive?”

“I don’t know,” Arwin admitted. “I’ll be honest – I’m just happy to be alive and that Reya got her class. I’m sorry we didn’t actually get to do any proper hunting, though.”

“Are you kidding? I think I just witnessed a legend in the making,” Rodrick said with a burst of laughter. “I wouldn’t trade that for anything. Also, I’m begging you at this point. Introduce me to the smith that made Reya’s armor. That thing held up against a bleedin *Wym*.”

“Techincally, it broke.”

“Are you kidding? That armor was made out of Forest Lizard scales, wasn’t it? Those things have no right standing up to a Wym in the slightest, but it managed to stop a blow and didn’t even have any magic infused into it.”

“I’m not sure I’d say it stopped the blow,” Arwin said, sending a critical glance at Reya’s armor. “She got injured.”

“She should be dead,” Anna said. “Rodrick is right. Forest Lizard scales couldn’t have done that on their own. The smith made them harder whilst forging the armor. That’s a really impressive piece of gear. We’d understand if the smith isn’t interested in new clients right now, though.”

Anna sent Rodrick a pointed glance when she said the last sentence, making sure he wouldn’t push any more. Arwin kept a laugh from passing through his lips as Rodrick sheepishly nodded his agreement.

For a few seconds, he considered the two adventurers. He didn’t truly know them that well, but if he wanted to start a guild, he needed people. These two had more than proven themselves, and they weren’t aligned with the Adventurer’s Guild.

They came back to help me when they had no reward from it. If I can’t trust them, then I don’t know if I can trust anyone ever again.

“Are you in a guild right now?” Arwin asked.

Rodrick and Anna exchanged a surprised look before shaking their heads.

“No,” Rodrick said. “We’ve stayed away from them after our experience in the Adventurer’s Guild. I know there are smaller ones, but they’ve all got recruitment requirements that I haven’t met. They’d take Anna in a heartbeat, though.”

“Except I’m not joining them without you. They’d just use me as a mobile health station anyway. I don’t want to lose my autonomy.” Anna crossed her arms and shook her head. “Why do you ask? Are you part of one?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Technically, no,” Reya said, glancing at Arwin out of the corners of her eyes.

Arwin cleared his throat. “Okay, technically no. But in spirit, yes.”

“What’s that meant to mean?” Rodrick asked.

“I started a guild myself. It’s just a few people in it right now,” Arwin said carefully. “We aren’t official or anything, but there aren’t any of the restrictions that other guilds have. It’s pretty much just us right now.”

“The blacksmith is part of your guild?” Rodrick tilted his head to the side. “Damn. How’d you pay him to join? Are you secretly rich?”

Arwin burst into laughter. “Money is the one thing I don’t have.”

Not yet, at least.

“I take it this is an invitation to join, then?” Anna asked.

Arwin nodded. “Yes. I don’t plan to grow fast, but you’ve both more than proven yourselves. I honestly don’t know how much we can offer you, but I can promise that we won’t screw you over.”

“We’d be able to hire the smith if we joined?” Anna asked.

“I’d say so.”

“What about term limits?” Rodrick asked. “Is there a set amount of time we’d have to stay?”

Arwin hadn’t put much thought into that. He hadn’t actually been planning on recruiting new members quite yet, but the words had left his mouth before he’d properly thought through them. “No limits. Leave if you want, but I’d ask that you keep anything you find to yourselves. It’s not like I can enforce that, but I’d ask it nonetheless.”

Rodrick leaned in closer to Anna and whispered something into her ear. She thought for a second, then looked back to Arwin and gave him a small nod.

“If there aren’t restrictions on it, then I think we can tentatively accept. You’re the first one that hasn’t tried to cheat or otherwise get an upper hand out of partnering with a healer.”

“Is that common?” Arwin blinked in surprise.

“You’ve got no idea,” Rodrick said. “Half the people we join up with try to convince Anna to leave me and join their party. Bunch of assholes.”

“It’s a pain,” Anna agreed. “But you know what you’re doing. So, for the time being, we’ll join. It’s not an official guild yet from the sounds of things, so it’s really not that much of a commitment. I promise we won’t share anything you don’t want us to, though.”

Anna held her hand out and Arwin took it, shaking once. He'd never had trouble getting healers as the Champion, but every day he spent in his new life reminded him of just how different things really were.

“So, about that smith...” Rodrick hedged. “When can we meet him? I probably can't afford anything he makes yet, but I'd love to have a look and start daydreaming.”

Arwin grinned. “The only people in my guild are Reya and I.”

“Wait, what?” Rodrick's face creased with a frown. “But you said...”

“That you could meet the smith,” Arwin finished with a nod. Rodrick's eyes went as wide as saucers as Arwin held his hand out. “Pleasure to meet you. I'm the smith.”

Chapter 34

“Wait,” Rodrick stammered, taking a step back. “That's not possible. You can't be the smith. You were fighting!”

“So I was.”

“You're better at fighting than I am!”

“Probably.”

“Stronger, too!”

“Most definitely.”

“How?” Rodrick demanded. “A crafter shouldn't be able to do that!”

Arwin shrugged in response. “Not every class is built the same, and not every person is content with their lot in life.”

“I’ll be damned,” Anna said, shaking her head and letting a smile slip across her lips. “You’ve got a Unique class?”

“I do,” Arwin confirmed. “One that lets me ride the line between crafter and warrior. I made the armor that we’re wearing.”

Rodrick looked down to his scale mail greaves, then back up to Arwin, shaking his head in disbelief. “You know what? I’m jealous. Screw you.”

They all burst into laughter. Anna made her way over to Reya and pressed her hands to the wounds on her chest, sending soft light into the bloodied furrows and sealing them back over. Once she was finished, she helped Reya to her feet.

“So... do we get a discount or something?” Rodrick asked with a sly grin. “We’re friends, right?”

“Friends get the right to buy gear from me in the first place,” Arwin replied without missing a beat. “No discounts.”

“Damn it,” Rodrick said. Anna glared at him and he rubbed the back of his head, giving them a sheepish grin. “It was worth a shot. How much would it run me to get a full set of armor like the stuff you’ve got on your legs?”

Arwin considered his greaves. They’d definitely saved his life more than once during the fight with the Wurm, and they were still in good shape. His scale mail shirt was in worse

condition, and he was pretty sure his entire body was bruised, but he'd avoided any further injury.

“The greaves were quite effective. I haven't figured out how to make them into a chest piece, helmet, greaves, or boots yet,” Arwin admitted. “I'll give you a more accurate quote for how much it'll cost you once I have. For the greaves alone, I'd probably ask for around one hundred gold.”

Rodrick let out a whistle. “Makes sense. It gives me something to save up for, then. Does that include cost of materials?”

“Yes. If you bring me all the scales I need, I can probably knock it down to eighty.”

“Perfect,” Rodrick said with a grin. He rubbed his hands together, then froze when he spotted Anna glaring at him.

“Stop doing business. We're supposed to be celebrating,” Anna admonished. “Reya just got her class!”

“It doesn't feel real,” Reya muttered, looking down at her hands before lifting her gaze back up to them. “I'm not dreaming, right?”

“If you were dreaming, I'd hope you could think up better company.” Rodrick let out a cackle and slapped Reya on her back. “Welcome to the life of an adventurer, lass. May it lead us to riches and – well, more riches, hopefully.”

“Perhaps we should head back to town,” Anna suggested. “I think I've had more excitement than I'd planned on today. Do you have a guildhall?”

Arwin cleared his throat. “Er... no. Not really.”

“We have a crumbling smithy,” Reya supplied.

“That’s not all,” Arwin protested. “We also have two beds.”

Anna and Rodrick stared at them.

“It’s a work in progress,” Arwin dismissed his armor with [Arsenal] and scratched at his back. “We’ll get there.”

“You know what?” Anna asked. “I believe you. That doesn’t change the fact that I’d be willing to stab someone for a good meal and bed right about now. I’m exhausted. Nearly watching people get killed will do that to you.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Arwin said absently, not thinking much of his words until he noticed the looks on Rodrick and Anna’s faces. “What?”

“You’ve been through some shit, haven’t you?” Rodrick asked, the usual cheer gone from his voice.

Arwin grunted and shook his head. The last thing he needed was their pity. “No matter. Anna was right. We should be celebrating Reya’s new class, and I’ve got some work to do. Let’s head back.”

The group returned to town without any further incidents. Rodrick and Anna broke off when they passed by the Gleaming Swordfish – they still had a few days paid for in the tavern, and there was no point wasting them.

Arwin and Reya slipped into Milten's alleyways, traveling through the darkness until they found themselves back on their street. Before Arwin could make for the smithy, Reya caught his wrist. He turned to her in surprise.

“What is it?”

Reya's cheeks reddened and she shifted her feet. “Could we go to the tavern? I... kind of want to tell Lillia that I got my class. I'm gonna wait for the right time, though. We can wait until she starts bringing out the food, and then I'll tell her. The look on her face will be great!”

Arwin paused. He didn't have a good excuse to avoid the Demon Queen. It didn't look like either of them were going to blow the other's cover, but it was still stressful. Still, she hadn't done anything to justify his reluctance.

Beyond that, there were some things he needed to ask someone who understood Monsters – and Lillia probably understood them better than anyone else. Arwin sighed and nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Yes!” Reya cheered, pumping a hand in the air. “Let's go!”

She darted down the street and over to the tavern. Arwin shook his head and followed after her at a much more leisurely pace, arriving several seconds after Reya had already entered the building.

The heavy darkness that followed the Demon Queen remained exactly as it had been before, cloaking the tavern before Arwin had even gotten a chance to step through the door. He squinted as he ducked through the doorway, but to his surprise, there was actually some light within it.

Several faint spots of orange flickered on the walls, cast by candles within old lanterns. Their glow barely made it a few feet out, but it was just enough to see by – at least, if one was close enough to the light.

Lillia had also managed to procure several new mismatched chairs by her counter. One was far too short for its purpose, but chairs were still chairs. Reya had already taken one for herself.

Walking up beside her, Arwin tested one of the other chairs before lowering his weight into it. The piles of dust and rubble that had covered the floor of the tavern had been removed as well – Lillia had been hard at work. It still didn't look anything like a proper tavern, but it was several steps in the right direction.

A shadow stretched out in the dim light as Lillia stepped out from the kitchen, a pan in her hands. She smiled as she saw Reya, then paused as she spotted Arwin behind her. Her eyes flicked down to the pan and her cheeks reddened.

“One moment,” Lillia said, darting back into the kitchen.

“Oooh,” Reya whispered, leaning closer to Arwin. “She likes it. She took your advice about the monster theme as well! She’s trying to make the tavern look like a dungeon.”

“I – yeah. I suppose so,” Arwin said, looking around again. Lillia really *did* look like she'd liked the pan. She must have, if she was using it.

Arwin still had a small frown on his lips when Lillia came back out from the kitchen, wiping her hands off on her apron. “What can I get for you two?”

“I got my class!” Reya exclaimed, unable to control herself any longer.

“I thought you were going to wait until the food came,” Arwin said.

“I got impatient.”

“You got your class?” Lillia repeated, her eyes lighting up. “That’s incredible! Congratulations! What class did you get?”

Ah, wait. Maybe we shouldn’t be telling the Demon Queen–

“A unique one called Warden,” Reya said without a second of hesitation. Arwin repressed a grimace, watching Lillia’s expression closely to study how she reacted.

To his surprise, the only thing he found in it was shared joy. Lillia was genuinely happy for Reya. It didn’t look like she had any ulterior motives in the slightest.

Perhaps I’m more caught up in the past than she is. We already called a truce, but some part of me never thought that the Demon Queen would be able to just... start a normal life. Care about people like she cares about monsters.

Could I do that if I were in her shoes? I’m not sure.

“I’ve never heard of Warden,” Lillia said. “That’s incredible. Great job, Reya. You have to be really proud of yourself.”

“I had a lot of help,” Reya said with a grin, looking back to Arwin. “Also, my armor got completely destroyed.”

“So I see,” Lillia said with a wince. “You look like you got healed, though. What hit you?”

“A Wyrn.”

Lillia's eyes bulged out of her head. "A Wyrms? You survived a Wyrms at your Tier?"

"Yeah. If it wasn't for Arwin, I wouldn't have. It was terrifying," Reya admitted. "But we lived. That's what matters, right?"

"I – yeah. It is," Lillia said. "Well, what can I get for you? It's on the house in celebration of your new class."

"Oh, really? Could I have cake?"

Lillia cleared her throat. "I should amend my offer. I only have ingredients to make a steak right now."

"I'll take a steak, then."

"Coming right up," Lillia said, flashing Reya a grin before darting back into the kitchen. It didn't take long before the sizzle of cooking meat filled the air. Arwin glanced around the tavern while they waited.

Lillia really had put a lot of effort into improving it. It was clear just how much she wanted everything to work out, and Arwin felt a pang of sympathy at the lack of people in the tavern.

I'm sure they'll start coming soon enough once word gets out.

Minutes slipped by, and Lillia finally emerged from the back with a steak on a plate of metal. It didn't have anything accompanying it, but as far as steaks went, it actually looked pretty good.

She set it down before Lillia, then turned to Arwin. "What about you? Want something?"

“I already ate today,” Arwin said, a small smile flickering across his face before falling away. “But, if you don’t mind, I’d like to talk. Privately.”

Chapter 35

Lillia didn’t respond for several seconds. Arwin held her gaze while Reya looked from one of them to the other, then pulled her steak closer and very pointedly avoided looking up from it.

“Fine,” Lillia said curtly. She turned on her heel and strode into the kitchen. Arwin followed after her, assuming that she was giving him an unspoken invitation to follow. A part of him wanted to summon his armor and sword, but he’d already eaten the sword and summoning his armor would only make it look like he was planning on fighting.

Arwin stepped past the dim light of the lantern and entered the kitchen. It was more of a long hallway with some cooking utensils and an old cooktop on one side. Lillia stood at the far end of the hall, leaning against the wall in a patch of shadow with her arms crossed.

He could tell that her guard was up. Her eyes traced his movements and, despite her casual pose, the muscles in her body were tensed. She was ready to spring into motion the instant he did anything aggressive.

For a moment, it felt like it had so many times before. Arwin had lost count of the number of times they’d stood before each other just like this before launching into a fight. A fight that inevitably always ended the same way.

The back of Arwin's neck tingled as his mind screamed at him to be wary of the shadows. He was within the Demon Queen's domain – unarmed and unable to properly fight back if she tried to attack.

“Well?” Lillia asked, her lips thin. Her words were curt, but there was fear in them. Not fear of him; Arwin was certain of that much. They'd never been scared of each other. He was pretty sure he knew exactly what the fear was.

It was fear of losing what she'd been building. Her tavern – and his smithy – both sat suspended on a thin cord. The moment either he or Lillia pulled just a little too hard, it would snap.

And yet, ignoring the problem could only solve things for so long. There were too many questions. He had enemies, and he didn't even know who they were. At one point, the Demon Queen had been one of them.

Now – Arwin wasn't so sure.

“What do you want?” Lillia asked. “Stop staring at me. If you're going to try to run me through, I dare you to give it a try. See what happens.”

“Who are you?” Arwin finally asked, finding the words he was looking for.

The Demon Queen stared at Arwin. “What? Did you hit your head on something? You know damn well who I am, and I know who you are.”

“No, you don't.” Arwin shook his head. “You knew who I was. I'm not that man any longer. He's dead. I didn't ask who you used to be. I'm asking who you are. Right now. Who are you?”

A second passed. Then two. The Demon Queen ran her tongue along her lips, considering Arwin quietly. Finally, a smirk flickered across her lips.

“What does it look like? I’m living in a run-down tavern with nothing but a cobbled together kitchen. I’m an innkeeper. That’s it. That’s all I want to be.”

“Then I am just the smith that lives down the road. That’s all I want to be.”

“That’s not what it sounded like to me. Reya’s been talking about how you want to start up a guild. That’s not something a blacksmith does.”

“A blacksmith makes armor. I’m just taking my armor a bit farther,” Arwin said, a wry smile flickering across his lips. “Doesn’t an innkeeper want more than just an inn? You want a community.”

Lillia let her head incline, the confusion and tension slowly leaving her form. She stepped to the side, then flicked a hand. Some of the darkness swirling around her abated, revealing a doorway that Arwin had previously missed.

Within it was a matted pile of straw in the shape of a bed. It looked horribly uncomfortable, though Arwin suspected it was probably far better than the floor. After sending one last glance at Arwin, Lillia stepped into the room and sat down on the far end of the bed.

It was a silent invitation, an acceptance of the continued truce Arwin had offered. Every single thing Arwin knew about the Demon Queen screamed at him not to accept it. She was a devious opponent with immense power that grew stronger still the closer he got to her sanctum – and if anywhere in her tavern was a sanctum, then it would be her room.

I'm not speaking with the Demon Queen, though. The person before me is nothing more than Lillia the innkeeper.

Arwin stepped inside. He sat down on the far side of the straw mattress, leaving his side completely exposed. If Lillia had wanted to, she probably could have run him through before he even realized she was moving.

Granted, he suspected he could have summoned his armor before she did any lasting damage, but Lillia made no moves. Neither of them spoke for a few more seconds. Finally, Arwin broke the silence.

“I didn’t realize you could reduce the darkness around you.”

“It’s not easy. Normally, I have to completely drain myself of my energy.” Lilla spoke softly, and Arwin could tell by how her voice was muted that she wasn’t looking at him either. “I’ve been working on trying to control it more, though. Nobody wants to eat at an inn where you can’t see the food.”

“There’s an appeal to it if you sell it the right way,” Arwin said with a small smile. “Especially if the food doesn’t look good.”

“Say that again and Lillia the Innkeeper is going to stab you with her tail.”

Arwin snorted. “I never said it didn’t look good. I just said it would help if it didn’t.”

“My point still stands.”

“Should an innkeeper even have a tail? I’d think you’d be trying to hide it.”

Something moved in the corner of Arwin's vision and he glanced over as Lillia brought her barbed tail to flick in the air before her, a pensive expression on her face. "I was going to, until someone suggested that a monster themed inn might actually work."

"You're really going with it, then?"

"It wasn't a half bad idea."

Arwin grunted. "I'd say so. I just didn't think you'd agree. Isn't it... concerning? What if someone catches on?"

"Who would?" Lillia snorted. "Let's be real. What would either of us ever be doing here? It's so ludicrous that it's impossible to comprehend. The worst that could happen would be some idiot would think I'm a lower ranked demon, but I don't think I'm anywhere near popular enough to draw attention that could make that a problem."

"That's true enough," Arwin allowed.

"Did you really come here just to have small talk?"

"Do you really get to talk to that many people?" Arwin raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I thought you just needed some company."

To his surprised, Lillia winced. "You aren't wrong. It's... a nice change of pace. I've started to get a little too used to the voice in my own head."

"Hopefully only one."

Lillia glared at him. "I'm not insane. There's only one. Usually. An inn isn't meant to be quiet, you know."

Arwin started to nod, then paused. “Wait. I thought you wanted a tavern?”

“Inn, tavern. Both. One day, at least.” Lillia sighed, then looked up at the ceiling, letting a small smile flit across her features. “I can picture it. Maybe I’m delusional, but I can’t shake the thought of a full room. It would be so noisy. I’d have to yell over people so they’d be able to hear what I’m saying.”

Arwin was surprised to find that he did understand what she meant. He wasn’t so sure he wanted his smithy to be so popular he couldn’t hear himself think, but the idea of lines stretching out the door just to buy his work did strike a hungry spark deep within him.

Even though he was well aware that selling magical items to the general populace was a bad idea at the moment, it was nothing more than an idle daydream where logic had no place.

“I don’t think it’s delusional,” Arwin said. “It’s better than what we were doing.”

The smile fell away from Lillia’s lips. “Yeah. It is.”

“Why were you doing it in the first place?” Arwin asked, turning to look at her front on for the first time since they’d sat down. “I don’t understand. You aren’t the person I thought you were.”

“The fact that you’re referring to me as a person rather than a demon seems a bit off as well,” Lillia said with a snort, shifting and crossing her legs beneath her so she could match Arwin’s gaze. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Ask me what? Why I was defending my people?”

“Defending?” Lillia scoffed. “More like hunting.”

Arwin's brow furrowed in confusion. "Hunting? All I ever did was keep your army from advancing. The only time I struck first was when your forces were pushed so deeply into human territory that I had to attack before you could torch villages. I just don't see how the person that's so eager to have a joyous tavern was slaughtering entire families without leaving a single survivor."

Lillia nearly choked on her indignation as she thrust a finger into Arwin's chest. "The absolute gall to claim that when you're the one that murdered countless innocents and torched their villages to the ground. Your hands are stained with more blood than you can ever wash off."

"Murder?" Arwin's eyes narrowed. "The only things I killed were the ones trying to rip my throat out."

"Children were trying to kill you?" Lillia crossed her arms. "Bullshit."

"Children?" Arwin blinked. "I never killed any children."

"Just because you don't see monsters as rational beings doesn't mean—"

"Did they look like actual children?"

"What?" Lillia blinked. "What kind of question is that?"

"Was it obvious they were children? They resembled human children?"

"With monster traits, but yes. Many of them did."

Arwin stared at Lillia, but he couldn't find any deception in her face. She seemed to be telling the truth, but that made absolutely no sense. Arwin didn't remember the face of everyone he'd killed, but he'd never killed a child.

“I never did that,” Arwin said. “I didn’t kill any children. I’d remember that. I know I would. You’re the one who—”

Lillia was shaking her head before Arwin could finish speaking. “I’d never kill a kid. I’ve killed more humans than I can ever remember, and some of them were younger than me, but no kids. Not unless you were sending kids against me in your armies.”

“Of course we didn’t,” Arwin snapped. His mind whirred, trying to make sense of Lillia’s words, but the answer was staring him right in the face, no matter how badly he wanted to ignore it. “You’re telling the truth.”

“You’re telling me that you thought I was going around slaughtering villages of people for no reason?” Lillia demanded. “What, did you think that I was just some monster that loved killing? I was defending my land!”

“I think we both were.” A sinking pit formed in Arwin’s stomach. “We got played.”

Chapter 36

There wasn’t a single word that could properly encapsulate the emotions Arwin was feeling, but Lillia gave her best shot at it.

“Fuck.” Lillia leaned closer to squint at his features. “You didn’t kill kids?”

“No more than you did.”

“The villages?”

“Not me.”

Lillia rocked back, her eyes wide with disbelief. “You’re telling the truth – but I saw your men torching villages with my own eyes. I literally watched innocents get cut down in front of me. That was your army!”

“Just like I saw your army doing the same,” Arwin said. “I don’t think either of us are wrong. Your army *did* destroy human cities, and I suspect mine did the same to monster cities. A portion of the army, at least. I can’t imagine they were all in on it. It was always raids, and we always got the information too late to properly interfere.”

“I never saw you at the attacks,” Lillia muttered, her brow furrowing as dread covered her features. “Why? Why would anyone do that? And who? You’re telling me the whole war was completely artificial?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it at all,” Arwin said, running his hands through his hair and shaking his head. It felt like the floor had collapsed out from under him. Even though he’d already decided that Lillia wasn’t his enemy anymore, this was something more.

She’d never been his enemy in the first place. She’d been fighting for the exact same thing he had.

“I can’t believe this,” Lillia muttered into the palms of her hands. “So many people died. What about your closest group? The ones that were always with you? Were they—”

“Never left my side for long enough to destroy a town, and they weren’t anywhere near strong enough to pull that off.”

Lillia looked like she wanted to throw up. “I killed so many of them. They were just trying to defend their homes?”

“Fuck. Your lieutenants were the same?”

“Always with me. I chose them myself,” Lillia muttered, her eyes boring into the ground.

Arwin’s throat constricted and his hands tightened at his sides. He’d always been convinced that his blade had been wielded for justice, but it was completely soaked through with the blood of innocents.

“I’m so sorry,” Arwin said. “I didn’t know. I thought—”

“We both did, didn’t we?” Lillia asked bitterly.

They sat on either corner of the bed wordlessly for nearly a minute. Arwin stared at the dark wall until it swam before his eyes, but it wasn’t changing anything. His friends were dead, and so were Lillia’s.

Someone had used both of them like puppets and thrown them to the side. Arwin had absolutely no idea why they’d been left alive, but he’d have been willing to bet everything he had that neither he nor Lillia had been meant to survive the explosion.

He glanced over at the former Demon Queen. Her shoulders were hunched, and her face was buried deep into her hands. Arwin had already suspected some degree of betrayal, so as hard as the news had hit him, his subconscious had already been prepared for it to some degree.

To Lillia, it was completely out of the blue, and he didn’t envy her. Having to handle the full revelation at once would have shattered everything he knew. Arwin was far from the best at comforting anyone, though.

He raised a hand, staring at it as if it were a foreign instrument, before slowly reaching out and uncomfortably setting it on Lillia's shoulder. She stiffened, but made no move to remove it.

"Do you have any idea who would have done this?" Lillia asked, her voice muffled.
"Who would even be strong enough? I thought we were supposed to be the peak!"

"I have a theory," Arwin said.

Lillia's head snapped up and she locked eyes with him. Specks of molten fury danced within them. "Tell me. Now."

"Do you recall the gem that was in my armor?" Arwin asked. "The black one."

"Yes. It was a backup strategy to kill me, wasn't it?"

"No. I have no damn idea what it was," Arwin said with a shake of his head. "But I think it was a failsafe. I didn't put it there, and I oversaw my armor. The Adventurer's Guild would have been the only ones that could have modified it, but it doesn't make sense why they didn't tell me about it. If I knew I had a bomb that could kill you, I'd have worked around that. I already planned to die for the victory, so it just doesn't line up."

"You're telling me you think the Guild *wanted* you to die?"

"I think so. I just don't understand why we survived – or what they even stand to gain from this in the first place." Arwin pressed his lips together. "What about you? Was there really nobody you knew that might have stood to gain anything from the war?"

“I can’t see what anyone gains from keeping the war going. The Monster Coalition were the ones that outfitted me and handled recruitment and management for the army. They hate humans.”

“And the Guild hates monsters. Their whole purpose is to destroy them,” Arwin said. “Nothing makes sense, and the more I learn, the more confusing it gets. I think I should make it clear that I don’t hold the deaths of my friends against you, though. We were nothing but swords in someone else’s hands.”

Lillia wiped her face with the back of a hand and raised her head, giving Arwin a small nod. “I – the same. It makes me wonder how much of what I believed was a lie, though. What if everything was fake from the start?”

A chilling thought struck Arwin. “You weren’t kidnapped from Earth as well, were you?”

“Earth? Why would I be from dirt?”

He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed to hear that. Arwin let out a breath and shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Hold on, you can’t just do that. We’re the only ones that know the truth about what’s going on,” Lillia said, her eyes narrowing. “If you have any information, you need to share it.”

“I don’t think it’s particularly relevant.”

“Let me decide that. Don’t deny me this,” Lillia begged. “I need to know. I can’t let things as they are, and every single piece of the puzzle could be vital.”

It was hard to argue with that.

“Fine. I’m telling you that it isn’t going to be useful, though. If anything, I think it’s just going to confuse you even more. I’m not from this world. I’m from a planet called Earth, and I got magically kidnapped and brought here as a child, specifically to fight you.”

Lillia stared at Arwin. “Is that meant to be a joke?”

“I told you,” Arwin said with a sigh. He took his hand off Lillia’s shoulder and made to rise, but she caught him by his wrist before he could stand.

“I’m sorry. Sit back down. Please.”

Arwin glanced back at her, then slowly lowered himself back to the hay.

“There are other worlds?” Lillia asked.

“You believe me?”

“I don’t know what in the Nine Underlands to believe anymore, so I might as well start with you,” Lillia said dryly. Her eyes narrowed and she poked him in the chest. “But if you’re screwing with me, I swear I’ll make you pay.”

“I’m not. There’s not much to say, unfortunately. There’s at least one other world. Maybe it’s a different universe. I don’t know. There wasn’t magic, and I really don’t remember much of it. I was taken away when I was a child. I assume you’re native to this planet?”

“As far as I’m aware, yes.” Lillia scrunched her nose. “Well, shit. You were right. All that did was give me more questions and absolutely nothing useful in terms of what I actually wanted to find out. How long have you suspected that something was awry with the war?”

“I thought I’d just been betrayed, not that the entire thing was a sham,” Arwin said with a disbelieving shake of his head. “I only figured it out just now, together with you.”

“So why did you come here to talk with me?” Lillia asked. “You must have thought I was a bloodthirsty monster.”

“I assumed you’d finally changed your ways, and I was hoping I could ask you about the mating habits of monsters.”

Lillia stared at Arwin, her cheeks tinging slightly red. “Why in the world do you want to know about that?”

Arwin opened his mouth, but he’d butchered his wording so badly that he couldn’t muster up an answer before a snicker slipped out of his lips. Lillia couldn’t keep herself from matching it and they both doubled over in fits of poorly-suppressed, hysterical laughter.

It took Arwin nearly five minutes to fully gather himself. Every time he started to stop laughing, he caught Lillia’s eye and started to laugh again. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed this hard.

It wasn’t like anything had been that funny, but he suspected his body had reached a breaking point and smashed right through it. There was only so much it could handle before emotions started to mix together and break down.

“Seriously, why do you want to know that, though? I assume you meant something by it,” Lillia said, her voice wavering as she tried to compose herself.

Arwin wiped away tears of mirth, forcing himself back under control. “It’s about the Wyrms in the forest. From what I know, Wyrms are ground dwellers that rarely emerge from their tunnel systems, but this one came out and tried to kill us really aggressively. The rest of the forest seemed to be in mating season, and I was wondering...”

“If Wyrms get worked up enough to chase people away when they’re in the mood?”

Lillia asked, raising an eyebrow. “It’s possible, but I can’t say I’m an expert on it. That’s like me asking you how horny old humans usually get.”

“Very, but I get the point,” Arwin said. He heaved a sigh. “Damn.”

“To be honest, I still can’t believe you managed to survive a Wym at your Tier. That should have been impossible. How’d you do it? Did you lie about your class getting changed?”

“No. I’m a smith. I just have some ways to defend myself. And I wasn’t alone. If I was, I’d have died.”

“Well, damn.” Lillia studied the palms of her hands. “They had to be quite some people if they helped you fend off a Wym. High Tier?”

“Nope. Apprentice, just like me.”

“And you fought off a Wym?”

“I cracked its knee enough to mildly inconvenience it,” Arwin corrected.

“That’s impressive. I’m not sure if it’s appropriate to look on them fondly, but it reminds me a bit of when I still had a party,” Lillia said, a small smile crossing her face as she reminisced.

I guess she’s just been sitting in this inn all day, waiting for people to show up. Sure, she’s gotten a few customers, but I’d already be insane if I were in her shoes. This sounds miserable for someone who was even more excited to be around others than I was.

“You know, if the Wym was mating, we might have a problem,” Lillia said.

Arwin tilted his head to the side, pulled from his thoughts. “What? Why?”

“Well, Wyrmlings are pretty damn destructive,” Lillia said. “And they usually have huge litters. There could be dozens of them, and they’re going to seek out the nearest food source. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy a miniature horde of Wyrms at my door.”

“Oh, shit,” Arwin muttered. “I did not know that bit. I thought you said you didn’t know much about them.”

“Everyone knows that you don’t want to be near a Wym when it mates.”

“Not everyone.”

“Evidently,” Lillia said with a snort. “That’s going to be bad. What do you think the chances are that the guild here does something about it?”

“I don’t know if I trust the guild,” Arwin said slowly. “I don’t know if I want any attention on this city at all. Not until we’ve learned more about what we’re up against.”

“It’s we, then?”

“Didn’t we just agree on that?” Arwin asked. “We were both used for something, and I’m damn well going to find out what. I’ll do it with or without you, but I imagine it’s going to be really hard to figure anything out on my own. Only by putting together what we know are we going to be able to figure out where the cracks in this shit was.”

Lillia’s jaw set and she nodded. “You’re right. I’m in.”

“Welcome to the guild,” Arwin said, rising to his feet and holding his hand out to Lillia.

“Slow down there.” She raised an eyebrow. “The guild? I didn’t say anything about that. An inn is one thing, but a whole guild? And one I’m not the leader of? Are you really inviting the Demon Queen to a human guild?”

“No. I’m inviting an innkeeper,” Arwin replied. “And it’s my damn guild. I invite who I please.”

Lillia snorted. She reached out and took his hand, letting Arwin pull her up to stand beside him.

“By the way, I’ve got a question,” Lillia said, averting her gaze as Arwin looked to her.

“Yeah?”

“Do you hate my cooking?”

“What? No. It’s fantastic.”

“Then why do you never eat it? You’ve only come by a few times in recent times.” Lillia crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “I’d rather you just tell me the truth. If there’s something wrong with my cooking, I want to improve it.”

Arwin grimaced. “That’s kind of a long story.”

“Sounds like you just don’t like my cooking.”

“Oh, fine.” Arwin threw his hands up in defeat. “I eat magical items.”

“You *what*?”

Chapter 37

“I take it this means that the explosion didn’t... change you somehow?” Arwin asked, ignoring the incredulous expression on Lillia’s face.

“Change me? It damn well changed me, but it didn’t let me start snacking on the Mesh itself!” Lillia exclaimed. “You’re not messing with me, right? You can actually eat magic?”

“It’s not all sunshine and rainbows. It’s not just that I *can* eat magic,” Arwin corrected, his features darkening. “It’s that I *have* to eat magic. If I don’t, I’ll die.”

The surprise on Lillia’s face turned to a confused frown. “I’ve never heard of something like that before. So you can’t eat normal food?”

“No, I can. It just doesn’t sustain me in the way that magic does. I’ll also ask you not to mention that – you’re the only one I’ve told, and I’ve only told you because I’m hoping you might have some insight as to what happened to us.”

Lilla pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them and chewing her lower lip in thought. “I definitely got changed by the explosion. It took my class away and gave me a new one called Hearthkeeper.”

“Unique?”

“Yeah. I got it from an Achievement I didn’t even realize I had called Sunset.”

“Odd. That was the exact one that gave my my own class,” Arwin said, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a frown. “Well, perhaps it wasn’t odd. It has to have come from the black gemstone that was meant to kill us.”

“Do you think it’s possible the gemstone wasn’t supposed to kill us? Maybe someone was intentionally trying to give us classes.”

That was an interesting idea, but Arwin wasn't sure he was optimistic enough to believe it. He'd felt the power from the explosion. It had been meant to kill, not aid. There was no way to argue that someone knew that the explosion would cause an Achievement to trigger either – nobody knew what made the Mesh assign Achievements or Titles.

And, even if they'd had a strong suspicion it would have worked, many Achievements or Titles would only appear for certain people, even if two people did the same thing. The fact that both Arwin and Lillia had gotten the Achievement meant something else was going on.

I suppose it was possible that anyone caught in the blast could have been given the Achievement, but I've never heard of an item that straight up gives somebody an Achievement. Those come from actions and aren't forewarned.

Then again, getting blown up is an action.

“I guess we can't dismiss the possibility that the gemstone could have been planted to help us, but somehow I just don't feel like that's the case,” Arwin said, shaking his head. “I can't prove anything, but you felt the magic in that explosion, didn't you? That wasn't something that we were supposed to live through.”

“Yeah, I don't suppose it was. I was hoping that maybe we might have had someone else on our side.”

“No way to know one way or the other for now, so we'll just have to assume we don't. Did the explosion really change nothing other than your class, though? Or does your class have anything odd about it that makes it more than just a normal unique class? I'm a smith, but some of the abilities I've been offered look far more offensive than they should be for a crafting class. It almost feels like I got a hybrid.”

“I’ve noticed some similarities to what you’re describing. I don’t have anything nearly as problematic as having to consume magic to live, but I do gain benefits based on the people staying in my inn or eating at my tavern – and drawbacks if it’s empty.”

“Like it is now?” Arwin raised an eyebrow and Lillia grimaced.

“Yes.”

“Significant benefits?”

“Very. Especially for the inn.” Lillia swallowed heavily. “Luckily, the drawbacks haven’t activated yet, but it won’t be long. That’s why I’ve been so desperate to get more people, but nothing I do works. Nobody wants to come to this shitty old alleyway.”

“What happens when they activate?” Arwin asked. “And how long do you have?”

“Two days. The tavern drawbacks make it so that all my abilities are weakened. The inn debuff... it’ll start by cutting my abilities off entirely. If I can’t get anyone to stay after a month, I’ll die.”

“You need to get this shithole good enough to convince someone to stay in it within a month?” Arwin asked, his eyes going wide. “Oh, shit. That’s bad.”

“You think?” Lillia asked dryly. “I’m focusing on the tavern right now. Nobody is going to bother staying if they don’t come in the first place. That’s why I was desperate enough to try out your monster inn suggestion – and honestly, it seems like it might work. I just don’t know if I’ll pick up enough speed to convince anyone to stay here in time.”

“Can’t you just make it free for a night or something?”

Lillia shook her head. “I already thought of that. It doesn’t work. The buffs only come into play if I’ve properly earned them, so inviting a ton of people into in for free or paying them to stay doesn’t do anything. They have to come in of their own volition and eat or sleep whilst paying for it.”

“Ah,” Arwin said with a grimace. Lillia’s abilities were clearly more limited than his were – but the Mesh was fair. That meant her potential buffs were probably enormous as well, but getting to the point where she could use them would be incredibly difficult.

“Ah,” Lillia agreed bitterly. “It’s still nice to live peacefully for a bit, though. I’d trade a lifetime of living through war for a month of peace in a heartbeat. Besides, I’m sure I’ll start getting customers soon.”

Arwin could hear the doubt in her voice. She wasn’t optimistic about her chances, and if he was honest, he wasn’t either. Lillia’s cooking was pretty damn good, but her location was horrible. Nobody lived on the street, and nobody would come this far into the slums of the city if they were in their right mind.

It would take a lot of time to build up a proper reputation, and by the time Lillia managed to do that, she’d probably get killed by her own magic.

That’s bad. I just got another ally and she’s probably going to end up dying in just – wait. Am I an idiot?

Arwin burst into laughter. Lillia blinked, taken aback, then narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t realize you took that much joy in my upcoming death.”

“No. It’s not that,” Arwin said, trying to get his laughter under control. “I just realized how stupid we both are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You just need a few people to avoid dying?”

“To stay in the inn? Yeah. That wouldn’t stop the debuffs, but it would be enough to keep me alive. Anything more than zero is going to be impossible at this rate, so it hardly matters. You can’t strongarm them into doing it either. That goes against how it works.”

“I don’t need to,” Arwin said. “As I said, we’re both stupid. You already have two people that can stay in your inn. Me and Reya.”

Lillia opened her mouth, then paused. She blinked, her brow furrowing. Slowly, she let her mouth close again. “I – oh, shit. You’re right. I didn’t even think about that because you were... well, you know.”

“I’m well aware, yes. But that would work, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t,” Lillia said, excitement starting to enter her tone. “You’d still have to pay me for the rooms, though. It couldn’t be free or it won’t count.”

“I think we can handle that as long as your prices aren’t ridiculously high. It’s not a big price to pay, at least until you can get enough people here to keep yourself alive. We might even be able to go farther. The other two members that joined my guild may be in need of an inn fairly soon. They might be able to move in as well.”

Lillia’s eyes lit up and she took a step forward. “You’re serious? Two more people?”

“Yeah. You’d have to have actual rooms for them, though. Does this crappy place have anything like that?”

Lillia cleared her throat. “It... well, not yet. I’ve got two rooms upstairs that I trust the floor in. The rest of it is liable to collapse – but still! I can make do with that, and the money could go toward renovations and making more rooms and a better tavern! Having you and Reya here would also remove enough of the debuff on my abilities for me to get some helpers in the tavern.”

“I’ve got twenty seven gold and nine silver right now,” Arwin said, looking through his pouch. “Would that be enough?”

“Twenty seven? Are you kidding me? Yeah, that’s more than enough. I only have to charge a silver a day!”

It was a bit odd, seeing excitement on the face that had belonged to his mortal enemy for so many years. He’d never seen her direct anything toward him other than disgust, anger, or apathy.

I suppose I was no different. That smile definitely suits her well, though.

“What?” Lillia asked. Arwin realized that he’d zoned off and shook his head to clear it.

“I just got lost in thought. How strong are those buffs you get if we properly fill your tavern and inn?”

“Pretty damn powerful. I don’t even know the full extent of what they do. A lot of it is gated behind how many people are staying or eating here.”

Arwin nodded. “We’ll have to make it a priority to get more attention here, then. If your power is anything like mine, then I suspect you’re going to have some form of scaling factor that means you need to get more and more people to stick around to keep yourself from dying.”

Some of the excitement in Lillia’s expression slipped away. “Shit. That could be bad.”

“We’ll handle it,” Arwin said. “After all, we’re going to have a whole guild to back you up soon enough.”

“Optimistic, are you?”

Arwin chuckled. “Perhaps. Either way, I get the feeling Reya is going to be ecstatic about this. She already eats your food constantly, so being closer to it will probably make her blow steam out her nose. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the guild shortly – assuming they stick around.”

Lillia started to nod, then paused and looked down at herself, gesturing vaguely. “Wait. What if they... well, you know.”

“For now, I’d suggest keeping up your disguise. They’re decent people, but I don’t know how they’ll react to the truth.”

“Even if we’re part of the same guild and they’re staying here constantly? They’re going to have to suspect something.”

“Then you’d best make sure you *really* seem to be into your role,” Arwin said dryly. “Hopefully you’ll have the place in a bit more order by the time they come around. Speaking of which, is there anything else you need made?”

“I – oh, yeah. Definitely. I still need more utensils, and some more cookware would be incredible. I don’t know if I can afford anything extra right now, though.”

“I could pay you with supplies. That wouldn’t count against your class, would it?”

Lillia tilted her head to the side in thought for a few seconds, then grinned. “I think that would work.”

“Perfect,” Arwin said. “In that case, let’s go tell Reya. We’ll need to move the beds out of the smithy and into your inn.”

“I can help,” Lillia said. “Seems only right. Can’t say I ever thought I’d be in this position. It kind of feels like I had some nasty mushrooms in my food and I’m passed out somewhere in a field. I mean... imagine that. The Demon Queen and the Champion of Man–”

“Both still out there, fighting somewhere,” Arwin said. “The original ones are dead and rotting. The only people in this room are Arwin and Lillia.”

Lillia smiled and nodded. “Right. Thank you, Arwin. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Likewise,” Arwin said. “I think we’ve both got a lot we can learn from each other.”

Chapter 38

“We’re staying here?” Reya asked, her eyes nearly doubling in size as she looked from Arwin to Lillia. “Seriously? That’s awesome! What happened back there? I thought you guys hated each other!”

“Wait, really?” Arwin blinked in surprise.

“I mean, yeah. Anyone would have seen the way you looked at each other.”

“Why did you keep trying to have me come along with you if you thought that?” Arwin demanded. “I thought you were oblivious!”

“So you *did* hate each other!”

“There was a misunderstanding,” Arwin said with a grimace. A misunderstanding might have been the biggest understatement of the century, but it wasn’t the right time to give Reya their full backstory. She had enough on her plate to deal with already.

Reya arched an eyebrow and peered over their shoulders. “Interesting. Now I really want to know what you did back there.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Arwin said. “What matters is that Lillia is going to be joining our guild, and we’ll be moving into her inn – at least for our night lodgings.”

“The ones you barely use because you’re always working?”

“Do you want to move in or not?”

“I definitely want to move in,” Reya said hurriedly. “Especially if that means we get three meals a day instead of just one. I’d be dining like a king.”

“Good,” Arwin said. He jerked his chin toward the door. “Come help me gather up the beds and bring them over here, then. After that, I’ve got some work to do.”

“Can I help?” Reya asked as the trio headed out of the dark room and emerged into the sunlight outside.

“It’ll be smithing, so probably not. If you need something to do, maybe try to help Lillia do some reorganization. Figure out what it is we’ll need for the tavern to function better. It’s part of the guild now, so we’ll need to do some reworking to make sure it lives up to our name.”

“What name?” Reya asked. “We aren’t even an official guild.”

“The first step of becoming is believing and acting as if you are.”

“That sounds more like bullshitting,” Reya said. Arwin glared at her and she snickered, raising her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Understood, Guild Leader Sir.”

“Do not start calling me that. My name is Arwin.”

Reya just snickered harder, and a small grin passed over Lillia’s face. Arwin suppressed a sigh and shook his head, wisely choosing to abandon the topic. The more he insisted that Reya do something, the less he suspected she would actually do it.

At least she’s being herself. That’s a far cry from the desperate woman that showed me the smithy just a few weeks ago.

It took a little under an hour to move both beds over to Lillia’s building. Getting them up the stairs was the hardest part, but between the three of them, they eventually managed it without destroying anything too important.

As soon as they’d finished, Arwin bid Lillia and Reya farewell before returning to his smithy. He took Reya’s damaged armor with him and set about repairing it as soon as he got back.

The repairs weren't too difficult, as all he had to do was remove the damaged scales and add in a new layer of fresh ones. Fortunately, the item hadn't been damaged badly enough to impact its magic, so It only took about an hour before he'd finished and moved on.

There was a variety of gear he still wanted to make, foremost amongst everything being a hammer for himself. Arwin was tempted to start immediately, but he resisted the urge. He wanted to use the Achievement he'd gotten from scaring the Wyrms off on his hammer, but wasting it on a weapon made from poor materials would be pointless.

I need to get my hands on something really nice. That probably means hunting a real nasty monster, so I should hold off on that. I'll start with making some cutlery for Lillia. Then I'll look into going hunting again once Anna and Rodrick come join us. We're going to have to discuss the potential upcoming disaster with the Wyrms and what we're going to do about it. If we fight them, I get the feeling they'd be perfect for this.

For now, I might also spend some time shopping to fix up the smithy a little more. I still need a bloody door.

With his plans in mind, Arwin got to work.

Time slipped away. Making utensils was far from a challenging task, and Arwin soon made a drawer's worth of forks, knives, and spoons. None of them were magical – he had no idea what infusing a spoon with magic would do and he had no desire to find out. Someone would probably just steal it.

The utensils were a bit rough, but they'd serve their purpose. A quick glance out the cracks in the walls told Arwin that it was still early in the evening, so he took a trip into town.

It didn't take much time for him to find a carpenter that had a door for sale. Arwin had never considered it, but apparently most doorways were the same size and shape. That made it considerably easier for him to purchase a door as well as some hinges and nails to secure it for just five gold.

Arwin took it back to the smithy and used [Scourge] in conjunction with his full metal hammer to drive the nails into the stone. Once he'd finished, Arwin took a step back and studied his handiwork.

The door wasn't anything special, but it was a door. He had the key in his pocket, an item he wasted no time in applying to the lock, just to open and close the door a few times. It struck him that he probably looked insane opening and closing a door for no reason, but Arwin didn't care.

It was a step closer to his goals. Soon he'd have a proper smithy, and his guild was starting to come together. Sure, there might have been a potential horde of Wyrms just a few hours from town that could draw the attention of the Adventurer's Guild and bring everything crashing down on their heads, but that was a problem for later.

For the time being, Arwin just wanted to test out the new location of his bed. He headed inside and grabbed the utensils he'd made for Lillia, then stepped back into the street and locked the door behind him. Nodding to himself, Arwin set off down the dilapidated street and toward his new lodgings for the foreseeable future.

He made his way into the back and up a set of rickety stairs, taking each one carefully. Lillia had assured them that the stairs were safe when they were bringing the beds up, but that didn't make him any less suspicious of them.

Never thought I'd be sleeping in the Demon – no. In Lillia's house. Certainly a bit odd, no mater what I say.

Reya had moved her bed into the room that Lillia had been using, so Arwin had a room entirely to himself. There weren't any doors on the upper floor, but it was still more privacy than he'd had in the smithy.

The bed took up nearly a quarter of the room, but he had a dirt-smudged window that someone had done their best to wipe down from the inside. It gave him a dim view of the city streets outside, but there weren't too many cracks in the walls and only a little wind managed to slip through.

Not half bad.

Arwin covered a yawn and slipped into bed, setting the utensils on the floor at the foot of the bed. It sounded like Lillia and Reya had already gone to bed, and he didn't want to wake them.

I'll give her the utensils tomorrow.

It felt a little odd falling asleep without the proximity of the forge, but it was only a few minutes before he drifted off and darkness swallowed his vision.

The next morning came before it was welcome and Arwin blinked awake as dull sunlight filtered through the window. Not much of it actually managed to make it through, but there was just enough to pull him from his rest.

Arwin yawned and rolled out of bed, grimacing as he sniffed at his arms.

I need to ask Lillia if her tavern has a bath yet. If it doesn't, I'm going to invest in one.

He scooped the utensils he'd made the previous day off the floor and headed out. He could hear loud snores coming from the room across the hall to him, and he poked his head into it to see that Reya was still fast asleep, her head buried under a pillow to avoid the sunlight.

Repressing a laugh, Arwin headed downstairs. The sound of clinking metal led him into the kitchen, where Lillia was busy trying to mix a bowl of batter with a metal rod. She glanced up as he entered, then nodded slightly in greeting, her attention returning to her work before doing a double take.

“Are those forks?”

“Knives and spoons as well.” Arwin held the bundle out and she took it carefully from him, her eyes lighting up with delight.

“This is fantastic. Thank you. Now I'll actually have something people can eat with normally. All I have to do is actually get a few more customers,” Lillia said with a grin. She pulled the rod out of her bowl and claimed a spoon, sticking it into the batter and giving it a spin. “That's so much better. How much are these worth?”

“Probably about five silver,” Arwin said after a moment. “They were pretty easy to make and aren't all that fancy. Maybe six?”

“Six seems correct. That's three days of stay for both you and Reya.”

“Good. Is there anything else urgent?”

“There's nothing that I need right now, but I always need more cookware.”

“I’ll look into that in a few days, then,” Arwin promised. “I’m going to look into starting to make some gear. We should be meeting the other members of my guild soon, and they’re going to want some equipment. I’ll be in the forge if you need me.”

“Sounds good,” Lillia said. “Good luck.”

“You too,” Arwin said, raising a hand in farewell. “Feel free to ask Reya for whatever help she can offer. She’s bored out of her mind.”

With that, he strode out of the tavern. He could already feel the call of the scales waiting for him in the smithy. There was a lot he needed to work on, and every item he crafted made the next one turn out just a bit nicer.

I can’t wait to make my hammer – but one thing at a time. For now, I need to work on some equipment. The stuff that turns out poorly can go into a pile to be sold. It’s about time I started getting ready to make some real money.

Chapter 39

Three days passed in a blur. Arwin spent all his time in the smithy, burning through the rest of his scales. He focused on making gear that he already knew how to do – namely, chest pieces and greaves.

By the fourth day dawned, Arwin’s efforts had been rewarded with five normal sets of armor and one set of magically enhanced armor. It was far from the strongest magical item he’d made, with both the chest piece and the greaves possessing heat resistance and increased durability, but it didn’t have any negative drawbacks either.

It's not Unique, so that's probably for the best. The enchantment on this is pretty weak, so it shouldn't be completely unrealistic for Rodrick to have this. It'll serve him well until we can get him some more powerful armor that he can conceal the properties of.

His work had netted him some magical energy and progress toward his next Tier advancement, but no movements in Titles or Achievements. That wasn't much of a surprise to him, though.

Arwin peeled his attention away from the hearth and turned to head out of the smithy. He hadn't made a magical item to eat recently, but he was pretty sure he had a day or two more before he'd need to consume something.

I need to go hunting soon.

But, as Arwin walked toward the door, something gave him pause. He couldn't place what it was at first, but the smithy felt different. It took him a few moments to realize what it was. The floor had been swept.

All the debris that had been scattered about was gone, and his piles of material had been organized slightly. Arwin's brow furrowed.

When did that happen?

He stepped outside, locking the door behind him before making his way across the street to the tavern. To Arwin's surprise, he heard voices coming from within it – voices that didn't belong to Reya or Lillia.

He ducked through the dark doorway. Sitting at the counter, illuminated faintly by the light of the lantern beside them, were Rodrick and Anna. Arwin nearly choked as an imp strutted

out of the kitchen and hopped up onto the counter, setting down a handful of berries on each of their plates.

The hideous misshapen creature, fangs jutting out of its mouth and a permanent snarl on its face, was wearing a dirty black dress with lacy white frills. It was in a maid's outfit. As Arwin watched, the imp gave them a sharp salute and hopped back to the ground, heading into the kitchen.

"That's great," Rodrick said through a laugh, slapping the counter and shaking his head. "Have you ever seen anything like that before? Best damn costume I've ever seen."

"I wonder how long it takes them to do that," Anna mused. "It must cost a fortune. I wonder why they chose such an odd place to set up shop."

"It adds to the ambiance," Rodrick said. "I love it. Do you think they'll have an orc at some point? That would be hilarious."

Arwin fought to keep the disbelief from his features as he walked up to join the two adventurers. They were completely convinced that the imp was fake. Sure, he'd told Lillia to lean into things as hard as she could, but he hadn't meant *this* hard.

Then again, nobody in their right mind would ever assume a real imp would be strolling around in a maid costume. Where did they get that?

"Oh, Arwin is here!" Rodrick said, catching a glimpse of him out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face Arwin and raised a hand in greeting. "Pleasure seeing you again, mate. We came looking for you like we said we would. Reya found us a few streets over and brought us here. You should have said how damn good the food here is. Cheap, too."

“She recently joined the guild,” Arwin said. “What do you think of the tavern?”

“The theme is hilarious. Never seen anything like it. I feel like this would be a hit if more people knew about it,” Rodrick replied, pausing to pop some berries into his mouth. “Wait, did you say the innkeeper was part of the guild?”

“Yeah. As of yesterday.”

“You work fast,” Anna said with a soft smile. “Rodrick is right. This is quite the spot. I didn’t think I’d like it much, but I’ve been pleasantly surprised. How have the last few days been treating you?”

“Quite well. I’ve been mostly focused on work,” Arwin admitted, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “Where’s Reya, by the way?”

“Out in town looking for something. She said she’d be back soon,” Rodrick said. He let some of the amusement fade out of his tone as his expression grew serious. “Anna and I tried to look into what might have happened with the Wyrms, but we didn’t have much luck.”

“I think I may have figured it out,” Arwin said. “Or rather, Lillia did. She knows even more about monsters than I do, considering her... well, appreciation of them.”

Rodrick snorted and looked around the tavern. “Appreciation is an understatement, but I love it. Nothing better than someone that’s really invested in their passion. I hope she doesn’t object to hunting, though.”

You know, I never considered that. I should probably ask her. It’s not like we can stop hunting monsters to get stronger unless there’s an alternative I don’t know of, but it would probably be right to at least chat with her about it.

“What’s that about hunting?” Lillia asked, stepping out of the kitchen and wiping her hands off on her apron.

“We were talking about if you’d be okay with it, considering how much you like monsters,” Anna said.

“Oh, I don’t care,” Lillia said with a shrug. “The monsters you’re talking about hunting aren’t the same as the ones I care about. There are a lot of different species, and monsters is honestly a bit of a misnomer.”

“Is that so?” Rodrick asked, tilting his head to the side. “What do you mean? Is it just that you find some cuter than others or something?”

Lillia snorted and shook her head. “No. Well, yes, but that’s not why. The difference is sapience. People generally refer to everything that isn’t a *normal* animal or human as a monster, but there are actually two categories beyond that. There are monsters that don’t have any intelligence beyond a desire to grow stronger by killing, and there are monsters that are just as intelligent as a human.”

“You’re kidding me,” Rodrick said. “You’re not exaggerating?”

“Identical,” Lillia confirmed. “I’ve seen some of them myself in my... uh, studies.”

“You’re a monster researcher, then? Just like Arwin?”

“Something like that,” Lillia said, sending a glance at Arwin.

“How do we know if we’re fighting a smart one?” Anna asked, chewing her lower lip with a frown. “I don’t want to mistakenly attack something that doesn’t deserve it.”

“You’ll know,” Lillia said. “It would be like attacking a random human. It would be really obvious.”

“Oh.” Anna let out a relieved sigh. “Good. So you don’t mind us talking about hunting in here, then?”

“Not at all. Feel free.”

“Great. Back to the Wyrms, then,” Rodrick said. “What was it the two of you figured out?”

“Oh, right.” Arwin shook his head, having temporarily lost his train of thought, before continuing. “It might be about to have a litter. You recall how the forest seemed like it was... ah, in the mood, right?”

Anna and Rodrick nodded.

“Well, it’s possible the Wyrms is no different. And, if that’s the case, there could be a bunch of Wyrmlings running around everywhere really soon. And, if I recall correctly, Wyrmlings are typically born around high Apprentice tier.”

Rodrick and Anna both paled.

“That could be bad,” Rodrick said, tapping a finger on the counter absentmindedly. “I doubt the city itself would have that much trouble – the guards here could probably handle a few Wyrmlings, but the forest would become way too dangerous for us to hunt in, and it’s one of the best hunting grounds in the area.”

“Not to mention the Adventurer’s Guild might send people,” Anna added, biting her inner cheek and frowning her brow. “The town would be insufferable for weeks. That also implies there’s a second Wyrms somewhere in the forest.”

“Having the Adventurer’s Guild show up would be... less than opportune,” Arwin agreed. “Which is why I think we should try to act *before* anyone figures out what’s going on.”

“You want us to try and take out two Wyrms when we barely managed to escape one?” Rodrick asked doubtfully. “That kind of seems like a suicide mission.”

“It would be, if we were actually trying to kill both of them,” Arwin said. “There’s no way we’d be able to take them out. Not on our own, at least. But, if we could somehow get them to fight or otherwise distract them, maybe we could either get the upper hand or make them run away.”

“That seems a bit optimistic,” Rodrick said. “I’d be willing to hear out if you had a plan, though.”

“Well, I think we’re going to need to get stronger before we even think about trying anything,” Arwin amended. “As it stands, we’d be slaughtered no matter what we went for. Luckily, we’ve got time. Wyrmlings don’t just pop out in a day. It should be about two months before they’re born.”

“Two months isn’t much time,” Rodrick hedged. “Especially if we don’t have a good place to hunt anymore. The forest is too dangerous as it is right now.”

“We do have a spot, though,” Arwin said, a grin pulling across his lips.

“We do?” Anna asked. “Where? Do you know of another location that’s close to town?”

“I do. It’s not the safest area, but we’re the only ones with access to it. Consider it a perk of being in the guild.”

“Stop dangling it over me and say what it is already!” Rodrick exclaimed.

“Are you sure? I was thinking about showing you the armor I made first,” Arwin said, grinning at the hungry look that flashed across Rodrick’s face.

“Wait, you made me armor? I can’t afford anything yet!”

“It’s an investment. Don’t expect anything too great.”

“Are you kidding? Anything would be – wait. You distracted me. This is bullying,” Rodrick complained. “Just tell us what you’ve got already!”

Arwin laughed and held his hands up in surrender as both Lillia and Anna nodded in agreement, joining Rodrick in glaring at him.

“We’ve got access to a Journeyman dungeon,” Arwin said. “One with only one key. It’s going to be a tough one for our current abilities, but if we’re all doing it together, I think we can handle it. The monsters probably won’t be at the level of the Wurm, so I think we could slowly make our way through it. They’ll still be Journeyman level, but as long as we don’t get too deep, I strongly believe we should be able to handle it.”

“Holy shit,” Anna breathed, jumping to her feet. “We have an exclusive dungeon? How is that possible? The guild isn’t even official. Who are you?”

“Technically, I think we stole an exclusive dungeon,” Arwin amended. “There might be a thieves’ guild that’s still pretty miffed about that – but who cares? It’s the best option I can think of. What do you say?”

“I say you give me that armor and we get to it,” Rodrick replied, rubbing his hands together. “This is either going to end in glory or a really, really pathetic death.”

“Way to spoil the mood,” Anna said, flicking Rodrick in the shoulder.

“Bah. At least I’m going to leave a beautiful corpse. Let me see that armor you made,” Rodrick said eagerly. “This is going to be glorious.”

Chapter 40

Everyone followed Arwin back to his smithy, where he very proudly unlocked his door, pausing to make sure everyone saw him push it open.

“Why’s he doing that?” Rodrick whispered as Arwin walked inside.

“He got a door,” Lillia explained.

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“No, it makes sense.” Lillia looked back at the door and nodded. “It’s a nice door.”

Rodrick didn’t respond. He’d spotted the pile of armor lying on the ground beside the anvil. Sitting on top of the anvil were a pair of scale greaves and a chest piece, both faintly shimmering with the Mesh’s power.

He stood in mute disbelief, staring at the items as if they were a pile of glittering gold. Rodrick swallowed heavily and looked over to Arwin, raising a finger toward the armor.

“That... me? It’s for me?”

Arwin chuckled and nodded. Rodrick looked like someone had just told him he had a long-lost son. Edging toward the magical pieces of equipment, Rodrick drew up to the anvil and let his hands brush over the scale plate.

“This is incredible,” Rodrick muttered. “I never thought – I can’t afford this. No way.”

“I told you it was an investment,” Arwin said with a shrug. “The only rule is you can only keep this as long as you stay in the guild, and you can’t sell it to someone else.”

“Sell it?” Rodrick exclaimed as if the very idea offended him. “I would never. This is incredible. A work of art. Nobody would be able to buy it off me for any amount of money. And damn – talk about a way to get your hooks in. I don’t think I could leave if I wanted to anymore.”

“Try it on, then,” Arwin said, gesturing toward the armor. “Make sure it fits. I made it with you in mind, but sometimes it can be hard to tell.”

Rodrick didn’t need to be told twice. He hurried to start pulling everything on, and Arwin sent Anna an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make anything for you. I didn’t think a healer would benefit much from metal armor. You probably aren’t particularly strong.”

“No offense taken. You’d be correct. I’d probably suffer in just chain mail, much less anything like that,” Anna said with a laugh. “It’s more than enough to see Rodrick this happy. Besides, he’s the one that takes the hits for me, so any armor for him is functionally armor for me.”

Arwin noticed Lillia's eyes were firmly fixed on the armor. He hadn't made her anything yet, but she was definitely far stronger than any normal innkeeper.

I should try to make her something. I've seen her wear some pretty heavy armor in the past, so as long as I don't go too crazy with the weight of the material, some armor would do her a lot of use.

"It fits me perfectly!" Rodrick exclaimed in delight, twisting to test out his new range of motion. In some ways, he'd reacted the exact same way that Reya had. Arwin chuckled at his expression.

"I'm glad to hear that. No problems, then?"

"None that I can feel. It's way lighter than I thought it would be too," Rodrick said, rapping his chest with his knuckles. "Definitely the best set of armor I've ever worn. You're not going to get me into eternal debt by making me pay for repairs if this gets damaged, are you? I mean, I'd probably take you up on it, but I'm just checking."

Arwin rolled his eyes. "No, I'm not. Just do your job and keep any monsters off our backline and you'll have earned it. You might want to find something to cover yourself with, though. I don't see a lot of people walking around with magic items."

"Gee, I wonder why. Not everyone just pops them out," Rodrick said, still looking down at himself in disbelief. "Seriously, how did you get the materials to make this? Do you have a deal with a powerful demon or something? Enchantments are so expensive."

They are?

“Don’t worry about it. Just try to let me know if you find anything off. I haven’t gotten around to making boots, gloves, or helmets yet – so make sure you don’t get hit there. I’ll try to get to it soon enough.

“Are you seriously apologizing for not making enough magical equipment?” Rodrick asked. “I’d be willing to run out and fight monsters naked wearing nothing but a thong if it was magical.”

Arwin grimaced, banishing that mental image from his mind before it could permanently scar him. “Then let’s all thank God that I made armor and not a thong. I’m rather eager to get things started, so if nobody needs anything else, we should look into finding Reya and getting to work. No reason to waste time.”

Anna pulled her cloak off and tossed it to Rodrick. He wrapped it around himself, leaving the hood down. As soon as it covered his armor, the faint tingle of the Mesh faded away.

“Thanks,” Rodrick said. Anna nodded in response.

“What are you doing with the other sets of armor?” Lillia asked, nodding to the pile in the corner.

“Selling them, probably. They’re nothing special. You’re welcome to try some on if you want, but I don’t think it’ll fit you,” Arwin warned. “I made them all pretty generic for broad-shouldered male builds.”

“Oh. No problem,” Lillia said, waving a hand dismissively. “Let’s get on with it, then. I haven’t gone hunting in a long time. Maybe we can pick up some fresh ingredients for me to work with while we’re out.”

“You know, I just realized how efficient of a pair you two make,” Anna observed, hiding a smile behind her hand. “Arwin takes all the inedible parts of the monsters to make armor and weapons with, and you can use the rest for food.”

“Waste not, want not,” Arwin said. “Come on. Let’s go find Reya.”

Fortunately, finding Reya was a fairly simple task. By the time they left the smithy and headed toward the tavern, she was on her way out of it in search of them.

“Did I miss something?” Reya asked. “Also, hi Arwin. Haven’t seen you much recently. Did you like what I did with the smithy?”

“Wait, that was you? You swept everything up?”

“Yep! It looks way better, doesn’t it?”

“Much better,” Arwin agreed. “Thank you very much. It’s looking more and more professional with every day. I still have no idea how you managed that while I was working, though.”

“No offense, but you’re basically as dense as a brick while you’re smithing,” Reya said through a snicker. “I was singing to myself the whole time while I cleaned, and you didn’t notice me once.”

Arwin grunted. That was mildly concerning – he’d have to remember to lock the door while he was working in the future so nobody strolled in and robbed him blind.

“Noted.”

“So, what’s everyone up to? You all look excited, and it’s making me feel left out.”

“We decided it’s just about time to use that key of yours,” Arwin said, bringing Reya up to speed on everything that they’d just discussed.

“Are we really going to be able to handle a Journeyman level dungeon, though?” Reya asked once Arwin had finished, biting her inner cheek. “I mean, we barely managed to handle a high Tier Apprentice Lizard.”

“That was some time ago, and there are more of us now,” Arwin said. “Dungeon monsters, especially ones at the start, should be easier to handle. I’ll admit that it’s far from ideal, but the forest is too dangerous with the Wyrms roaming around it. This might be our best shot at a safe training space.”

“Do you think the thieves guild will let us in? I bet they’re still guarding it.”

“It’s hard to say. If they want to pick a fight, I think we’re pretty well equipped to handle it,” Arwin said. “They won’t have their whole guild there, and I think we more than made our point the last time we had a disagreement.”

“You had a disagreement with a whole guild? Were they a small one or something?” Anna asked.

Arwin cleared his throat. “Maybe we’ll tell you the story on the road. It’s a bit of a long one, and all that matters in the end is that we’ve got a chance to do something big here. If we can handle the dungeon and get strong enough to fight off the Wyrmlings – not only will we get stronger, but I’ll have a slew of powerful new materials to work with.”

“I’d have new ingredients to cook with as well,” Lillia said, licking her lips. “It’s dangerous, but we’re not getting anywhere by hiding like cowards. I’m in.”

“I was in the moment you gave me this,” Rodrick said, tapping his armor. “If you need a whole guild destroyed, just point me in their direction. I’ll take ‘em out.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Anna said with a laugh. “I’m in, obviously. Journeyman Tier monsters aren’t going to be easy, but I’ve seen almost everyone here fight. We can handle it as long as we can get past that guild, it’s a chance. If we pull this off, we might actually have enough capital to look into becoming a proper guild.”

“I’m obviously in as well.” Raya gave Arwin a confident grin. “I’m not letting you just take my key and waltz off with it. Besides, I’ve got a new class to test out. I want revenge on that stupid Wurm for eating my dagger. Let’s do this.”

“We’re all in agreement, then.” Arwin scooped his blacksmithing hammer off the ground and tested its weight. Even though it was meant for the forge, the thing was one hefty bastard. It would be perfect for bashing in the heads of anything that got in his way – at least until he got the chance to forge his new weapon. “Reya, care to take the lead? We’ve got a dungeon to start clearing, and the only thing that might be standing in our way is a tiny little guild.”

“So they were small after all?” Anna asked. “What, do they have five members or something?”

“No, it was more like thirty,” Arwin replied absently. He ignored the horrified looks that Anna and Rodrick sent him. “Don’t worry about that. We probably won’t even have to fight them again. The last time I confronted their guild I sent a pretty strong message.”

“You confronted them? Alone?” Anna asked.

“Nah, I had a bit of help. It worked out in the end.”

“You can’t leave it at that,” Rodrick protested. “What happened? How’d you handle a whole guild?”

“I told you, it’s a long story. Reya, care to take the lead? I want to get this underway.”

Reya grinned and nodded. “With pleasure. Let’s go.”

Chapter 41

The trip out of the city didn’t take long and went easily. The only stressful part of their exit was the fear that someone might notice Rodrick’s armor, but he kept the cloak Anna had given him wrapped tightly around himself.

Even though nobody had any way to tell what he had, none of them breathed easily until they’d stepped out of the city gates and were well on their way toward the dungeon.

“I need to get strong enough to conceal my equipment,” Rodrick grumbled, glancing over his shoulder at the city walls as they followed Reya. “That was horrible. I felt like every single person we passed was staring me down.”

“Well, we’re already working on that, so all you have to do is keep at it,” Anna pointed out. “I felt the same way, though.”

Makes me even happier I have [Arsenal]. Even if my equipment doesn’t have the property that lets it appear mundane, I can still banish and summon it at will as I bind to it.

Speaking of which, I only have two pieces of equipment bound right now since my sword got chomped. I wonder...

Arwin activated [Arsenal] and bound the hammer in his hands. It wasn't magical, but it still counted as a piece of equipment as far as he was concerned. A moment later, the black weapon vanished.

"Whoa," Reya said. "That's so strange to watch."

The hammer reformed in Arwin's hands. "It's quite convenient, though."

"You can't do that for my stuff, can you?" Rodrick asked hopefully.

"Unfortunately not. It's a personal equipment thing only. You'll just have to conceal things the old fashioned way," Arwin said apologetically. "Reya, how far are we from the dungeon? I want to make sure we're all ready when we get closer. Your old friends might be hanging around."

"About an hour away, I think," Reya said after a moment of thought. "I thought you said they wouldn't put up much fight, though. Didn't we come to an agreement?"

"That kind of thing can fall through sometimes," Arwin said with a shrug. He scanned their surroundings, but there didn't seem to be anything other than grass. "Never hurts to be prepared, just in case something goes awry."

Their trek continued on in silence. Minutes slipped by and, soon enough, they'd been walking for nearly an hour. The slope of the hills intensified the deeper they went, making it harder to tell exactly where they were.

Reya seemed to have a pretty good grasp of their direction, though. She kept glancing up at the sky, then slightly rerouting and continuing on with almost no hesitation. Just when Arwin was about to ask how she knew where they were, Reya held a hand to her lips and pointed down the hill.

From what he could tell, the only thing there was the bottom of a small, grassy hill and a small pile of large stones. It took Arwin a moment to notice what she was pointing at. Nestled behind the rocks was a thin rectangular outline in the ground.

He would have missed it completely if Reya hadn't pointed it out to him. Arwin glanced around to see if there was anyone else in the area, but as far as he could tell, it was completely empty.

"That... almost seems too easy," Rodrick muttered. "I thought you said there was a guild guarding this?"

"Maybe they gave up since we took the key," Reya said.

That did seem a bit optimistic, but Arwin couldn't find any traces of other people in the area. It really did look like the thieves' guild had given up on the dungeon. He'd definitely made a pretty strong impression on their guild leader, so it was possible that they'd decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

"Well, sitting around here isn't going to make things any better for us. We've come this far, so let's keep pushing forward." Arwin said.

They crept down the side of the hill and approached the outline. After glancing around one last time to make sure they weren't being watched, Reya pulled the necklace over her head and set it down on the grass, pressing it down.

The back of Arwin's neck tingled. The feeling passed over the rest of his body, crawling down his spine and along his limbs as the Mesh's presence around them intensified. There was a sharp pop, followed by a wet squelch.

Shimmers of energy lit up along the outline of the rectangle at their feet. The tingling grew stronger, and lines of magical power stretched out through the grass, forming into intricate patterns.

With one final buzz, the Mesh faded away and the grass sank down, forming into a stairwell that wound deep into the earth. Faint flickers of light appeared within it as glowing motes of orange light appeared to guide their path.

"Whoa," Reya breathed, peering down the stairwell with undisguised awe. "That's incredible."

"Just remember the exit is only going to open back up for us as long as you've got that key," Arwin said. He let his armor manifest on his body, not wanting to risk a surprise attack hitting something important, and stepped into the darkness.

The rest of the group followed behind him, Reya taking up their tail. As soon as she had passed several stairs and was out of the way of the entrance, the ground shut behind them, leaving only flat stone.

“That’s creepy,” Reya said, throwing glances back over her shoulder as they continued by the light of the faint glowing orbs. Arwin considered batting at one of them as he passed, but he pushed the intrusive thought away.

Most dungeons were pretty much inanimate – the only living things inside them were the actual monsters. There were a few that had did have a degree of sapience, though – and those took rather poorly to anyone fiddling with them.

No point finding out the hard way. Right now, all we want to do is figure out if we can handle this dungeon. I don’t want to mistakenly make anything harder for us.

They continued down the stairs for several minutes until they came to a stop at an archway that led into a large, square room made of old cobblestone. Vines crawled across the walls, half-dried out from lack of water.

The faint smell of moss and stale water drifted into Arwin’s nose as he squinted through the dim light, trying to see if there was anything in the room. There was no door that he could initially see, but there was a shallow pool of water in the center of the room.

“Emptyer than I expected,” Reya said, peering over his shoulder. “I thought there would be monsters.”

“There will be,” Arwin said absently, scanning the corners where the shadows were the darkest. No two dungeons were exactly the same, but there were usually similarities – and monsters weren’t stupid.

They congregated to dungeons because of the condensed magical power within them, and the dungeons used the monsters to fuel themselves – either through the blood they spilled from inquisitive adventurers or through their own blood.

Something might be in the water, or it could be hiding on the ceiling where we can't see it. I doubt the dungeon would just have an open room that does absolutely nothing this early on, especially since I don't see a door anywhere.

The weakest monsters always hang around the upper levels of a dungeon because they aren't strong enough to make it deeper and closer to the more intense magical energy. The ones far out from the ground usually aren't the smartest of the lot, but ambush predators are common.

“Keep your guard up,” Arwin advised as he crept into the room, letting his hammer materialize in his hands and adjusting his grip on the rough metal handle. “Watch out for little buggers lurking in the shadows or underwater.”

“You think they're small?” Lillia asked.

“Figure of speech,” Arwin replied. “I have no idea how big anything here is. Reya, Anna, both of you stay back. Let me and Rodrick draw their attention. Lillia – I'm not sure how your combat skills are now, but I imagine you can handle yourself without instruction.”

Lillia nodded. “I'll hang back so I don't draw anything's attention too early. I'm not in the best spot to fight anything right now.”

Arwin crept further into the room. He could still remember countless other dungeons he'd plowed through, but the difference in strategy was so stark that it almost hurt. He could recall wading straight into dungeons, power rolling off his body as he sent waves of molten light into

the dark, ripping through everything that stood in his way – often before they even realized they were under attack.

His party had been full of trained warriors that had done the dungeons dozens of times over already, and they knew every single thing about what they were facing. The dungeons almost never held surprises, and they'd certainly never held challenges.

Now, it was different. Arwin had no clue what was waiting for him in the darkness, and there was a very real chance that whatever it was had the strength to kill him and everyone behind him if they weren't properly prepared to fight it.

I can't believe I'm thinking this, but in a morbid sense, it's actually more interesting. Sure, we might all end up dead, but it feels like we're actually doing something, not just going through the motions that we have to go through to get stronger.

“Sneaky little cretins in this room, aren't they?” Rodrick asked, spinning his sword in his hand and baring his teeth in a grin. “What do you think the chances are we're up against some slimy bugger that lives in the pool?”

“Considering we haven't been jumped yet? Pretty damn high,” Arwin said. He tried to squint into the murky water, but it was too dark to make anything out. “Only one way to find out.”

His foot shifted across the ground until it found a loose stone. Arwin kicked it, sending the rock sailing through the air and into the very center of the puddle, where it struck the water with a *sploosh*, sending ripples running out and vanishing beneath the surface.

Almost instantly, the water erupted. A slippery grey form burst out, tentacles whipping through the air as a screech split the air. Arwin swung his hammer, batting one of the tentacles out of the air as it shot out for him.

The weapon hit the soft, fleshy appendage and ripped straight through it, spraying blue blood across the ground and drawing out another screech. The monster heaved itself fully out of the water, revealing a bulbous head and dozens of beady black eyes scattered across a blobby body.

[Landsquid – Apprentice 9]

“Gods, that thing is hideous,” Anna exclaimed from behind them. “Get it away from me, please!”

“That looks delicious,” Lillia said, running her tongue along her lips. “Arwin, don’t squish its body too much, please. I want it un-mushed.”

“I say we kill the damn thing and figure out what to do with it afterward,” Rordrick suggested, taking a step back as the monster whipped a tentacle at his head. “Any info on this ugly bugger, Arwin?”

“It’s a variant of a Landsquid,” Arwin replied. “They’re not very dangerous, but don’t let it grab you.”

“How do we kill it?” Rordrick asked.

“Stab it.”

“Lovely,” Rodrick said dryly, raising his sword and narrowing his eyes. The Landsquid let out another screech, its tentacles slamming into the ground around it like the beat of a dozen furious drummers. “One plate of chopped wiggler, coming right up.”

Chapter 42

Lillia had specifically requested that Arwin avoid crushing the Landsquid too badly, but he didn't see how he was meant to fight the monster without crushing it. It wasn't like he had a particularly large variety of pointy weapons to work with – all he had that was usable at the moment was his hammer.

I can't imagine she'll complain if I cave the monster's skull in. I'll just leave the rest of the tentacles as untouched as I can.

“Focus on cutting the tentacles off,” Arwin ordered, ducking out of the way as the Landsquid sent two tentacles snapping out to try and grab Arwin while he was off guard. The monster was fast, but its attacks were fairly predictable.

Rodrick didn't even waste breath on a reply. As the next tentacles shot out, he brought his blade down and carved one of them apart right at the half-way mark. Blue blood splattered across the warrior's chest and he ducked back to avoid getting hit by the monster's follow-up attack.

The beast still had ten tentacles left, and Arwin didn't know how deep the pool of water beneath the Land Squid was. With its gelatinous body, he suspected it could probably fit itself into small spaces, but he wasn't about to bet that the watery pit didn't connect to a much larger area beneath.

If it did, the fastest way to get killed would be to let the Landsquid grab him and drag him into the dark waters below. For the time being, the best thing he could do was to keep the monster's attention and let Rodrick work.

Arwin dismissed his armor and hammer to let himself move faster. He ducked and dodged away from attacks, letting each one pass by him harmlessly. Compared to much of the training he'd gone through in his past life, this creature was nothing. It was a monster that fought by ambushing its prey and using the element of surprise, not through long, extended combat.

Another tentacle squelched to the ground, thrashing about even though it was no longer connected to its controlling body, and the Landsquid screamed in pain. It lurched forward in a last ditch effort to try and grab Rodrick – and that was when Arwin struck.

His hammer materialized in his hands as he took advantage of the monster's temporary distraction and he brought the weapon down clean on the side of the Landsquid's head, using [Scourge] to empower the blow.

The Landsquid's squishy body gave way, and there was a loud crunch as the hammer hit something solid deep within it. It was lifted into the air and sent splattering across the ground until it hit the wall.

Not defeated, the squid lurched forward and twisted across the ground, making to retreat back into the pool that it had come from. Rodrick ran to cut the monster's path off, but Reya was faster.

She took a step forward and thrust her hand out. Faint blue light erupted at her palm, swirling through the air and forming a dull pillar above the Landsquid. The monster slowed, struggling against an invisible force.

It only lasted for an instant, but that instant was enough for Rodrick to close the space between himself and the squid and drive his sword forward, plunging it straight into the wounded monster's skull.

The Landsquid lurched once, then the tension vanished from its body and it collapsed in a wet pile at Rodrick's feet. He ripped his sword free, flicking purplish-blue goo from the blade, and sheathed it at his side.

Arwin didn't get any energy from killing the monster, but that was hardly a surprise. He didn't get stronger from killing things – he got stronger from forging them. And, unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do with the gelatinous monster's corpse other than hope that Lillia fed it to people she didn't like.

“That was awesome!” Reya exclaimed, running up to the monster's body. “Did you see that? I helped!”

“That was actually pretty damn useful,” Rodrick said with an approving smile. “What did you do? It felt like you slowed it.”

“Yeah. The first ability I chose was [Imprison]. It lets me reduce the physical attributes of any monster by a small percentage. It's stronger the closer in Tier I am to my target, so I can't do too much with it yet, but I think it still helped. I got some energy for aiding in the kill.”

“It was definitely useful,” Arwin said. “I'm really curious to see what else your class will be capable of. Any debuff abilities are really valuable, so I think we can safely say you definitely went with the right choice.”

Rodrick nodded in agreement and let out a whistle. “Yeah. You’re going to be in real high demand, kid.”

“I am?” Reya asked. “Why?”

“Debuffs are one of the best ways to fight strong monsters,” Anna explained, walking up to stand beside Reya. “There’s only so hard you can hit things, especially ones with really powerful defenses. But, if you can chip away at those defenses, you can make really nasty fights much easier. Not many classes provide access to strong debuffs.”

“I never thought about it that way. I just thought it sounded useful,” Reya said with a sheepish grin, rubbing the back of her neck. “I guess I made the right choice.”

“And you all left the squid mostly intact as well,” Lillia said, kneeling beside the dead monster and prodding it with a finger. “Thanks. I bet I could do a bunch of stuff with this thing, but it’s just struck me it’s probably going to go bad pretty quickly, isn’t it?”

“Most likely,” Arwin said. “You should invest in an icebox when you can.”

Lillia pursed her lips and groaned. “Just one of the many things I need to get my hands on. I’m pretty sure the list gets longer with every day.”

She picked up one of the severed tentacles and held it out before herself, ignoring the sickening squishing noises the limb made. It looked like an odd cross between flesh and Jell-o, and from the strong fishy smell filling the room, Arwin suspected it tasted like brine.

Please don’t try to turn that into sushi.

“Does anyone want to carry this?” Lillia asked hopefully.

Everyone suddenly found the walls fascinating. Lillia snorted and rolled the tentacle up as best she could before tucking it under an arm, completely staining her clothes. “Fine. I’ll carry it myself. True genius requires experimentation.”

“Does true genius also smell like fish?” Reya asked. “Because you’re going to.”

They all chuckled, and Arwin summoned his armor back as he walked a lap around the room, checking to see if there were any other monsters lurking in wait. He kept his distance from the pool of water, not wanting to find out the hard way that there was another squid.

“For our first fight of the dungeon, that wasn’t half bad,” Rodrick said.

“I’ll say,” Anna agreed. “We didn’t even get hit.”

“It was only an Apprentice Tier. I thought this was a Journeyman dungeon,” Reya said with a frown. “How come it was so weak?”

“Trust me, that wouldn’t have been weak if we hadn’t outnumbered it five to one,” Arwin said, still scanning the walls. “And Journeyman dungeon means it’s appropriate for Journeyman tier adventurers, not that everything within it is a Journeyman. The weakest monsters are always toward the entrance of the dungeon, and it’ll only get harder the deeper we go.”

“Oh, so that’s why we can’t clear out the whole thing yet?” Reya guessed.

“Exactly,” Arwin said. “We’ll probably be able to go a few rooms deep at the most, but that should be more than enough for our purposes. I want you to make sure you don’t land any killing blows on any monsters yet, by the way.”

Reya blinked in confusion. “Really? Why? Wouldn’t that get me energy faster so I could get stronger?”

“It would, but that would cripple you in the future,” Arwin said. He paused as some lines in the wall caught his eye. “Power lies in Titles and Achievements, not through jumping through the Tiers as quickly as you can. Trust me on this.”

“Okay,” Reya said with a mock salute. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“Arwin.”

“Right.” Reya didn’t sound particularly mollified, but Arwin didn’t press the issue.

He let his hand run along a crack in the stone, searching for a loose brick. It didn’t take long before he found it. There was a soft click and a portion of the wall ground back, swinging out to reveal another room.

“That was fast,” Anna said, her eyebrows crawling up her forehead. “How’d you know there was a secret door? I would have suspected something in the pool.”

“There might very well be something there,” Arwin allowed. “But I didn’t feel like going for a swim, and once you’ve seen a few dungeons, you start to keep an eye out for crap like this. Most of them were originally forts or other structures that got warped by the Mesh. Who doesn’t like a secret passage?”

“I only like secret passages when I find the stupid things,” Rodrick said as he walked over to stand beside Arwin. “We going in there?”

Arwin turned back to the pool and stuck his hammer out, extending until it was several feet beneath the water. He grimaced, then pulled it free and backed away from the water once more.

“Yeah. We’ve got a deep pool over here, but nothing popped out when I tested it. I don’t think the monsters should be that clever this far out, so we should be good to go deeper. Make sure to take things slowly, though.”

“Will do,” Rodrick promised. The two of them stepped into the next room. As soon as their feet fell beyond the doorway, dozens of little orange motes of energy identical to the ones that had lit up the stairs erupted all around the room, bathing it in soft light.

This room was even mossier than the first had been, and the vine growth was thick enough that it almost resembled roots running along the floor. Water dripped from the ceiling, pattering to the floor gently.

Sitting in the center of the room, still unaware of their presence, was a hunched green humanoid creature. It was hunched over the body of a dead Landsquid, ripping large portions of the fleshy body away and shoveling them into its fanged mouth.

[Swamp Orc – Journeyman 1]

A rusty cleaver hung at the monster’s side, still covered with goop from the Landsquid and dried blood from other victims. Rodrick gagged as the orc shoved a whole tentacle down its throat, barely even pausing to swallow. It wiped its mouth with the back of a clawed hand, then ripped another piece of the dead monster away.

“That’s one ugly bugger,” Rodrick muttered, just loud enough for Arwin to hear.

“Orcs are good fighters, but they’re not particularly clever. They’re more of a threat when they’re in groups,” Arwin said, tightening his grip on his hammer. The orc hadn’t noticed them yet, but it would soon – and, unfortunately, they didn’t have any ranged attacks that could

take advantage of its distraction. “Just remember they’re a lot stronger than humans are on average, and it’s also got the tier advantage. Try to dodge attacks more than block them.”

“Right with you. Do you want to take the lead, considering...” Rodrick gestured vaguely to the armor covering Arwin’s body.

“Yeah. Wait until it’s distracted by me, then see if you can cripple it. Don’t go for a killing blow too early. It’ll make you over-extend and you could end up getting hit. It’s safer to just take this nice and steady. Reya, can you Imprison it when it looks like Rodrick is about to strike?”

“Yeah. I’ll do my best,” Reya whispered.

Arwin crept forward and the others followed him. It had been a long time since Arwin had fought an orc, but he got the feeling this one wouldn’t go down nearly as easily as their previous opponent had.

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No sooner than Arwin had inched a few feet into the room did the orc jerk upright from its meal, its dull eyes flashing as it spun toward him. The gelatinous body of the Landsquid splattered across the ground as the orc threw it to the side.

It drew its cleaver and threw its head back, letting out a furious roar that sent spittle flying all across the floor. Even at the distance Arwin was at, he could smell the monster’s rancid breath.

Arwin moved carefully, not wanting to get his feet caught on the thick vines on the ground. One misstep would be more than enough to give the orc an advantage that he had absolutely no desire to hand over.

He bared his own teeth in challenge and beat a fist against the armor on his chest, drawing the orc's attention to him. From what he remembered, orcs were incredibly competent in physical combat, but they weren't hard to trick.

As long as I can keep its attention on me, we should be able to handle this without too much trouble. I just have to make sure I don't take a blow to the head and die before Anna can patch up any damage I take.

The orc, fed up with waiting for an attack, charged. Its powerful muscles propelled the humanoid beast forward, closing the distance between it and Arwin in just a few steps. It reared back, bringing the cleaver down for the nape of Arwin's neck for what would have been a killing blow.

Arwin spun his hammer, knocking the sword to the side with a grunt. He'd planned to convert the momentum of the deflection into a counterattack, but the orc was *strong*. All the force he'd put into the attack was absorbed, leaving nothing to press forward with.

The orc, having a considerably nimbler weapon than Arwin, recovered first. It brought the cleaver back toward his neck with brutal speed. He leaned back, letting the blow whistle by harmlessly, and then drove his knee into the orc.

It was like striking a brick wall. Arwin cursed, and his greaves tingled as a small portion of kinetic energy was stored within them. His attack had done so little that it had actually counted as an attack against Arwin.

Or is that just physics? If I hit something really hard, isn't that the same as it hitting me just as hard? The force has to go somewhere. Interesting thought.

If the orc could have read Arwin's thoughts, perhaps it would have been impressed with his budding career as a physicist. Unfortunately for him, it was entirely incapable of both mathematical calculations and mind reading, so it was forced to settle for a scream and a lunge.

Arwin's foot caught on one of the many vines littered across the ground and he twisted as he fell, bringing his hammer around to keep the orc from instantly pouncing on him. He hit the ground with a grunt and rolled to the side without waiting.

A loud screech rang out as the monster's cleaver scraped against his armor, leaving a furrow through the scales. Heat swirled in Arwin's chest and a lash of molten flame arced out from the armor, striking the orc across the face before it could react.

It screamed in pain and stumbled back, dropping the cleaver. Rodrick took that moment to act. He burst into motion from where he'd been standing at the sidelines, thrusting his sword forward without a sound.

Even still, the orc managed to notice him coming. It twisted at the last second, bringing its heart out of Rodrick's path. The sword bit deep into the monster's side and sent blood splattering across the damp floor.

Rodrick nearly tripped over his own feet at the lack of resistance his blade met. He'd been planning to run the monster through, not leave a nasty cut on its side. Even as he recovered, the orc lunged for his neck, reaching out with rancid, jagged claws.

A flash of blue light enveloped the monster. It slowed, and Rodrick ducked out of the way. Arwin surged forward, bringing his hammer for the orc's side just as the blue energy wore off.

In an impressive display of acrobatics, the orc vaulted backward. It grabbed onto a vine hanging from the ceiling and swung itself even further, landing on the other side of the room. It pressed a hand to the bloody furrow in its side, then bared its teeth and let out a roar.

Dull red energy ignited behind its eyes and the orc's posture shifted. It flexed its claws, hissing as it swayed from foot to foot. Arwin grimaced in distaste.

“Shit.”

“What the hell is it doing?” Rodrick asked. “Nobody told me the damn things could glow!”

“Orcs often have a berserker state that gets triggered when they're in a really intense fight or when their shaman triggers it intentionally,” Arwin said. “Be careful. Back up and let me handle this.”

“What? But I thought—”

“Have you ever fought a rampaging orc?”

“No.”

“Then back up,” Arwin said, advancing to make sure he kept the monster's attention. Not every orc had the bloodline that let them rampage without the aid of a shaman, and he'd been hoping to get lucky.

Evidently, that had been a poor idea. In concept, a rampaging orc shouldn't have actually been that much more dangerous than a normal one. They didn't get stronger or faster – in fact, they didn't change their physical abilities at all.

Instead, they completely lost their ability to feel pain. Their bodies basically forgot that they were living, breathing creatures and transformed into weapons hellbent on killing their target.

“Don't do anything dumb,” Lillia warned. “You know what–”

“I know,” Arwin said briskly. Lillia did likely know more than he did, but she'd been hiding her powers from Anna and Rodrick. He didn't blame her, but it meant she couldn't do anything in the fight. If he wanted to make it out from this fight with his armor in one piece, he was going to need his full concentration.

The orc roared and sprinted toward Arwin, its arms extended to rip him to shreds. Arwin empowered his legs and bounded to the side, swinging his hammer at the monster as he passed. It didn't even bother trying to dodge, and a loud crunch rang out as the weapon impacted the orc's shoulder.

It lurched toward Arwin, slashing with its claws and nearly catching him while he backed up and readied his hammer again. Arwin swung the weapon once more, this time empowering it with [Scourge].

A keening wail filled the air as the hammer hurtled through the air and slammed straight into the center of the orc's chest, sending a spray of blood and bone up into the air with a sickening crunch.

The force of Arwin's blow sent it tumbling across the ground. It bounced twice, then slammed into the wall. Blood pouring from the massive crater in the orc's chest, it clambered to its feet and swayed toward him, apparently unaware that it should have been dead twice over.

Annoying bastards.

The orc burst into motion, and Arwin matched the attack with his hammer. As the weapon neared the orc's head, it twitched to the side and just barely managed to avoid it. In the same motion, it lunged to bite at Arwin's neck.

He used [Scourge] to empower his leg as he brought his leg up, driving his knee straight into the orc's chin. It snapped back with enough force to shatter the teeth in its mouth. Not finished, Arwin brought his bare fist down on the monster's head, pouring in all the power [Scourge] would let him.

In a scene vaguely reminiscent of a very gorey whack-a-mole, the orc's head crumpled. Blood and gore seeped out of its face as it careened, still managing to rake its jagged claws across Arwin's chest as it collapsed.

His armor absorbed the blow, keeping it from penetrating, but Arwin earned four thick new furrows in his armor for his troubles. Even when the orc's body hit the ground, Arwin didn't hesitate.

He brought his hammer down once more, driving it straight into the monster's back. Its body flailed, then fell still. Arwin took a step back, breathing heavily as blood dripped from the end of his hammer.

"There," Arwin said, pausing to swallow and catch his breath. "I got it."

“Holy shit,” Reya said. “I knew you could fight, but I didn’t know you could *fight*.”

“What’s that meant to mean?” Arwin asked. “I fought the Wyrm.”

“We ran from the Wyrm,” Rodrick corrected, regarding Arwin in a new light. “That was brutal. Have you fought orcs before? You ripped that thing apart.”

“On occasion,” Arwin said. He saw the look in Lillia’s eye and grimaced. He knew what she was thinking, even if she wasn’t saying it.

She’s seen me do that to a whole lot more than just an orc.

“So the room is safe, now?” Reya asked. “Can we look around and see if there’s anything good?”

“There almost certainly is,” Arwin replied, kneeling to pick up the fallen cleaver. It had two rough initials carved into it, a *V* and an *A* overlaid on top of each other. They probably belonged to the original owner of the cleaver, before it had landed in the grasp of the mindless creature laying at Arwin’s feet. “Don’t get too excited yet, though. Take things slow. This room is pretty hard to see in, so there could be doors leading to other parts of the dungeon.”

“Do monsters actually travel between the rooms? I always thought they kind of just... sat there,” Reya said.

Arwin looked at Reya, blinking in surprise. “Why would they do that? They want to get deeper and closer to the source of Mesh that lured them here in the first place, so they rarely come back out of the dungeon into the worse rooms – but rarely doesn’t mean they won’t.”

“That was a good save, by the way,” Rodrick said. “If Reya hadn’t slowed that orc down, I’d have taken a nasty hit. I didn’t think the darn thing would be so aware when it was actively fighting you.”

“That’s why I told you to go for crimpling blows, not finishing ones,” Arwin said. “Harder to correct when you’re throwing your whole weight behind an attack. Now, lets—”

“Hush!” Lillia hissed, slipping forward and clapping a hand over Arwin’s mouth. His eyes widened and he had to stop himself from throwing her arm away instinctively. The expression on her face was serious enough to kill any questions that Arwin had.

They all went silent; eyes darting around the room to try and find what Lillia had spotted. It took Arwin a few more seconds than he would have liked, but he finally managed to locate what had drawn Lillia’s attention.

The vines near the far left wall were... off. Their tone was just slightly different to the other vines covering the ground, and they were more tightly knit than they were in other areas. They weren’t just vines – it was the coiled body of a large snake. The Mesh didn’t appear to identify the monster, so it had to have some form of stealth or concealment skill.

The snake must have been at least three feet wide and twelve feet long. It hadn’t attacked yet, but it was ever-so-slowly making its way toward them.

No sooner than Arwin had spotted the monster did he hear a grunt from down a hall at the room behind it – a grunt that sounded suspiciously like an orc.

“More orcs coming,” Arwin whispered, tightening his grip on his hammer. “I knew it. They’re rarely alone. The others must have gone deeper into the dungeon. Get ready to fight. Rodrick, do you see the snake?”

“Barely.”

“That’s your job. Keep it off the backline. I’ll hold the orcs off until you can back me up. Don’t let the snake get behind me, or I’m dead.”

Dull red eyes appeared in the darkness of the doorway and Arwin suppressed a curse. The orc was already in a rampaging state – but it wasn’t running around like an idiot, which meant only one thing.

There was an orc shaman.

This might get ugly.

Chapter 44

Arwin charged the door. In general, charging an orc was the act of either a madman or someone so strong that the orc posed absolutely no threat to them. But, in this instance, he was neither.

I need to make sure they don’t make it out of the doorway. There are going to be at least two orcs coming out, and I can’t fend them off if they gang up on me. Routing them at the door is my only option.

Arwin reached the doorway an instant before the orcs could emerge and thrust his hammer forward like a spear. The orc before him snarled and dodged out of the way, pressing its

body to the wall to keep from getting struck. As soon as he got a good look at the monster, the Mesh identified it.

[Swamp Orc – Journeyman 1]

In the darkness behind the orc, Arwin could make out a pair of glowing green eyes and the rough form of another orc.

That's the shaman. It'll stay out of the fight and try to whittle me down with magic while buffing up its warrior. I can't let this drag on for long. I'm not going to win a battle of attrition.

Almost as if on cue, the Mesh shimmered forth once more.

[Swamp Orc Shaman – Journeyman 2]

Behind him, Arwin heard Rodrick let out a battle cry. There was a loud thump, presumably the snake as it entered the fight with him, but Arwin didn't have the liberty to turn and see how their fight was unfolding.

The orc before him lunged, thrusting its rusty sword for his chest. Arwin batted the blow away with the hilt of his hammer and drove his foot into the orc's stomach, using [Scourge] to give himself enough strength to throw it back several feet.

His magical energy reserves weren't as high as he would have liked, but it wasn't like the orcs were going to sit around and wait for him to recover. The light in the orc's eyes turned even brighter and it let out a furious roar, charging Arwin like a mad bull.

He drove his hammer forward, but this time, the monster didn't even bother dodging it. It thrust its sword forward, taking the hammer blow to the shoulder and striking Arwin in the stomach with its own weapon.

If it hadn't been for his armor, the blow would have gone straight through his heart. Instead, it rang off the scales and caught on the furrows already present in Arwin's armor, only leaving a superficial cut on his chest.

In turn, Arwin's blow demolished the monster's left shoulder. Bone and blood splattered across the floor, but the orc didn't even notice. It thrust its blade again and again, having gotten close enough to Arwin that his hammer was nowhere near as effective.

He grit his teeth as the sword carved into his armor. He tried to shove the orc back, but it managed to dodge out of the way. Its sword rang off his greaves, giving them some kinetic energy, but Arwin wasn't going to be able to get much use out of it if –

The orc's sword slammed into his armor again. Heat swirled in Arwin's chest, and a whip of fire lashed out, striking the monster in the eyes. It screamed, more in fury than pain, and Arwin took the brief reprieve to use a [Scourge] empowered kick to throw the orc back.

His chest stung something furious and blood dripped down his front, but none of the cuts he'd taken were fatal. His armor had held up against most of the monster's attacks, but it wasn't going to last forever.

A loud hiss rang out behind Arwin, followed by the clash of metal on scale and a slew of curses. In the brief instant that Arwin was distracted, the shaman sent a bolt of green light into the back of the orc he was fighting.

The wound on its shoulder stopped bleeding. It hadn't been healed, but it wouldn't be dying from blood loss anytime soon. Roaring, the orc charged Arwin again. The light in its eyes burned even brighter than it had before.

I can't keep trading blows like this. The shaman is going to keep picking this bastard back up until it's using the corpse like a puppet. I need to blow through and kill the real threat.

Instead of trying to fend the orc's blows off, Arwin threw caution to the wind. He drove his shoulder into the monster, slamming it into the wall. He caught a sword to the side in the process, but it rang off his armor and failed to find purchase in his skin.

Arwin charged forward, and he was rewarded with a flash of surprise and fear in the orc shaman's eyes a moment before he grabbed it by the neck. Letting [Scourge] empower his body, Arwin slammed the shaman's head into the stone.

There was a sickening crunch and a splatter, much like a watermelon being dropped. The shaman's body went limp in his hand and Arwin spun just in time for the other orc's sword to slam into his shoulder with enough force to drive him to one knee.

He snarled, lunging forward and tackling the monster to the ground. The sword flew from the orc's hands and it reached up to claw at his face. Arwin drew on [Scourge] once more, slamming the orc's hands to the ground.

It roared up at him – but the roar was quickly turned to a garbled scream as Arwin drove his forehead into the beast's face, shattering its nose. One of its fangs caught his chin. If it hadn't been for [Indomitable Bulwark], the fang likely would have completely ripped his face open. But, even with his empowered defenses, it still ripped across his flesh and left a deep cut.

Arwin didn't give himself time to register the wound. It was taking literally all of his power to keep the struggling orc pinned down, and it wouldn't be long before the monster managed to escape him again.

With a roar, Arwin activated [Scourge] once more, draining the majority of the magical energy he still had left to work with, and drove his head down once more. The orc's skull caved in beneath him.

Blood splattered across his face, but Arwin didn't care. He leaned back, releasing the monster's hands and driving one more blow into its sternum to make sure it was well and truly dead before staggering back to his feet, breathing heavily.

Achievement: [Use Your Head] has been earned.

[Use Your Head] – *Awarded for using your head in a way in which you probably should not have used it.* Effects: The next piece of headgear you forge will be magical. *This achievement has been consumed upon creation of your next piece of headgear.*

Arwin dismissed the Mesh. He grabbed his hammer from where it had fallen on the floor and strode back into the other room, readying himself for another fight. But, when Arwin emerged from the hallway, he nearly ran straight into Rodrick.

The man let out a scream and jumped nearly a foot into the air, bringing his sword to bear.

“Good gods!” Rodrick exclaimed, his eyes wide. “You look like a monster!”

“Are you okay?” Reya asked, her face pale. Lillia looked like she wanted to say something as well, but, but she remained quiet. Anna hurried over to him and started to draw on her magic.

Arwin looked down at his torn up armor, then wiped the blood from his face with the back of an arm. "I killed the orcs. Where's the snake?"

"Dead," Rodrick said, stepping back so Arwin could see the corpse of the monster behind him. It was largely in one piece, having been run through the eye. Arwin gave Rodrick an approving nod, letting himself relax slightly.

Anna's magic washed over his body, stitching shut the wounds he'd picked up.

"Thank you, and good job. We should pause here for a moment. That was... a little harder than I expected."

"You killed three of those things on your own?" Rodrick asked, looking over Arwin's shoulder and shaking his head in disbelief. "Some smith you are."

"It's not about the tools you have. It's about how you use them."

"Do you even have any tools other than that armor?" Rodrick asked with a laugh. "With the amount of blood on you, it looks more like you used your head to beat the life out of them."

"Your whole body is a tool," Arwin said. He touched the damage to his armor, then frowned. It had taken quite the beating from the fight. It didn't feel like the magic within it was about to falter, but if he went through another fight that was as brutal as this one had been, there was a good chance it would be too ripped up to be repairable.

At least I got a pretty nice achievement out of this. I've got more than enough scales to repair the damage I took back at home. If I can just gather some new material to work with, then I can consider this a huge success.

Lillia dug through her pockets and pulled out a black napkin, tossing it down to Arwin. He caught it with a hand and wiped the blood off his face, giving her an appreciative nod.

“Thanks. This is probably going to stain, though.”

“That’s fine. I always use it to clean up blood. Butchering animals is messy.”

Arwin looked at the napkin, then shrugged. It wasn’t going to be any less dirty than he already was, so he wiped the rest of his face off. He gave himself another few seconds to recover before standing back up. He handed the napkin back to Lillia, who took it between two fingers.

“Should we go deeper?” Reya asked. “If the next room is even harder than this one...”

“It could be difficult. My armor is pretty cut up,” Arwin said. He walked over to the snake and knelt beside it, examining the monster’s body. He pulled at one of the scales, bending it until it snapped.

Not nearly as strong as the Forest Lizard scales. This thing must have been much more reliant on its stealth abilities. Not particularly useful for my forging, but it’s a good thing Lillia spotted it.

Arwin pulled the monster’s head up, holding it by one of the fangs to study the inside of its mouth. The fangs were large, so he snapped them off and stuck them into a pocket. He wasn’t sure if he could use them, but it wouldn’t hurt to keep them around.

He then knelt by the dead orc and ruffled through its belongings. Aside from the cleaver, there really wasn’t anything of real use on it. The first orc in the hallway was similarly useless, its sword far too rusted to be of use, but the shaman was different.

Arwin hadn't had a chance to see it during the fight, but the monster had been holding a wooden wand of some sort. There was a glittering purple gemstone tied to its top. Arwin wasn't sure what it did – if it did anything at all, as the Mesh didn't identify it. Either way, he ripped the gem free of the staff and tucked it into a pocket. At the very least, it would probably sell for a little.

He returned to the room with the others in it. “Nothing too useful yet.”

“I did get a good amount of energy from killing the snake,” Rodrick put in. Reya nodded. “I did too, even though I only helped a bit.”

“Any achievements?”

Both of them shook their heads.

“Then it's up to you lot,” Arwin said. “I'd be willing to push forward for one more room. We haven't really gotten much out of this yet. If I rest for a few more minutes, I should be able to handle another fight without much trouble. I'd like to try to get more out of the dungeon on our first run.”

“I'm not keen on cooking orc, and the snake is kind of stringy,” Lillia said. “I'd like to go further as well, but I'm not really doing much fighting right now, so it's up to you.”

“I haven't been hurt yet, so I'm good to go deeper,” Reya said.

“Same here,” Rodrick said, and Anna nodded in agreement.

“Then it's settled,” Arwin said. “We go deeper.”

Chapter 45

After a few minutes of sitting around to recover their energy, the group crept down the hall. It had been long enough since their last fight that it didn't seem likely anything else had overheard it, but there was no point taking chances.

They crept down the dark hall, following its curves deeper into the earth. The scent of mildew grew stronger with every step, and a faint mist greeted them, prickling against their skin. It was mostly concentrated around their feet, sending wisps of swirling white up with every step they took.

The Mesh prickled at Arwin's skin, telling him that there was faint power stored within the mist – or, more likely, whatever had created it.

After a few more minutes of walking, they reached the end of the hall. A stone door sat before them, its surface flush with the walls around it. It was plain, aside from a small green crystal jutting out from one side of it like a doorknob.

“That's not suspicious at all,” Rodrick said, squinting at the door. “Something nasty past this, you think?”

“Probably,” Arwin said with a nod. “I'd say the mist is coming from beyond the door. It's probably something a little stronger than what we've faced before.”

“What are the chances it's waiting on the other end of the door to attack us?”

“Nonzero,” Arwin admitted. “But this mist could be a good sign. If we can take out whatever is waiting for us, I'd be willing to bet we'll be able to get some good stuff from the victory.”

“I’d be willing to try. I’m topped out on magic right now, so as long as nobody gets hurt too seriously, I can keep everyone patched up for a while,” Anna supplied.

“Can we just poke our heads in there and see what we’re up against? Or will it chase us?” Rodrick asked.

“No clue. Depends on what’s there,” Arwin replied. He idly ran a finger along the damage to his armor. “Not every monster is the same. I think it’s worth a try, though. We can always use the door as a choke point if it’s a real threat. Most monsters won’t throw their lives away trying to kill you, so it’ll try to run if we injure it enough. We’re not that deep into the dungeon yet anyway, so I think we can handle it.”

“Let’s go, then,” Reya said. She paused, then cleared her throat. “You first though, please.”

Arwin snorted and stepped toward the door. He wrapped his hand around the crystal and pulled. The door didn’t budge, so he pushed instead. It swung open silently, gliding across the stone without a noise.

More mist poured out of the room, rolling past their feet and going up to their waist. The sound of rushing water accompanied it. A small waterfall poured from an outcropping of rocks at the far right of the room, its blueish-green water making a river that traveled across the ground and disappeared into a hole.

Glistening teal gemstones jutted out of the walls and disrupted the flow of the river, sending faint flickers of light dancing across the walls and ceiling. Compared to the rest of the dungeon, it was shockingly beautiful.

A pile of strangely shaped rocks and gemstones about seven feet tall caught Arwin's eye as the familiar tingle of the Mesh greeted him. He focused on it more intently and was rewarded by a swirl of golden letters.

[Crystal Golem – Journeyman 3]

“Over there,” Arwin whispered. The golem didn't seem to have noticed them yet – or perhaps it simply didn't care about their presence. Not every monster in a dungeon was always hostile, though they usually didn't appreciate getting bothered.

“That thing is huge,” Reya muttered. “Can we really fight it?”

“Smaller than the Wyrn,” Rodrick whispered.

“We had to run from that,” Reya pointed out. “It's just... sitting there. What is it waiting for?”

“Us, probably,” Arwin replied. He adjusted his grip on his hammer. He'd fought golems before. They were a rather interesting kind of monster, as they weren't naturally born. Instead, they formed when the environment had so much magical energy sitting around that it got infused.

Most of the time, Golems tended to guard whatever it was that had formed them. They were occasionally aggressive, but most of the time they didn't care about anyone unless they got near whatever it was they happened to be protecting.

“There might be something good in this room,” Arwin said. “Golems are protectors, but I don't know what it's guarding. I have to say that I'm a little tempted to try and harvest some of these crystals.”

“What are the chances that it’s going to take offense to that?” Reya asked.

“Almost one hundred percent,” Arwin admitted. “Up to you all.”

“If you think we can handle it, I’m willing to give it a shot,” Rodrick said. “Never fought a giant pile of rocks before, but I’m always willing to try new experiences.”

“The strategy for this should be pretty straight forward, then. Golems tend to embody the traits of whatever it is they’re made of. Crystal and stone, in this case, so it’ll probably be heavy and strong. Don’t get hit. Focus on chipping away at it until we reveal its core. Once that gets shattered, it’ll die,” Arwin said.

“Understood,” Rodrick said. “I guess we just smack at it and Reya waits to use her power until one of us are about to get hit or we see it’s core?”

“Exactly,” Arwin said with a nod. “And Anna will sit at the back and quickly heal anyone that does get hit. This should be a short fight, but it can go badly pretty fast if the golem lands a good strike on us and we can’t get away in time. Sound good to everyone?”

“I’ll sit here and provide moral support,” Lillia said with a grin. Arwin snorted, but he couldn’t exactly ask her to do anything else. Unless they had absolutely no choice, it was better to keep her powers concealed.

“I feel like it’s more of a curse than a support with that tentacle you’re carrying around,” Rodrick grumbled. “I keep seeing it out of the corner of my eye and shuddering.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Lillia said defensively. “It’s going to taste great.”

“I’ll believe it when I see someone else try it.”

“Let’s just just kill this thing already, shall we?” Anna asked. “The mist is tingly. I don’t like it. I know it’s not doing anything, but it kind of feels like I’ve got ants trying to crawl up my pants.”

Arwin grimaced at that thought, then hoisted his hammer and started toward the golem, Rodrick at his side. The monster didn’t respond to their approach, and Arwin kept his guard up to make sure nothing else was lurking in the shadows.

Golems were pretty non-confrontational so long as they weren’t annoyed, so it was very possible for another monster to be in the room. But, at least as far as he could tell, there wasn’t anything else in the area. He wasn’t even sure where the door to the next room was – though he would have bet a fair sum of gold it was probably behind the waterfall.

Dungeons always liked sticking things behind waterfalls.

As they grew closer to the golem, a dull grinding noise echoed through the room. The golem’s head shifted up, dim green lighting in the sockets that made up its eyes. It hadn’t attacked yet, but it was watching them.

“I think it sees us,” Rodrick said.

“I don’t know if sees is the right word,” Arwin said. “It doesn’t actually have eyes. It’s just magic manifest. Golems don’t process information or thought like we do, as far as I’m aware.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I don’t have to feel bad about this,” Arwin replied, rearing back and swinging his hammer, empowering the blow with [Scourge]. The hammer slammed into the side of the golem’s head with a resounding crash, sending a spray of stone fragments flying everywhere.

The monster staggered, catching itself on the ground with an arm. It shoved itself upright, stone screeching against crystal as it stood upright. Rock flew from the ground, filling the crater Arwin had made in it.

“I think you pissed it off,” Rodrick said, taking a step back as a dull hum filled the air. The crystals covering the monster started to pulsate, their light reflecting in the mist around them.

“So I did,” Arwin agreed. “The core isn’t on the left side of it’s head, in case you were wondering.”

The golem lurched forward, bringing a large, rocky hand the size of Arwin’s upper body down toward him. He dove to the side and the ground shook behind him from the force of the golem’s blow.

Rodrick darted at the monster and slammed the butt of his sword down into the top of its arm, cracking the stone slightly. His eyes went wide and he skipped back, avoiding the golem’s other hand as it swept at him.

“Nine Underlands, that thing is really hard to crack. How’d you damage it so easily?”

“I’ve got a bloody hammer,” Arwin replied.

And an ability that lets me grow a hundred times more powerful than I normally am. Just a small buff, really. Definitely not a big deal.

The golem rumbled toward them, raising a hand. Crystals shifted across its body, gathering in its palm and forming into a large, jagged sword. It swept the blade and Arwin dropped to the ground, just barely ducking under the powerful blow in time.

The rush of wind from its passing buffeted his hair, and Rodrick let out a slew of curses from behind him. There hadn't been a loud crunch, so the warrior must have avoided the attack as well.

As the golem went to pull the sword back for another swing, Arwin attacked once more. He brought his hammer hurtling toward the other side of its head like a meteor, slamming it into the stone with all the force his body could muster.

Another loud crash echoed through the room. The force of his blow, empowered by [Scourge], sent the golem staggering several feet to the side. Rubble rained down from the huge crater, but there was still no core to be seen.

The wound quickly started to patch over. Arwin went to attack again, but he was forced to abandon the attempt as the golem nearly impaled him with its enormous crystal sword. He twisted at the last second, letting the weapon scrape across his armor with a loud screech.

“You okay?” Rodrick yelled.

“Fine,” Arwin replied with a grimace. The golem was a bit faster than he'd expected – or perhaps he was just slower than he'd once been. It was probably a mixture of the two. “The golem's core isn't in its head. Let's go for the body, around the heart area.”

“I’ll distract it,” Rodrick said, running up and smacking the golem on the arm before Arwin could respond. It turned toward him, bringing the crystal sword whistling for Rodrick’s head.

A blue glow enveloped the golem, slowing its movements for just an instant. Rodrick leapt back and the sword whiffed him. Arwin’s hammer shot out and caught the golem in the shoulder with another spray of stone. A resounding chime rang out as he struck some of the crystal, and a tremor raced down his arms with such intensity that Arwin was forced to drop his hammer.

He hopped back, cursing and shaking his arms off. Whatever the crystals were made out of, it was *really* strong. Arwin used [Arsenal] to summon his hammer back into his hands. The golem reached out for him, and Rodrick unleashed several rapid – but largely ineffective – attacks into its back.

This time, the golem completely ignored him. It had clearly registered that Rodrick didn’t have a good way to injure it, and Arwin was the greater threat.

“Over here, you overgrown lump!” Rodrick called, racing past the golem to stand where it had risen. “You’re protecting something, right? Sure would be a shame if I—”

Rodrick didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. The golem spun with such speed that its hand caught Arwin by surprise, striking him in the shoulder and sending him tumbling across the ground.

He slammed into a wall and the world flashed around him as the air was knocked from his lungs. The golem lunged for Rodrick. A flash of blue light enveloped it, but it wasn’t enough to stop the monster.

Its weapon came crashing down, on a collision course for Rodrick – and the warrior wasn't anywhere near fast enough to dodge it in time.

Chapter 46

Lillia burst into motion, slipping into a shadow and tackling Rodrick a moment before his head could get turned into a fine bloody mist by the golem's sword.

Arwin stumbled to his feet, his head still ringing. Even the glancing blow had been enough to completely knock him out of sorts. Anna raced up to him, slapping her palm against his shoulder.

Healing energy rushed into him, pushing the dizziness back. Arwin sprinted back into the fight, not even spending the time to give Anna a grateful nod. The golem was already rearing back to swing at Lillia and Rodrick again.

He swung his hammer with a roar, bringing it crashing into the golem's side whilst using the full force of [Scourge]. A powerful shockwave ran up his arms as his hammer struck home, crashing through the golem's body.

For a brief instant, a flicker of green caught Arwin's eye. A gemstone, roughly the size of his fist, rested directly in the center of the monster's chest.

"The core is in the middle of its body!" Arwin roared, jumping back to avoid getting crumpled like a tin can by the golem's sword. "One of you need to finish it off! If I kill it, you'll barely get any rewards!"

"I'll be honest, I'm a little more concerned with not dying," Rodrick yelled back.

“You’ll not die more often if you get stronger.”

The golem’s limbs ground against each other as it stomped toward Arwin. Tremors ran through the ground with every step it took, and Arwin was forced to use [Scourge] to empower his feet and jump out of the way of a devastating sword swing.

Stone had already started rolling up the monster’s body, gathering and concealing the core once more. Arwin gritted his teeth. The golem wasn’t exactly a sapient monster, but it could adapt. It wasn’t going to sit around and let him wail on it.

“I’m going to reveal the core again,” Arwin said. “Reya, slow it down as soon as I land the hit. Rodrick, finish it off.”

He didn’t wait for any confirmations. Arwin activated [Arsenal] and dismissed his armor and hammer before bursting into motion. Without the heavy equipment, Arwin dove under the golem’s next blow and rolled to his feet. He summoned his hammer back to his hands as he rose and brought it up into the golem’s chest.

Stone shattered and rained against the wall behind the golem, revealing the shimmering core in the center of its chest. The golem brought a fist hurtling toward Arwin, but a flash of blue enveloped it once more.

Rodrick ran forward with a cry. His sword ignited with burning light as he swung it at the core. It struck the green gemstone with a high-pitched clink. Cracks shot through the gemstone and it shattered, letting out a flash of faint light.

The golem's fist crumbled to dust, stones and crystal falling down all around Arwin. The entire golem crumbled, stumbling forward and collapsing into a large pile of debris. The Mesh swirled before Arwin.

Achievement: [Topple the Strong] has been earned.

[Topple the Strong] – *Awarded for defeating an opponent one full Tier above you.*

Effects: One skill in your next Skill Selection has been upgraded to Unique. *This achievement will be consumed upon choosing your next skill.*

A huge grin split Arwin's face. Even if they got absolutely nothing else from the dungeon, this single achievement made everything worth it. The value of upgrading upcoming skills had already been proven time and time again to be immense.

"Whoa," Rodrick breathed, staring into the air before him in mute awe.

"What?" Anna asked. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I got an Achievement," Rodrick said. "For killing a Golem with one strike."

"Congratulations. What's it do?" Arwin asked.

"It lets me upgrade one of my skills," Rodrick replied absent-mindedly, his gaze still fixed on the air before him. "And I got a pretty damn good upgrade out of it. My Empowered Strike now carries on into my next two attacks. That'll be pretty useful, since using it once draws pretty much all my magical energy."

"I didn't get anything this time around, but I barely did anything to help in the fight so it's not much of a surprise," Anna said. "What about you, Reya?"

Reya nodded mutely. She swallowed, then licked her lips. "I – yeah. I got something."

“An achievement?” Rodrick asked.

“No. A Title.”

All of them froze. Rodrick drew in a sharp breath, letting it out in a whistle. Getting Achievements was incredibly important, but they were always consumed at some point. Titles, on the other hand, were arguably the most powerful boons that anyone could get.

Barring the most extreme circumstances, Titles were permanent. Their benefits could range from borderline useless to incredibly powerful, but they never left. Every single title was immensely valuable. To get one this early was huge for Reya.

“What does it do?” Anna asked, her eyes wide with shock. “Is it a good one? I can’t believe you got a Title at Apprentice 1. That’s incredible. That could set your entire future up for you.”

“Don’t forget she got it by helping kill something more than twice her Tier,” Rodrick pointed out. “She actually helped take it out, too. It wasn’t just fed to her. That’s not an easy feat to replicate.”

“Stop yapping and let me hear what the Title is,” Lillia said. She paused, then reddened. “Assuming you want to say, of course. You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to, Reya.”

“I think it’s fine,” Reya said with a hurried shake of her head. “I was just distracted reading it. It’s called Gaiac Heart.”

“What’s it do?” Arwin asked, a flash of concern passing through him. Not every Title was always beneficial. It was incredibly rare, but it wasn’t impossible to get a detrimental effect from them. Anything that had the chance to affect the heart was a little worrying.

Reya swallowed before speaking again. “It’s a passive that draws on my magical energy whenever I get injured, healing slowly depending on how bad the damage is.”

“Oh, shit,” Anna whispered. “That’s absolutely ridiculous. A healing passive?”

“A very slow one,” Reya said, but that did little to reduce the significance of the ability.

“That’s quite the Title,” Arwin said. “It’ll serve you well. I’ve seen a lot of them, and I can say without a doubt that defensive and restorative Titles are almost always the best ones you can get. Even if it’s just a small amount, that’s going to be useful for as long as you live.”

“Might make you live longer too,” Anna mused. “Aging is just destruction of the body. You might stay young for longer without even having to reach the higher Tiers and slow your aging by infusing yourself with magic.”

“Whoa. I didn’t even think of that,” Reya said, blinking in surprise. She touched her face, as if trying to see if she’d suddenly grown younger. “How come I got a Title when the rest of you got Achievements?”

“Questioning the Mesh is a pretty pointless task,” Arwin said. “It does what it wants. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say it’s because the difference in your abilities and those of the golem was really large, even compared to the rest of us. You basically just started fighting monsters, while everyone else here has been at it for at least a little while.”

“It’s too bad we can’t replicate the scenario by fighting some real big bad monster ourselves,” Rodrick mused, rubbing his chin. “I’d quite fancy a Title myself.”

“You could. Go try to beat up the Wyrn,” Anna said with a snort of laughter. “See how it goes for you.”

Rodrick grimaced and wasted no time in shaking his head. “No thanks. I choose life.”

“We’ll have more than enough time to get ourselves Titles and Achievements,” Arwin said, approaching the remains of the golem and kneeling beside them. He pushed through the rubble, pulling out one of the faintly glowing crystals. He turned it over in his hand, watching the light reflect off the walls. “And I got what I was looking for as well.”

“The crystals?” Anna asked.

“I think I can use them,” Arwin said with a nod. He stuffed the crystal into a pocket, then started rifling through the rest of the pile to collect the other fallen pieces. There was more than enough of it scattered throughout the room, but these were all already loose.

If I had a pickaxe, I’d consider trying to take some of the crystal in the walls as well. That would have a pretty high chance of attracting more attention than we want, though. This is more than enough to work with for now.

“So, do we try to venture any deeper?” Anna asked while Arwin worked to collect the crystals.

“I don’t think it would be wise,” Lillia said, adjusting her grip on the tentacle tucked under her arm. “We’ve already gotten some pretty good rewards from going this deep, and the golem was already a pretty tough fight. Arwin’s armor is already pretty damaged, so pushing further could mean biting off more than we can chew.”

“I agree,” Reya said. “I don’t think we should rush things. We should reset, get used to our new benefits, and let Arwin fix up his armor.”

And make my hammer. If I can figure out how to use this crystal, I bet it could be quite effective. With how hard it was to damage them, they'd definitely pack a significant punch. I'll probably need to use a different material for the handle of the hammer if I don't want to vibrate myself to death every time I hit something.

“No need to push ourselves farther.” Arwin straightened back up, every pocket he had completely stuffed full of crystals. “We can all be pretty proud of our performance. Before we head out – Anna, how is it that your class gets strength?”

“Mostly through combat. It's really hard to get energy as a Healer,” Anna said with a frown. “I've got to participate in the fight, but I don't have any good ways to damage monsters. Since I don't have the buffs or benefits that other combat classes have, I'm more liable to get chopped in half when I try to fight. It's okay, though. I get a really small amount just from standing around and keeping everyone safe.”

Arwin shook his head. “That's not going to be acceptable in the long run. We can't have you far weaker than the rest of us in the span of a few weeks.”

“A few weeks? Just how aggressively are you planning to push us?” Anna asked with a nervous laugh. “It's not like I can do much about it anyway. The only way for me to safely participate in a fight would be to get close, and my magic doesn't work on myself. I'm just a liability.”

“Not if we hold the monster down for you,” Arwin said.

“That's an assisted kill, though,” Anna said. “You'd lose so much energy for doing it, and I'd barely get any because you basically fed it to me. The Mesh only awards challenge.”

“I’d say it’s a good bit of challenge to get close enough to a monster that can kill you in one blow,” Arwin said with a dry laugh. “We’ll be ensuring you get energy as well from here on out. We don’t need an under leveled healer.”

Anna bit the insides of her cheeks. “That’s a lot of energy you’d be wasting.”

“Not my energy. I don’t get shit for killing things,” Arwin said with a snort. “What about you, Rodrick? Complaints?”

“Are you kidding? No way in the Nine Underlands. I’d do it for Anna myself if I thought I could actually manage it safely,” Rodrick said with an eager grin. “She’s too damn polite to say yes, but I’ll do it for her. Thank you. We’ll gladly do as you ask.”

“Good,” Arwin said. “Let’s get going, then. I’ve got some armor to repair and some new toys to play with. I think I’m going to try to make myself a hammer.”

Chapter 47

Lillia had been pretty sure that someone would have been waiting for them the moment they left the dungeon, or *something* would have gone awry.

But, to her surprise, nothing did. The trip back from the dungeon went smoothly, though they did get some strange looks from the guards on the way back into the city. Fortunately, nobody asked too many questions and the group broke off once they’d gotten deep enough.

Rodrick and Anna returned to the Glowing Swordfish. Arwin headed back to the smithy to get to work, while Reya joined her in heading back to the tavern. The tentacle she’d taken

from the Landsquid was getting a little difficult to hold with how slippery it was, but she'd carried it for this far, and she'd be damned if she dropped it now.

I'm starting to suspect that this isn't going to taste anywhere near good enough to justify all the effort I've put into it. I've already basically ruined my clothes with goo, but I'm going to cook this piece of shit if it's the last thing I do.

"Are you okay?" Reya asked as they ducked through the doorway and entered the dark tavern. "You've got a really concentrated expression on your face. You aren't mad, are you?"

Lillia hurriedly got her features under control and cleared her throat. "I – no, no. I'm fine. Just... thinking."

"About what?" Reya asked. "Also, can I have something to eat?"

"Well, I was going to try to cook this," Lillia said, glancing down at the tentacle. Reya blanched.

"You know what? I did just have a workout, and it's not a good idea to eat right after working," Reya said hurriedly. "It's bad for... uh, digestion."

I'm pretty sure the rule was to not eat before exercise, not after it. Oh well. Can't force anybody to eat something. It's her loss.

"Suit yourself," Lillia said with a shrug. She stepped into the kitchen and set the tentacle down on the counter, wiping her hands off on the sides of her shirt before poking her head back out. "You did a great job today, by the way. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do after you've got some more experience and training."

“Me too,” Reya said, her face turning serious. She ran a hand along her armor, then shook her head as a small smile appeared on her lips. “I never thought I’d get a class, much less a Unique one. It feels like Arwin never even considered that an option, though. He kind of just plowed through everything in his way and got what he wanted. I feel like I don’t even deserve the damn class.”

“From what I heard, you’re the one that charged the Wurm. That wasn’t him.”

“He’s the one that set everything up for me, though. I wouldn’t have been able to do any of that on my own.”

“Don’t dismiss your own actions,” Lillia said. “Arwin put you in the situation where you could succeed, but you’re the one that did it. I certainly won’t argue about his determination, though. He’s a force of nature.”

A memory flickered through Lillia’s mind. The crunch of bone giving way under the blade of Arwin’s sword, glowing with immense holy might as he carved through the neck of her closest friends.

Her hands tightened at her sides and turned away from Reya, stepping back into the kitchen. It was difficult to associate the gruff but kind man that had just led them through the dungeon with the Champion of Man.

The Champion of Man had killed everyone she’d ever loved – and yet, he’d risked his life purely to get Reya a class for no reason other than the fact that she hadn’t had one. He’d refused to let a healer he barely knew fall behind, just because it was the wrong thing to do.

If I ever get my hands on the people that turned me and Arwin into murderers, I'm going to rip them to shreds and feed them their own innards.

“Lillia?” Reya asked worriedly. “Are you okay?”

Lillia blinked, unclenching her hands and coming back into the present. The darkness around her had intensified into a thick blanket, completely blocking out the light from the lanterns. She hurriedly dismissed the magic, pushing it as far back as she could and letting the faint glowing lights re-ignite.

“I’m fine,” Lillia said, coughing into her fist. “Just... worked up from the dungeon.”

“Oh, I get that,” Reya said. “It still feels like I’m going to get attacked by a monster at any moment, even though I know that obviously isn’t going to happen in the middle of town. There probably isn’t anywhere safer – from monsters, that is. I could definitely get jumped by someone from the thieves’ guild. Or just about anyone else, for that matter.”

Just how many enemies does Reya have?

Lillia couldn’t keep a laugh from slipping out of her mouth. It was hard to stay angry when Reya’s wide eyes were peering into her.

“Maybe you should make sure that doesn’t happen. It would be a shame if you got injured after all the work you’re doing to get stronger.”

“That’s true,” Reya said with a thoughtful nod. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I think you just did but feel free to ask another.”

“Why do you think Arwin’s bothering with all this?” Reya asked. “He could be rich. He makes *magic* equipment. If he tried to sell his wares, he’d probably be rich in the span of days.

And yet... he sits around with us. He gave me gear worth more than my life, and he didn't even ask for anything in return."

"I'm going to choose not to take offense to that," Lillia said dryly. "And I don't know why Arwin does anything he does. He's an odd one. I think he just does what he thinks is right, regardless of if it's the smart move or not."

"Why, though?" Reya asked. "What does he get out of it? I mean, I appreciate it... but why?"

"That might be something you have to ask him yourself," Lillia said with a shake of her head. The more she spent time with Arwin, the harder it was to associate him with the man she'd spent the majority of her life trying to kill. That was probably a good thing, but it certainly felt odd.

"I might be overstepping my bounds here, but did you really meet for the first time in the tavern? The way you both act seems like you've known each other for a lot longer."

Lillia nearly choked. "I – what? No. No, we definitely just met. He just reminds me of someone I used to know."

"Oh," Reya said. "I guess that makes sense. I honestly thought you'd been courting each other for a few years and broke it off or something like that."

This time, Lillia did choke. She doubled over, coughing into her hand in surprise. "What? Date? No. Definitely not. Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. Just a thought." Reya shrugged. "Well, I'm probably going to go find some food. Not that I'm hungry. It's, uh, to look at."

“Right,” Lillia said dryly, grateful for the change of subject. “You do that.”

Reya headed out of the tavern and Lillia watched her leave, a small frown on her face. Thoughts whirred in her head, so jumbled that she couldn’t make out which ones were hers and which were just strays passing through.

After a minute, she shook her head and turned back to the tentacle on the counter. It looked remarkably unappetizing. Grimacing, Lillia rolled her sleeves back. She had work to do, and she’d be damned if she’d done all the work lugging the stupid thing this far if it didn’t taste good.

I’m going to eat you, and I’m going to like it. That isn’t a threat. It’s a promise.

Oh, who am I kidding. It’s also a threat.

Arwin held a palm-sized crystal up to the light of his [Soul Flame], watching the light dance within its green depths. Before he started properly working the material, he needed to learn more about it.

There was a faint hum within it – the call of the crystal, asking to be turned into... well, something. Therein lay the problem. Arwin could feel the call within the crystal. It hungered to be more than what it was.

Unfortunately, unlike the other materials he’d worked with, he had absolutely no idea how to understand it. The desire was there, but it was like he was listening to someone speaking in a different language.

“But why, I wonder,” Arwin mused, turning the crystal over in his hand. “How come you can’t speak to me? Is it because you’re more complex than the other stuff I’ve worked with? Or am I just not listening properly?”

The crystal, unfortunately, wasn’t much help. Even if it could have answered, Arwin wouldn’t have understood it anyway. He shook his head and set the crystal into the hearth, watching the flames lick at its sides.

Unsurprisingly, it was resistant to fire. Arwin hadn’t expected a bloody crystal to be particularly easy to melt. He worked the bellows, raising the intensity of the fire to see how it affected the green crystal.

Fire danced all around it, licking at its sides. Arwin would have sworn that the fire wasn’t just outside – it was within the crystal as well. But still, the voice of the crystal eluded him entirely.

There was nothing to do but to continue working the bellows, and so that was what he did. And, as the minutes ticked by, the crystal started to change. It was gradual, but its edges started to darken and turn a translucent black.

Arwin stopped as soon as he noticed the change start to happen. He took the crystal from the fire, wondering if he’d somehow managed to burn it. However, the crystal’s structural integrity seemed fine.

He tapped a finger on the side of the crystal. It wasn’t burnt. If anything, it felt like it might have hardened slightly. The greenish-black material was oddly beautiful, and Arwin could just barely make out the faint flickers of flame within the crystal.

“You’re certainly magical,” Arwin murmured, running a finger along the crystal’s smooth surface. “But how do I work with you? I don’t want to waste crystals testing things out. They’re too valuable.”

He chewed his lower lip, still turning the crystal over in his hand. He went to held it up to the daylight, only to find that the sun had already set. It was already dark outside. Arwin’s nose scrunched in annoyance, and he tucked the crystal into his pocket, drawing the [Soul Flame] out of the hearth.

Maybe Lillia will know more about this thing. It can’t hurt to ask.

Arwin moved some scrap metal to cover the pile of crystals as best he could, then thought better of it and collected all his winnings, stuffing his pockets full once more before waddling out of the smithy – making sure to lock the door behind him – and heading for Lillia’s tavern.

Chapter 48

It was, as usual, dark when Arwin stepped through the entrance. Faint lanternlight illuminated the counter, where Arwin was surprised to find Lillia sitting in one of the stools, her head in her hands.

A plate of... something sat before her. It was a gelatinous pile of half-melted flesh, singed black in some parts and semi-raw in others. Evidently, the tentacle Lillia had lugged all the way back to the tavern hadn’t met a fortunate fate.

“Is this a bad time?” Arwin asked.

Lillia turned, looking mildly surprised to find him standing there. “I didn’t realize you got back. Sorry. I was... uh, distracted.”

More like you were in mourning.

Arwin walked over to the stool beside her and tested it to make sure it would hold his weight before sitting down.

“Looks like you cooked the tentacle.”

“Cooked might be the wrong word for it,” Lillia grumbled. “The stupid thing fought me, even in death.”

“It looks like you put up a valiant effort.”

“Yeah, right. I put up a valiant effort and lost.”

Arwin eyed the tentacle. He couldn’t help but agree, but he wasn’t dumb enough to voice that sentiment. “It doesn’t look that bad. At least, parts of it don’t.”

Lillia pierced him with a withering stare. “My feelings aren’t that fragile. You don’t have to lie. It might possibly be the most horrendous thing I’ve put on a plate.”

Arwin, against his better judgement, reached out and picked up one of the more burnt-looking pieces of squid. At least if it was burnt it wouldn’t try to come back alive in his mouth.

Lillia stared in disbelief as he brought it to his mouth and bit down. Arwin chewed slowly – then chewed some more. It wasn’t anything like what he’d expected it to taste like. The meat was somehow simultaneously slimy and unbelievably chewy.

It was, without a doubt, probably the worst textured food that Arwin had ever eaten. After chewing for about another minute, he gave up the battle and swallowed the piece. Despite its horrid mouthfeel, the taste wasn't *atrocious*.

"Wow," Lillia said, blinking. "I'm impressed, honestly. I didn't think—"

Arwin took another piece. Lillia's mouth nearly dropped open as he ate. She squinted at him, then stood up to walk around him and see if he was somehow hiding the squid with slight of hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Eating," Arwin replied through a mouthful of squid.

"Why?"

"Because it's food. And, once you get past the texture, it's not all that bad. The flavor is actually decent."

"Bullshit," Lillia said, crossing her arms. "It's horrible. Objectively horrible."

Arwin swallowed the second piece of squid and took a third. He arched an eyebrow, locking eyes with Lillia as he brought it to his mouth and popped it in. Arwin chewed deliberately, making sure she could see him eating it. "There are good sides to most things."

Lillia's belief changed to a different emotion. Arwin couldn't quite tell which one it was — but it was an emotion he'd never seen on her face before. Before he could even try to properly read it, she brought her features under control once more.

"I suppose so. You won't catch me eating it, though."

“More for me.” Arwin took another piece of squid and ate it. With his other hand, he pulled out the blackened crystal and waggled it in the air.

“What’s this?” Lillia asked. “The crystals from the cave?”

“I was hoping you might know something about it,” Arwin replied through a mouthful of squid, doing his best to not spray food everywhere while he spoke. “It seems slightly magical.”

Lillia reached out and took the crystal from him, a small frown creasing her lips as she held it up to the light of the lantern. The flames from the forge still flickered within it like a layered mural, dancing in waves of green.

“It’s beautiful,” Lillia murmured. “Hard, too. It feels slightly magic resistant.”

“Resistant?” Arwin swallowed his food. “I was thinking the opposite.”

“No, it’s definitely resistant,” Lillia said. One of her nails, as black as the night, elongated into a thin point and she tapped it against the green material. “I don’t know that much about it, but magical resistant and absorptive materials are usually a circle. You start with something that absorbs magic, and it absorbs all the energy it can until there’s no room left. Then boom – resistant.”

“I see,” Arwin mused. “I never knew that, but I wasn’t exactly the most involved with the actual materials I used. I was more interested with seeing what could be made with them.”

“I had a friend who was really interested in gemstones,” Lillia said, lowering the crystal and handing it back to Arwin as her brow creased. “Particularly magical ones.”

Arwin didn’t ask what had happened to the friend – he was pretty sure he knew.

“Would it be possible for this resistance to cause them to be harder to work with?”

“If you’ve got some form of magical fire, sure. You’d probably have to work really fast if you’re making something magical,” Lillia mused, chewing her lower lip. “If you couldn’t finish by the time the crystal completely filled, it would probably become very hard to influence or change.”

And I’d be willing to bet it would be borderline impossible to understand as well. That’s it. I need to add the crystals last, not first. That doesn’t actually solve my issue understanding what they want, but if I introduce them to the project at the proper time, I’d be willing to bet I’ll be able to understand what they want far better.

“I think you might have just solved my issue,” Arwin said, sliding the crystal back into his pocket. “Thanks, Lillia. What do I owe you for the food?”

“I feel like I should be the one asking *you* that,” Lilla muttered, sending a glance over at the plate of squid. “Thank you, though.”

“Thanks? For what?” Arwin asked, blinking in confusion.

“Never mind.” Lillia shook her head and waved her hands dismissively. “I’ve got prep to do for tomorrow. Go to your room – or back to your smithy, depending on whichever you’re going to be doing tonight. Somehow, I think I’ve already guessed which one it will be.”

Arwin chuckled and nodded to her, turning to head out the door. “Probably. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Lillia replied, picking the plate of food up and heading toward the kitchen. Arwin stepped out of the tavern and made a beeline back for his smithy.

The excitement in his steps faltered slightly as he drew closer, recalling a slightly significant issue. He may have had crystals to work with, but he didn't have any material to make the rest of the hammer with.

Sure, I could use the crappy scrap metal I've got, but that would be such a waste with the quality of these crystals. I need to use something nicer... but what? Maybe I should go shopping tomorrow. More importantly, I really need to start selling some of my normal pieces. I keep telling myself I'm going to do it and not getting around to it.

Arwin let his thoughts entertain him as he headed back down the street. He was so caught up in them that he almost didn't notice the figure standing at the entrance of the smithy – almost. Arwin skidded to a stop and narrowed his eyes, nearly dropping into a fighting stance before he realized that the figure was just Reya with a bag over her shoulder.

“God, Reya,” Arwin said, shaking his head. “What are you doing? I thought you'd be asleep by now.”

“I was busy,” Reya replied, holding the sack out to him. The movement caused it to clink and sway precariously. “Here!”

“What's this?” Arwin asked, accepting the sack. It was considerably heavier than he'd been expecting and he nearly dropped it in surprise.

“Well, you spent so much effort trying to help me get a class that I figured I'd try to do something back. I may have stumbled into a little gold, so I went shopping earlier today. Looked around for some good material for you,” Reya said, shifting her feet. “I don't know if it'll be useful, but I know you've been trying to get better metal.”

Arwin opened the top of the sack and peered inside. There were several glistening silver rods as well as a dozen bars of the same metal.

“Reya, this is incredible,” Arwin said, lowering the bag to look back to her. “How did you know I needed this? I was just thinking—”

“You’ve kind of been muttering it under your breath the whole time you work,” Reya said with a relieved grin. “It’s useful, then?”

“It’s definitely better than anything else I’ve got,” Arwin said with a huge grin. “This is exactly what I need. Do you know what kind of metal it is?”

Reya nodded. “It’s called Brightsteel. Not to be confused with Starsteel – that stuff is actually from the stars. This is more just... pretty metal, I guess. It’s pretty sturdy, but the smith that sold it to me said it was great for the internals of weapons. It’s apparently pretty decent at hitting things. I didn’t really understand more than that, but hopefully it will be useful.”

“It most certainly will be,” Arwin said. “Thank you, Reya. How much was this?”

“You don’t want to know,” Reya replied. “Don’t expect more of it anytime soon, though.”

“Noted,” Arwin said as he slung the bag over his shoulder and unlocked the door to the smithy. “I appreciate it. If things go like I hope, I’m going to be making something really important with this.”

“Magic?” Reya whispered, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

“We’ll see,” Arwin replied with a chuckle. “For now, it’s just a hope.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it, then. I’m going to go sleep now, so I’ll see you tomorrow – or whenever you finish smithing.”

“Probably the latter,” Arwin said. He bid Reya goodnight and headed into the smithy. As soon as he drew up to the forge, Arwin dumped the crystals out of his pockets and emptied the metal from the bag beside them.

He then drew a spark of [Soul Flame] from his chest and sent it into the hearth, filling the smithy with flickering light. Arwin picked up one of the pieces of metal and held it up before him, the flame illuminating the smile that stretched across his lips.

It was time to make his hammer.

Chapter 49

Arwin was delighted. Almost as if in spite of the crystal’s stubbornness, the metal that Reya had brought him was perfect. Every blow of his hammer landed exactly the way he wanted it to, and the handle of his hammer was taking shape perfectly.

The Brightsteel didn’t just speak to him. It sang, and all he had to do was listen. His hammer rang again and again against the metal, coaxing it into position with every blow. Arwin almost felt as if the metal were forging itself, and he was just the tool with which it used to become more.

Either way, he certainly wasn’t going to complain. The hard part of this piece – both figuratively and literally – was going to be adding the crystals into the head of the hammer. But that would come when it came.

For now, the only thing Arwin was concerned with was listening to the Brightsteel. Time passed, and the night slowly started to fade as dawn approached outside. Faint slivers of light broke into the forge, but Arwin barely noticed them.

He'd finished forming the handle of the hammer and was now onto combining the ingots to form the head. Arwin hadn't exactly determined how large he wanted the head of the hammer to be.

A larger one would be better for crushing things with, but he wasn't going to be able to use it to forge if it was too big. He couldn't deny that the idea of having a weapon that he could both craft and fight with was quite tantalizing.

It seemed like the metal agreed. As Arwin rained down blows on the glowing portions of the Brightsteel, a shape started to take form. The head of a hammer, large on one end and focused on the other.

And yet, as it took form, Arwin could immediately tell that it was incomplete. The Brightsteel knew his thoughts just as well as he knew its, and the hammer was meant to be built around the glowing crystals, not just pure metal.

A flicker of concern gripped Arwin as he let his hammer lower and grabbed a handful of crystals. If he made a mistake here, something told him that he wasn't going to be able to recover. The hammer would be ruined, and he'd have to try to rip it apart and salvage what materials he could.

That degree of loss will delay for me days, if not more. It'll probably ruin the crystals as well.

This wasn't the time for concern, though. Concern meant he was leaving the possibility of failure on the table, and that wasn't how things worked. There could be no doubt. No room to even consider anything but his goals would be accomplished.

If he allowed such thoughts to creep into his head, then it would have been no different from insulting the materials he was working with. They held all the potential he needed to make the perfect weapon, so it was unfair to disparage them.

Arwin laid the hammer to the side, leaving its head buried deeply within the heat of his [Soul Flame] within the forge. He needed to pick out the right crystals to use, and they all had to be inserted in conjunction. If he did them one at a time, they'd lock up and stop absorbing magic before the item was complete.

It took Arwin about ten minutes to select all the crystals. He wasn't exactly sure which metric he judged them by beyond his gut, but he eventually found himself staring at a small pile of glistening green stone.

He still couldn't quite understand what they wanted, but there was desire within them. Just like the Brightsteel, the crystals desired to be used.

"You and I," Arwin informed the crystals, cupping them in his hands. "I may not be able to hear your voice in the same way as that of the metal, but perhaps it can translate for me, eh?"

Arwin pulled the hammer from the flames. Its head glowed red hot, barely still holding its shape from the heat that had been beating down on it. Wasting no time, Arwin picked up the first of the crystals and pressed it into the head, using [Scourge] to make himself strong enough to drive past the metal.

It wasn't the most elegant forging method, but it worked. The crystal sank deep. And, to Arwin's delight, he felt a flicker from within the weapon. It wasn't quite a song, much less a word or any form of guidance, but it was a flicker of approval.

That was all he needed. Arwin grabbed the other crystals and got to work, driving them into the head of the hammer. He felt the Brightsteel shifting as he worked, trying to accommodate the new material entering it.

Arwin worked as fast as he dared without risking a mistake, piling the crystals into the hammer before embedding one right below where the head connected with the shaft. As an afterthought, Arwin also added a crystal to the bottom of the shaft.

It's practical, but that doesn't mean it can't look pretty.

Arwin set the hammer down on the anvil, grabbing his old smithing hammer and setting back to work as parts of his new weapon called to him, asking for help. The ring of metal rang out through the dilapidated smithy once more.

The sun continued to rise outside, the rays of light squeezing through the cracks in the walls growing stronger as they lit up the smithy. They passed over the hammer, causing metal and crystal to glimmer in unison.

Arwin plunged the hammer back into his hearth, letting the flame scorch the crystal and meld it together with the Brightsteel. The Mesh tingled at his fingertips, racing down his arm and into his heart.

He pulled the hammer free of the fire, his heart racing as power gathered around the newly forged weapon. Even as it started to cool, Arwin felt the Mesh intensify. The prickling turned into a pulse, and Arwin's hair stood on end as the air became charged.

Ozone filled the air as a pop rang out and a delighted laugh escaped Arwin's lips. Golden writing erupted before him and the Mesh finally acknowledged his creation in true. He felt a faint question tickle at the back of his mind as the achievement he'd earned for scaring off the Wyrms felt an opportunity to take hold.

Arwin sent a thought of approval without a second of hesitation.

[Verdant Blaze: Unique Quality] has been forged. Forging a magical item has granted you energy.

[Shieldbreaker] has been consumed.

Title: [Stonesinger] has been earned.

[Stonesinger] – *You crafted an Awoken item with a magical component that was beyond your comprehension, and your efforts have attuned you to the whispers of the world. If you listen close enough, you can speak with magical materials – though they may not wish to reply.*

"I'll be damned," Arwin breathed, not even daring to look away from the Mesh's words in case it decided to take his title away from him. It was vague, but everything he knew about crafting had already come from just barely being able to pick up on the desires of the material he worked with.

I always assumed that it was just the Mesh guiding me, or that the materials kind of had some vague sense of desire. I didn't realize that magical components could literally speak with me. They could tell me exactly what I need to do to make the perfect item with them! This is incredible.

That wasn't it, though. Arwin's eyes caught on the Mesh once more. It hadn't said he'd crafted just a Unique item. He'd made an Awoken one. A delighted grin stretched across his lips and he nearly pumped a hand in the air with delight.

Arwin waved the window away, then quickly summoned his status to make sure the title remained. After confirming that it had, he turned his gaze to the newly forged hammer in his hands.

It felt right. The hammer had a weight to it, but not so much that it would be unwieldy to use. The large, fighting head had crystals jutting out of it, their points blackened and dancing with faint flame.

Its other side had a single crystal, turned flat side out so he could use it to strike metal without putting holes in it. The perfect blend of combat and crafting capabilities, condensed into a single weapon.

The Mesh bloomed as Arwin inspected the hammer.

Verdant Blaze: Unique Quality

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

[Shieldbreaker]: This weapon hungers to destroy. Every consecutive blow against the same target will deal marginally increased damage. Changing targets or blocking an attack with this weapon will reset any power that Shieldbreaker has generated.

[Firestarter]: This weapon is one with the fire used to forge it. It will drink in [Soul Flame], imbuing its blows with it at the cost of magical energy.

[Unique]: This item was created for Arwin Tyrr, and it will never know another owner. This item will attempt to burn anyone who attempts to wield it other than its owner. Information about this item may be hidden from others after it has bonded.

“Now that,” Arwin breathed, letting the Mesh fade as he held the hammer before him, delight in his eyes, “is one hell of a hammer.”

Chapter 50

22 gold 9 silver

Gold is about 50 bucks, roughly.