

Chapter 6

When Kyra knocked on Brennan's door the next morning he already had a map of the Great Continent out on the table. It was clearly a divers map as lairs were the primary feature, marked with colors and scales to denote difficulty and equipment variety. The cities were a secondary concern, noted by simple labeling. Brennan stood from the table and opened the door for the younger, less experienced, diver and immediately returned to his seat.

"Good morning Brennan." Kyra said as she stepped in, following the dark haired man into his room.

"Good morning." He responded, sitting back down without another word.

Kyra walked further into the room, her pack strapped onto her back. As she got closer to the table she shrugged the leather and cloth pack off of her shoulders and put it on the ground, leaning it on the table leg.

"This... is a detailed map." Kyra commented after she studied it for a moment. "Where did you get it?"

"Bought it off a retiring diver. He didn't need it and I happened to have some spare steel coins."

"I'd say it was worth it..." She responded, trailing off before continuing. "Why do you have it out?"

"I was trying to plan out exactly where we would be going next ." He said simply. "There isn't much reason to hang around any more, we would be wasting our time."

"Why?"

"Because everyone knows what happened and no one will hire us around here for at least a few months."

Brennan stretched and walked over to the small water pot, pouring himself some water before sitting back down and continuing.

"The guild takes strange lair activity seriously. Every person who checks in at the guild hall for the next few months will be informed that the wolf lair had a bad dive that resulted in two people dying." Brennan explained. "They will also tell them who died and who survived."

"What?! But thats... thats..."

"It's perfectly fair." Brennan insisted. "Other divers have a right to know that a dive went bad. The guild has probably already requested our records to see if we have had other dives gone bad recently. It's to keep people from corpse farming."

Kyra winced at the phrase, having heard it from her father, probably as a curse or an insult. Corpse farmers either joined teams or hired fillers to let them die to loot their bodies. It carried a hefty punishment if you got caught, the same as murder. Eventually the harvester parsed through what Brennan had said and she looked at him.

"Your worried Lord Cowan will hear about you."

"I'm not worried he will, I know he will." He assured her. "Lord Cowan may not be a high noble but he is rich, charismatic and absolutely ruthless. He has ears all over the continent and the news that I am here in Primonte will reach his ears eventually. The only reason I'm not panicking is because it will take some time for the news to get to him. I have three, maybe four days.

"If Lord Cowan has spies in the guild, why doesn't he already know where you are?"

"Because guild halls don't communicate very often." Brennan explained, still looking down at the map. "There are a few reasons why, but the biggest is that there isn't much point to it. There are only a few times when the guilds will always communicate, and one of them is when a diver dies in a lair."

"When else?" Kyra asks, finally taking a seat at the table next to the more experienced diver.

"When there is a lair mutation, an outbreak or a nearby emergence." Brennan explained, but sighed when Kyra looked at him confused. "When a lair spontaneously changes, when an untended lair breaks open and releases its lair beasts or when a new lair shows up."

"I knew what an outbreak and an emergence was." Kyra insisted, pouting slightly. "Was what happened... was it a mutation?"

"No, it was honestly just really bad luck. A mutation is when something truly chaotic happens. Like a different type of lair beast showing up, or the environment changing. I've never actually seen a mutation personally, but about five years ago a lair to the south mutated and stayed that way. It used to be filled with giant eagles, now it's some sort of reptilian humanoid."

The duo went quiet for a few minutes, Brennan focused on the map and Kyra dwelling on their last dive. Eventually she shook her head and focused on Brennan.

"So where are we going then?"

“Well... as I see it we have two choices, upstream or downstream.” He answered. “We hop on a ship, pay a little bribe and ride along with them. Mercenaries will have a hard time figuring out which way we went because a captain is supposed to pay taxes on passengers so they don't want to admit they had any.”

Kyra looked at Brennan with a raised brow. When Brennan noticed he shrugged with a smirk.

“I told you I've been on the run for a while, it would be weird if I didn't know what I was doing at this point. Anyway, up river is a large town called Serra with a small lair that we could run by ourselves, though we wouldn't. It's known for its helmets, which we could both use.”

As Brennan talked he trailed his finger up the Fremarch River on the map, along a short road to a green dot..

“Alternatively we could go downstream, get off at the Farna Passway, a rope ferry system with a dock on both sides. It connects a road that we can follow to Trenia. We can stay there, complete the nearest lairs a few times before deciding where to go next.” Brennan explained, pointing out the places on the map as he talked. “It's a longer trip and more of it would be on land, but there are a few easy lairs in that area, two of which are known for armor and one that is known for shields, which you desperately need. Honestly my armor could use an upgrade as well.”

“How much longer would the trip to Trenia be?” Kyra asked, watching as Brennan pointed out the path.

“Upstream would probably be three days. Downstream will be five at least, probably more with three or more on land. On the upside we could do some hunting, maybe earn some coins if we find some easy beasts.”

“I came from upstream, if that matters.”

“Downstream it is then.” He said with a nod. “It's probably nothing but backtracking is a bad idea in general. You would be surprised how many people notice that kind of stuff.”

“So... are we leaving today?”

“I need to go to a few shops, buy a pack, some travel food.” Brennan responded. “But if we get lucky and a ship is willing to let us stow away then we might get out of here by tonight, yes.”

“A pack? Why would you need a pack when you have your satchel?”

“Because the only thing that makes storage equipment more obvious than pulling something out that is larger than the bag, is traveling with no pack. Both of us will be carrying a full pack, even if we only put in the lightest stuff.”

Kyra nodded, looking at the satchel that Brennan had seemed to habitually keep close to himself, always in arms reach. He also purposely didn't look directly at it often, instead only looking over it and double checking it in his peripheral vision.

“Would people really steal it from you?” She eventually asked. “I understand that the spell your grimoire has is... game changing. But would people really be so quick to steal your satchel?”

For a long moment Brennan was quiet, considering her words before taking a deep breath and releasing it.

“In all honesty, there are plenty of groups who wouldn't. I would even agree that those groups would be the significant majority. Plenty would offer to buy it, though it would be a sign of idiocy, there is no way anyone short of a noble could even come close to what it is actually worth.” He admitted. “I'll admit... being alone for so long makes it easy to default to paranoia. But it's not completely unfounded. Hell, stealing it isn't even the only problem it can make, that I know from experience. ”

“What happened?”

“I mentioned my first group was... not exactly kind?” He started, getting a nod from Kyra. “I was in two groups after that. The last group, we were pretty friendly. It was three filler pairs and myself, a group of seven.”

“Is... that a normal size?”

“It's at the high end honestly. You occasionally see larger groups but they tend to break up into smaller teams to dive.” Brennan explained, before continuing. “Anyway, at some point we dive and we stumble on a river, and the bottom was littered with copper ore. Not exactly a king's ransom but a decent addition to our profits. Only problem was...”

“Hauling it out.”

“Exactly. Someone had already started talking about using our clothes as extra sacks when I spoke up. They reacted better than I could have hoped. No jealousy and no greed, everyone was just happy that we had some more room. We walked out with several irons worth of copper ore in my bag and I thought I had found a group I could stay with.”

“That's... Good?”

“It was for a bit. Then they started realizing how powerful such a large piece of storage equipment could be. They realized how much people would actually pay for it.” He explained, sighing before continuing. “Kyra, I’ve filled an entire cart’s worth of stuff into my bag. It wasn’t full. My grimoire might be literally priceless but the bag is worth five, maybe ten platinum.”

Kyra’s jaw dropped, her eyes looking down at the intentionally dirtied bag. It looked unassuming and simple, even under the stains and extra leather. Unbeknownst to her, Brennan was watching her closely, watching her expression. He smiled a bit at her honest response.

“No wonder you’re so paranoid.” She muttered when she had recovered, focusing back on Brennan. “So what happened when they realized?”

“They started getting possessive.” He answered with a shrug. “Acting like it was the group’s bag instead of mine. Which honestly I wouldn’t have minded. If the price of a solid, trustworthy team was communal ownership I wouldn’t even have batted an eye. But I caught them a few times talking behind my back about how I was hogging the bag, that I should let other people carry it. The last straw was when I caught them discussing what my cut would be if they sold it. They all nodded along when someone said that because I had enjoyed having it longer I should get a smaller cut. I left that night without saying a word.”

”

The room was quiet for a while as Brennan looked down at his hands, leaning forward on the table. Kyra had watched as he had slowly shrank in on himself, his stature going from upright and alert to hunched over and oblivious. He looked up when moved, her chair scratching back as she turned and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him into a hug. Eventually, after a few moments she pulled back, shaking her head, a frown on her face.

“I’m sorry they put you through that Brennan...”

“I could have handled it better.” He admitted with a shrug. “I never put my foot down about it, never explained why I didn’t sell it. I underestimated how much it was really worth too in all honesty. If I had known... I might have never mentioned it. I don’t think everyone is like that, I don’t think you are like that. But... that much money is a lot to just ignore.”

“... why don’t you sell it?” Kyra asked, leaning back in her seat.

“Spite.” He answered easily with a slightly dark chuckle. “Every day I carry it is a day that bastard can’t buy, lie, cheat or steal until it’s back in his hands.”

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.” Kyra said with a nod.

The room was once again quiet for a minute before Brennan stood.

“Okay, glve me a minute to get ready.” He said, stepping into his room. “Then we can go do some shopping.”

True to his word he returned a minute or so later, wearing normal everyday clothes. He picked up his satchel and looped its strap around his shoulder, while hooking the bag itself to his belt.

“Alright, the first stop should be the merchant square.” He said, before looking down at Kyras backpack. “I already have most of my own traveling equipment and I assume you have most of what you need? I see a bed roll back there at least.”

“Just the basics.”

“Okay, which means we just need food and supplies.”

Kyra stood from her chair and started to pick up her own pack but Brennan stopped her.

“I'll have plenty of room once I get a pack, no reason for you to lug it around just yet.” He explained. “We can get the basics and come back here. Do you need to go back to where you are staying?”

“It sounded like you were eager to get out of here so I didn't leave anything behind.” She admitted, a little embarrassed. “I was living out of my bag anyway.”

“Good instincts. I'm hoping we can leave tonight.”

The two made their way out of the boarding house and back into the city, cutting their way through semi crowded streets. Eventually they made it to a small market square, where merchants sold their goods from covered stalls and laid out mats. Brennan headed into the square with confidence, heading to one of the back corners.

“There is a guy who sometimes has lower end lair equipment.” He said, leaning over and talking softly to Kyra. “It's usually crap, but it's good to check.”

Kyra looked at him in confusion why he cared about crap equipment when the answer dawned on her, even crap could be used to improve another item. Eventually the two arrived at a small, barely held together stall with a shifty looking hunched over man behind the counter.

“Ah! Brennan, welcome back.” The man greeted with a smile. “Looking for something in particular.”

“I don't know, have you gotten anything new?”

“As a matter of fact I do!” The peddler said with a sleazy smile, reaching under the counter to pull out a box. “I managed to buy this off a diver just yesterday. A healing gem! It’s a bit on the... weaker side, but definitely a healing gem.”

The peddler lifted the cover off of a box to reveal a palm sized blue stone that just barely glowed inside the box. The stall owner reached in and pulled it out, showing the stone off to Brennan, who turned his head to Kyra and gestured to the stone. She blinked for a moment before catching on.

“Oh! Right, yeah.” Kyra reached out with one hand, putting the other on her amulet, focusing for a moment. Her amulet glowed softly, as did her hand. “It is a healing stone... but it’s very weak. Once a day maybe, and nothing much worse than a scratch.”

“Hmm... how much do you want it for?” Brennan asked, distracting the peddler from looking at Kyra.

“One silver.” The peddler said. “It is healing equipment after all.”

“A useless one by the sounds of it.” Brennan responded. “I’ll give you four steel.”

“Seven steel.”

“Five steel.”

“...fine. But only because you embarrassed Reyla last time you came through.”

Brennan chuckled and reached into his bag, pulling out five shiny steel pieces and putting it on the counter. The peddler passed the stone to Brennan, who slipped it into his satchel.

“Thank you for your business.” The peddler said with a smile.

Brennan nodded and stepped away, giving the peddler a nod before heading back into the merchant square. Kyra was a bit dazed by the quick exchange of money.

“Was that really worth five steel?” She asked as she followed behind. “I mean even if you found a use for it...”

“You’ll learn pretty quickly, Kyra, diving is an expensive job. You make a lot and you spend a lot doing it. You stick with it long enough and gold coins start seeming normal. Marla’s amulet was worth at least a few gold coins.”

“I... had no idea.” Kyra admitted, looking around. “Are you looking for a specific stall?”

“No, but this is where the good deals are. If we can't find anything of good quality I know a leather shop nearby. So keep your eye out.”

The two wove through the populated area eventually finding a nice leather pack for Brennan, before heading off to buy travel safe food. By the time they got back to the boarding house the sun was high in the sky. Brennan put his now full pack on the table before they headed back out to find a captain willing to let them stow away.

Chapter 7

The docks were noisy, smelly and a constant bustle of activity. Even the parts that weren't filled with hauling cargo or offloading fish and other goods were filled with people rushing from place to place. The boats moored along the huge network of docks varied in size from small fishing vessels to much larger merchant ships. Even a few ocean ready ships were squeezed in, having traveled upriver from there to do business inland through the deep Fremarch River. As Brennan and Kyra wove their way through the rushing crowds they had to compete with several fishmongers and a few other merchants selling food and drink to sailors. Eventually Brennan pointed to a row of medium sized fishing vessels, all docked in a row.

“Let's try those over there.” He said, getting a nod from Kyra.

The two made their way to the slightly slower paced dock, walking down a set of stairs, now standing over actual water. The first boat was empty, at least the deck was. Kyra mentioned maybe going to knock on the door below deck but Brennan shook his head.

“If they were looking for company they would have someone on the deck. Everyone is either out in the city or huddled below, either way they dont want to talk to us.”

The second vessel had a single crewmate on deck, and had apparently just arrived. It had no plans to leave the dock for another few days at least. The two finally got lucky at the second to last vessel. This one had a few crew on deck, as well as a relatively well dressed captain pouring over paperwork.

“Hello! Could I speak to the captain?” Brennan called out, still standing on the dock.

The captain looked up at the two and raised an eyebrow. He made his way closer and leaned on the railing of his boat. He studied the two for a moment before speaking.

“Well?” He asked simply, eying them both.

“My name is Travis and this is Laura, We were hoping to talk to you about hiring you...”

“We are busy preparing for our next trip out, and we don’t do pleasure cruises.”

The crew chuckled at a joke the two divers didn't get, but Brennan simply smiled back.

“Your next trip out, it wouldn't happen to be down stream would it?” He asked. “Maybe all the way to the Farna Passway?”

“...We were considering going that far. The fish are running in that area this time of year.” The captain admitted. “What's your interest in it?”

“We need a ride to the passway. We would be willing to pay say... three steel to sleep on your deck?”

The captain considered it for a moment, studying the two before squinting.

“Four steel now and two more when we get there.”

“Three now and one when we get there.” Brennan countered. “Safely.”

“Ha! Like I would be dumb enough to threaten a pair of divers.” He said with a barking laugh. “Alright. We are leaving in the next few hours, and we won't be feeding you.”

“We will return in an hour.” Brennan said with a nod. “And I didn't expect you to.”

The captain reached over the edge of the boat and Brennan leaned forward as well, the two shaking hands before the captain turned around and went back to his crew. They both overheard the captain mention something about getting an extra barrel of drink for the crew as they walked away.

The two divers made their way back to Brennan's boarding house, stopping to buy some food from a vendor, returning to his room with their meals. Brennan quickly rolled up the map and stuck it in a protective leather tube, sliding it into his satchel before sitting down to eat.

“So that was a lot easier than I thought it was going to be.” Kyra admitted, after finally finishing off her simple chicken sandwich. “Why did you lie about our names?”

“Because now they can spread our names as much as they want and no one will recognize them.” Brennan explained, already having finished his lunch. “It happens a lot more than you think.”

“Why did you pay them so much?” She asked.

A lot of people are willing to be flexible for a diver who is willing to spend money.” Brennan explained. “Besides, four steel is something I can make in a day, without even diving. To them, a single steel is something they can expect to make in a few days.”

As they talked Brennan started emptying his pack, splitting up some of the food and supplies they had bought between the two packs. He also pulled a few things out of his satchel, including a bedroll, which he attached to the bottom of his newly purchased leather pack with built-in straps.

“If we are lucky we will get to the passway tomorrow afternoon or the next morning.” Brennan explained. “We can go hunting for food and probably buy some fish off of the crew if we get desperate.”

Brennan started putting on his armor, having finished organizing his pack. Kyra watched him for a moment before looking at her already packed up armor.

“You’re going to want to wear most of your armor, especially when we are traveling through unfamiliar areas.” He explained. “You can wear it loose for comfort, and leave off anything uncomfortable, but it should be on you. It’s easier to carry that way, it can save your life in an ambush and looking like you’re ready to fight will dissuade any opportunistic thieves.”

Kyra nodded and slowly put on most of her armor, though it wasn’t much. It was still the same homemade green leather armor that she had worn previously.

“We are going to the armor dungeon a few times when we get there to Trenia, At least until we get you some chest armor.” Brennan said emphatically. “The fact that you made this by hand is impressive, but it really can’t compare with lair armor. What’s it made out of anyway?”

“Wyvern leather.” She said, smirking when Brennan’s eyes got bigger. “It was left overs from someone making some sort of carriage. I got it for cheap because to them it was scraps anyway.”

“But just big enough for you to make into armor.” Brennan nodded along. “That’s not bad, definitely better than normal leather. Maybe we could bring it to a leather worker and have it turned into a cloak or something when we get you something better. Speaking of which…”

Brennan reached down into his satchel and pulled out two tightly bundled rolls of cloth, one a dark blue and the other a dark green. He unclipped the pin that kept them rolled up and shook them open, offering the now revealed cloaks to Kyra, clearly intending for her to pick one. They were pretty well made and the dye looked well applied. When she protested he shook his head.

“One of the best benefits of having this satchel is when I see a really good deal I can take advantage without worrying about my carry load.” He explained. “I have a dozen more in

here and I got them for very cheap. If I remember correctly I got these from a merchant whose cart fell apart on the road. He was selling stuff to lighten the load.”

“... Alright, fine.” Kyra said after a minute, taking the dark green cloak and throwing it over her shoulder, fighting a bit to get it over her pack, but eventually succeeding. “But I’m paying you back for this.”

“Of course you are.” Brennan said with a scoff. “Trust me, you will be earning your keep. But you asked me to be your mentor and... I’m going to take that seriously. Even if I still think you’re crazy for choosing me.”

Brennan threw his cloak on with a practiced motion, pulling it around his shoulder and clipping the pin through to secure it. It looked a bit odd with his pack still on, but settled on fine. They both spent a few minutes making sure everything was secure before Brennan grabbed his shield and left, making their way back to the docks.

The fishing vessel didn’t leave on its journey down stream for another hour after they arrived. Brennan almost immediately found a small space to sit, leaning back against the bulwark of the vessel while Kyra stood next to him, her head on a constant swivel. She watched as the workers adjusted sails, pulled on riggings and kept busy all over the ship. Everyone was constantly doing something.

“There is so much going on.” She commented about a half hour into the trip. “I had no idea there were so many moving parts on a boat.”

“It will calm down when everything is set up.” Brennan said, his eyes closed. “Just don’t get in their way.”

Kyra nodded, turning around to watch the passing landscape. They had left the city behind almost immediately and were now passing by the occasional farm and estate. Eventually they left even that behind, only untamed wilderness surrounding them. Eventually Kyra sat down beside Brennan, before pulling out what looked like a journal from her pack.

“What are you reading?” Brennan asked after waking up from a shallow nap.

“My father’s journal.” She explained, not looking up from it. “He made a lot of notes about harvesting. I’ve read it a few times at this point but I still like to brush up on it.”

“I remember seeing you consulting something inside the lair, when you examined the flowers.”

"Yeah, it was this." She answered with a nod. "I have two other small books on harvesting but my father filled his journal with all sorts of tricks and information."

"Well I'm glad you checked it." He said with a yawn. "That ambush could have been even worse if we hadn't realized we were getting too much good stuff too quickly."

Kyra gave Brennan a small, sad smile and closed the book, sliding it back into her pack before buckling it shut. She leaned back against the bulwark with Brennan, letting out a soft sigh. After a good while Brennan sat up with a light groan, standing and turning back to help Kyra up as well.

"What?" She asked as he pulled her up by her hand. "Is something wrong?"

"No no, nothings wrong." He assured her. "Do you remember what I said about how harvester fight?"

"That we don't." She said, still confused, but still easily remembering what he said. "If we get hurt it could prevent us from harvesting properly."

"Exactly. A harvester fighting should be an absolute last resort." He explained, leaning down to grab his shield before turning back. "Standard harvester equipment is a dagger or knife and a shield. I know you have a knife, was it your equipment?"

"Yes, it was my fathers." She answered before adding. "It ignores armor, lets me cut thick hides like its normal leather."

Brennan's eyes went wide and he quickly looked over his shoulder. Finding none of the crew close enough to hear what she said he steps closer.

"If anyone asks, tell them it just cuts better than normal." He says in a hushed tone. "Weapons that ignore armor are highly coveted. Your dad must have been very lucky or paid an arm and a leg for it."

"O-Oh, okay. I guess that makes sense. Sorry, I didn't know."

"It's fine, just something to keep in mind." He reassured her with a smile. "Now, do you have any experience with a shield?"

"... No... I don't."

"That's alright, I'll just have to teach you."

Brennan slipped his shield onto his arm, leaving it loose for now. He raised it up in front of himself, settling into a simple stance.

“Now every shield type is different, but a heater shield like this is the most common.” He explained motioning for her to come closer. “The first rule of shield use is simple. Keep the shield between you and the thing trying to kill you.”

When Kyra was close enough Brennan gestured for her arm. When she held it out he pulled off his shield and slipped it onto her arm, tightening the thick leather strap. Once she was holding it she could feel herself getting a bit stronger, her eyes going a bit wide as she felt it.

“I assume that look means you noticed strength improvement?” He asked, getting a nod in return. “Good. Try not to get used to it, it's not that useful of an ability for a harvester.”

“Why not?” She couldn't help but ask.

“Because you're not supposed to be attacking. A good one for a harvester is some sort of speed improvement, or durability.” He explained with a small smile before stepping back. “Okay! So different types of shields require different types of movements, and if the shield can do something you have to be flexible around that, but the basics stay the same.”

“The shield goes between me and what's trying to kill me?”

“Exactly.” Brennan said with a chuckle. “Now be careful not to activate anything. Our companions might get a little upset if you sink their boat.”

Brennan was smirking but Kyra looked pale at the mention of what the shield could do. When she noticed he was holding back another chuckle she cursed at him. When they had both recovered Brennan continued.

“Now the key to blocking things is simple. You have to keep a low stance and give slightly with the blow.”

As he talked Brennan helps her settle into a lower position, showing her how far her feet should be away from each other and that her back foot should be behind. He showed her how to use her whole body to absorb an impact, and how to brace with both arms, her free arm behind the shield as well.

“What happens when you get attacked with magic?”

He eventually asked, pushing at the shield as she held him back. He was holding back considerably and she could tell, though the extra strength from the shield was definitely helping.

“What type of magic?”

“I don't know, what type of magic is it?”

“How would I know? I know next to nothing about magic” She asked, looking confused. “And you asked the question.”

“Exactly. Rule of thumb is to always dodge unknown magic.” He said easily. “Remember what happened to Tary? As brutal as that was, he tried to block that flame with a shield and what happened?”

“I-It got him anyway.”

“Exactly. If you don’t know what your opponent is using, assume it’s something you can’t block. We can work on rolls and dodges when we have more room but its still something you should keep in your mind.”

Kyra went quiet as her memories of Tary’s death played in her head.

“He saved Marla’s life though.” She eventually pointed out.

“That he did.” Brennan agreed, standing out of his stance. “He seemed like a good man.”

The two were both quiet for a few more moments, Kyra letting their shield arm go limp.

“Do you think Marla and Ward are okay?” She asked eventually.

“I do. They both had a small fortune of gear equipment on them. If they were smart they would sell all their armor and weapons and use the money to buy a second healing item, sell the healing charges at their village. It’s not an unpopular retirement plan for some divers.”

“But... will they recover... from losing two of their friends like that?”

“That... I don’t know. But if they stick together... and their family is supportive when they get back home... They should be okay. Now come on, a few more things and then we can be done. The sun is almost set.”

Brennan showed Kyra a few more tips about defending herself with a shield, including the first steps in how to use it as a weapon if necessary. When they were finally done Kyra was tired but happy with what she had learned. She unbuckled his shield and held it in her hands.

“Thank you for teaching me.” She said with a smile.

“Don’t thank me yet. This was an easy day, just stances and light movements.” Brennan assured her with a chuckle. “When we get off this boat and have a bit more space, then the fun starts. Then when we get to Trena we will get you your own shield. We will start you with something basic at first but eventually...”

Brennan trailed off, but Kyra understood what he was saying. The idea that she would own a shield that could become as impressive as the one she was just holding was exciting. Not exciting enough however to stave off the large yawn that snuck up on her. Brennan chuckled, turning just in time to watch the sun set behind the horizon.

“Yeah, definitely a good time to stop for the day.” He said, walking back to their previous spot and sitting back down.

Kyra, still holding his shield, watched the sunset for a few moments longer before joining him, first leaning his shield against his pack.

Chapter 8

The next morning Brennan and Kyra woke up under an early morning purple sky. The sounds of water, creaking sails and the crew preparing for a long day of fishing made it impossible for them to sleep in, especially when the crew eventually cast their nets into the river. The captain shouting orders and the crew hollering back was impossible to ignore, even for a heavy sleeper like Brennan.

The two slowly rolled up their bedrolls and shared a simple meal of jerky, bread and nuts. As the sky slowly turned a slightly brighter blue Brennan showed Kyra a short morning stretching and workout. She accepted that it was necessary with minimal grumbling. When they were done with that they began a long day of... waiting.

The two sat, paced, talked and generally just waited for time to go by. Brennan practiced with his sword for a short while, going through several forms on repeat, working up a bit of a sweat before passing his shield off to Kyra to practice what they had gone over the day before. She went through forms as well, though they were frequently corrected and re-demonstrated by Brennan.

It wasn't until the second day that Brennan and Kyra started keeping an eye on the shore, waiting for the distant view of the dock. When they finally spotted it the captain met them by the gangway and Brennan passed him another steel coin, shaking hands with the fisherman. Not long after they disembarked onto a much smaller and less active dock. The fishing vessel barely paused, already moving on by the time Brennan and Kyra stepped onto solid land.

The two divers made their way through the docks and the lightly populated passway, quickly stocking up on supplies again from a small shop before heading out, hoping to make a little progress before the day was over.

“Traveling in the forests can be dangerous, even when you stick to patrolled roads.” Brennan explained as they left the passway’s nebulous border, the road quickly becoming a bit rougher, the forest more dense. “Especially around some of the more difficult lairs. There shouldn’t be anything life threatening on this side of the river, but it can still be dangerous.”

“Because of outbreaks?”

“Because of old outbreaks generally.” Brennan corrected. “Lair beasts don’t age, eat or sleep, but they do go dormant occasionally. Frequent attacks in a forest could be a sign of a new lair emerging but that is incredibly rare. What’s much more likely is to get ambushed by a lair beast that is decades old. They tend to get more powerful as they age so going into an unpatrolled forest can be dangerous.”

“Is this forest patrolled?” Kyra asked, resisting the urge to nervously look up and down the road.

“This part is, mostly because of the passway ” He assured her. “And the road that it merges into is as well. That doesn’t mean there won’t be anything dangerous around. If we come across some tracks we don’t like we might skip a night’s sleep to keep moving or if I think we can handle it we might try and track it. I still haven’t seen you do any harvesting after all.”

He finished off with a teasing tone, Kyra nudging him back with her shoulder as he chuckled. The two kept walking for a few more hours, the sun setting and the sky getting darker and darker. Brennan eventually found a decent spot to camp and started setting up. He hung chains and metal bells, all pulled from his satchel, around the perimeter as Kyra found wood for the fire. Finally they set up two simple tents using thick, waxed canvas that Brennan also pulled from his satchel. When they were finally done setting things up Kyra surprised Brennan by handily starting the fire with her own flint and tinder.

“What, cause I’m a girl I couldn’t know how to start a fire?” She teased, sitting back in front of it, the fire casting light around their simple camp.

“No, I assumed you didn’t know because you’re still new to this.” He responded, rolling his eyes. “I’ve seen a woman kill a goblin by beating it to death with the corpse of another goblin. Trust me, I don’t think less of women.”

“Woah... That’s pretty intense.”

“Yeah it was. But it’s goblins so fuck them.”

“What is with divers hating goblins?” She asked. “Everyone I’ve heard mention them hates them.”

“Well for one they are nasty to fight. Smart, quick and lethal.” He answered. “Any lair that has them is much harder than it would ordinarily be. And I’m sure you could figure out the second if you thought about it for a minute.

Kyra frowned and looked down at the fire, pulling her knees to her chest while poking the fire with a long stick. She tried to wrap her mind around the puzzle, trying to remember what she knew about them beyond the harvesting steps and technique. There wasn't much of that even, they had very little worth harvesting beyond some of their blood, and that wasn't worth the time for such a small creature...

“Oh, they are useless to harvest!” She answered excitedly. “There isn't anything to harvest off of them.”

“Exactly. If it’s a high difficulty lair you might be able to gather a bunch of metal scrap but beyond that their corpses are useless. Going into a goblin dungeon means the only money you're going to make is either off lair equipment or random things to harvest.”

“Like the ore or the flowers.” She said

“Like the ore or the flowers.” Brennan confirmed with a smirk. “The only real reason to run a goblin lair is if the lair is known for giving out equipment you need, or just a general culling to keep the lair from having an outbreak.”

“Are we going to go against goblins anytime soon?” She asked nervously.

“No, I wouldn't run a goblin lair without a dedicated team.” Brennan said, laying out his bedroll before laying back down on it. “They are too good at picking apart a group, you need a team you have trained with specifically, who can trust and depend on each other. Otherwise it's easy to be overwhelmed.”

“So you’ve never ran a goblin lair?”

“Oh no, I have, with my last team, the one I told you about. It's where I got the base form of my spear actually.” He answered as he laid back, looking up at the stars. “That one was known for handing out ice magic, and we had a self professed ice mage in the group. We ran it a few times.”

Kyra nodded in understanding, still watching and poking at the fire. Eventually she pushed the stick into the fire and stood, walking to her pack. She grabbed her waterskin, a small sack of jerky and walked back. Brennan was already chewing on some food of his own by the time she sat back down.

“Jerky is really only good when you're eating it voluntarily. When you have to it just feels more like a chore.” Brennan said after a few minutes of them eating in silence, getting a laugh from Kyra.

“Yeah... I know what you mean.” Kyra agreed. “My dad always hated the stuff. I never understood why until I had to eat it while I was traveling. It really does feel like a chore.”

“With any luck we will stumble on some natural tracks while we are traveling tomorrow.” Brennan said with a dreaming smile. “I have a bunch of spices, there is not much better than a hot meal after a few days of travel food.”

The two chatted for a while longer before once again Kyra's own fatigue snuck up on her and she yawned.

“I'll take first watch.” Brennan volunteered. “I'll wake you up in a couple hours.”

Kyra nodded, familiar with the concept from her precious travels. She stood and walked to the simple tent and started setting up her bedroll, stopping once it was all set up.

“How will you know?” She started to ask as she was turning to find Brennan already turning an hourglass over. “Of course you have one.”

Brennan chuckled and shrugged now sitting back up on the end of his bedroll. He looked over his shoulder at her.

“It's kind of a thing with me.” He admitted. “Before you buy anything, ask me first. I wasn't kidding about getting stuff for cheap.”

Kyra shook her head and crawled into her shelter, sliding into her bed and pulling her cloak over herself for extra covering. The sound of the fire lulled her to sleep almost immediately, covering the sounds of the forest. Once she had fallen asleep, her breathing equalizing and slowing, Brennan let out a slow sigh, letting the stress of the day slowly leave him. There was still plenty to be stressed about, and it still tugged and strained on his back, but he had learned long ago to let what you could go.

In truth, most of his stress wasn't for himself. He was ecstatic to be traveling with company again. Paradoxically, it felt familiar and new at the same time. Kyra knew exactly what she was getting into, knew exactly what he was carrying, which was new and refreshing. On the other hand traveling with his last team had felt good as well, all the way up until it didn't, until it felt like he had ruined the team. He could only hope that this time would be different.

The next morning was similar to what the previous morning had been like on the boat. They both woke up, had a quick simple breakfast before doing some morning exercise. Brennan added a few more exercises that they couldn't have done while on the fishing boat. It still wasn't hugely intense, and after Kyra asked why it wasn't Brennan explained it was less about being in perfect shape and more about keeping the body used to movement.

When they finished they quickly took down the small camp and Brennan stomped out what was left of the fire. They left quickly, eager to get back on the road. The walking was still monotonous, but the forest was more interesting up close than it had been from a distance as they had sailed past. At some point, a few hours past noon Kyra caught something from the corner of her eye. She nudged Brennan and pointed out the large forest rabbit nibbling on some short plants further up the road. He followed her finger point and his eyes went wide.

Slowly he reached back into his satchel and pulled out... a strung bow of all things. Kyra couldn't help but shake her head as he pulled the long ranged weapon out, followed by an arrow. Making sure to stay quiet he nocked the arrow... pulled back... and released, the arrow soaring through the air to slam into the rabbit, just above it back leg. The small creature was pinned to the ground, struggling for just a few moments before dying.

“And that's lunch!” Brennan said happily, turning to Kyra with a smile. “Nice job spotting that, any closer and we would have spooked it. Come on, you can clean it while I get the fire ready.”

Kyra nodded and followed Brennan as he slid the bow back into his satchel, walking over to his kill. It didn't take long for him to start a small fire off the side of the road and set up a small spit, pulling out the parts for it from his satchel while Kyra handily gutted, skinned and cleaned the rabbit with practiced hands. When the rabbit was on the spit Brennan brought out several spices, shaking them out on the meat as it slowly cooked. Already it smelled amazing.

Instead of simply waiting for the meat to be cooked however, Brennan stood, grabbed his shield from the ground and passed it to Kyra, who looked confused for a moment before realizing what was going on.

“What are we practicing?” Kyra asked as she strapped the shield on properly. Only pausing for a moment when she felt the extra strength kick in. “Should I-”

Her question was cut off as Brennan lunged at her. He was unarmed, and instead of punching or kicking her he gave her a light shove. She stumbled back before she could recover and she looked at him.

“Alright, but you could have warned me-”

Again he cut her off as he lunged at her. This time she managed to get the shield between them before he shoved her, his hands shoving the shield instead. However she was still in a terrible stand so she still stumbled backwards again.

“You need to get your stance wider, use your back leg to help you absorb the blow.” Brennan said, this time circling her.

Kyra adjusted her stance just in time for Brennan to jump forward again, and this time she was able to hold him off and stand her ground. From there it devolved to Brennan challenging her from every angle. Sometimes he would jump and shove, sometimes he would shift and press her from a weird angle. Slowly she got better at anticipating where he was going by watching his feet and eyes, managing to stay in place almost half the time.

Occasionally Brennan stopped to rotate the rabbit, or offer bits of advice. He showed her how to keep a half step out of the way so you could get whatever beast was attacking you to stumble through the hit. Eventually, when they had been at it for almost thirty minutes Brennan lunged a final time. Instead of shoving her though, he slowed slightly, brought his foot up and full power kicked the shield as hard as he could. She attempted to block it, managing to get a halfway decent stance prepared. However, she couldn't handle the full powered kick and went sprawling backwards.

Thankfully Brennan had known what he was about to do and had made sure it was clear behind her beforehand, so she merely landed on her backside, a bit stunned and shaken but not any worse for wear. When she had recovered a few moments later she looked up at him with a scowl.

“Now that was bullshit!” She said, ignoring his hand and standing up on her own. “How the hell was I supposed to stop you when you kicked like that?”

“You weren't.” He said with an easy shrug. “You had no idea how hard I could kick, or if you could handle it. It was to teach you something. Your shield is important but if you don't know what is coming at you, you have no idea if you can block it.”

“Like magic?” She asked, recalling what he had said before.

“Just like magic. The difference is that magic is always unknown until you see it used.” He explained. “Now that you've experienced my kick you know you can't handle a kick from a guy my size. Next time someone my size tries to kick you like that...?”

“I get out of the way.” She answered, slowly nodding, her frustration fading.

“Exactly.” Brennan said with a smile before turning back to the cooking rabbit. “Now come on, this is a good place to stop for now. Let's eat so we can get back on the road. Next time we do this I'm going to teach you how to dodge out of the way with a heater shield.”

Kyra nodded and handed Brennan back his shield, which he dropped onto his pack. They both sat down by the fire before Brennan used a knife to crudely cut off a piece of meat for Kyra, having removed it from the fire a few minutes to let it rest and cool a bit. Together they enjoyed a warm if not simple meal of rabbit and bread.

Chapter 9

Once they finished their freshly caught and cooked meal the two returned to the road, quietly walking for a while, both of them in their own thoughts. Eventually Kyra looked over at Brennan for a moment before speaking.

“Why do you even bother with being a diver?” She asked. “I mean I’m glad you are, but you are so paranoid about getting caught by that Cowan guy. Why not just disappear somewhere, bury the bag with your grimoire inside it and live a peaceful life?”

“You mean other than the fact that it didn't occur to twelve year old me?” Brennan answered with a chuckle. “I could have honestly. I could have just picked a small village in the middle of nowhere and done my own thing. But when I was younger I had this fantasy of building up incredible equipment, storming his manor and.... I don’t know. Expose him? Kill him?”

Kyra nodded as he talked, not judging him for his confusion. He was silent for a moment or two before he finally continued.

“Somewhere along the way I realized it wasn't that simple. Not if I wanted to survive and live after the fact. I may want to pay him back for what he did but I want to live too. My parents would have wanted me to live.”

He continued, the last sentence coming out something he had frequently repeated. Kyra couldn't help but wonder how much he struggled to remember that fact.

“By the time I realized that, diving was what I did.” He explained, looking up through the trees at the patchwork clouds that covered the sky. “Plenty of people have described diving as being addictive and... I really can't argue with that. The rush of beating a lair boss, of finding powerful gear, the coin rolling in as you sell the parts you harvest...”

“Dad described it as a risk takers paradise.” Kyra said, still nodding along.

“He wasn't wrong.”

The two kept walking for a while, following the road. Brennan kept his head on a swivel and Kyra did her best to mimic this. Eventually the road they were on merged with another, this one in slightly better shape.

“At this pace we will probably be there in another three days.” Brennan said, before continuing. “Unless we rush, then we could get there in two...maybe.”

“How bad would rushing be?”

“Well for one we wouldn't be doing your training anymore.” He explained. “Probably cut out any hunting as well. We would have to have walking meals instead of sitting down.”

“... Should we be rushing? Because honestly that sounds horrible, and I need that training.”

“No, we should be fine for at least a few weeks. Even then we just need to keep our eyes open.”

“For what?”

“People asking too many questions, groups that are following us or interested in us.” Brennan explained. “One of the few times they caught up to me they pretended to be a team looking for a filler. The only reason I caught on in time to run was because they agreed to pay me a ridiculously high percentage.”

“How did you get away?”

“I ran and hid, managed to find a merchant leaving town and bribed him to hide under his goods. Skin of my teeth type thing.” He said with a shrug. “It's when I learned to keep moving rather than wait for them to catch up.”

“Yeah... I honestly can't blame you for being paranoid.” Kyra admitted, shaking her head. “That all sounds awful.”

“It has its highs and lows.” He admitted with a shrug. “I wasn't lying when I said traveling alone was terrible.”

“I can imagine. I was only by myself for a month or so and it was already getting pretty bad.”

“You do get used to it on some level. I wasn't sobbing myself to sleep every night if that's what you're imagining. It does wear on you though.”

“When you-” Kyra started, cutting herself off. She stopped walking and turned, looking back the way they came.

“What?” Brennan asked, subconsciously grip his shield tighter, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“I... I thought I heard something.” She said, peering out into the woods. “Like a distant thump.”

The two stood still looking around until a loud thump echoed through the brush and trees. Then another and another.

“That’s getting closer” Kyra pointed out, getting a nod in response.

Brennan stepped forward and drew his sword, pulling his shield up as the sounds got closer and closer. Suddenly a young man lept from the bushes, rolling and tumbling across the street, only a dozen or so feet in front of Kyra and Brennan. He carried a short bow in his hand and was covered in simple black leather armor. He slowly struggled to stand, pulling three arrows from the quiver on his back, holding them in the same hand he used to nock and pull the first arrow back.

Before he could fire a large humanoid beast rushed out from the forest, knocking the man off his feet and back, once again skidding and tumbling on the road, this time towards the two bystanders. The green beast stood almost twice as tall as Brennan and was armed with a thick massive wooden club. Its whole body was thickly corded with muscle and while its face was blunt and stocky its anger was visible on its face. Several arrows stuck out of its light green skin, though they didn’t seem to slow it down in the least. It bellowed at the stirring man, cutting it short to sniff the air, turning to look at the two divers.

“Oh fuck, a troll....” Brennan dropped his sword immediately, pulling his spear out of his satchel in one fluid yank.

The drooling, barely injured beast bellowed again and turned its body, seemingly unconcerned about the injured bowman, instead focusing on Brennan and Kyra. It took two steps towards them, the ground shaking enough to rattle rocks off the road.

“Kyra... I’m going to charge it.” He said softly. “When it’s focused on me, run around and grab the guy. Get a couple dozen feet away and either get him shooting or take his bow and shoot for him.”

With a shout Brennan rushed at the monstrous humanoid, thrusting his spear out. It flashed bright blue and shards of ice fired from around the blade, slamming into the troll’s face, staggering it as the magic ice sliced at its skin. It roared, rubbing its slightly bleeding face before managing to push through the pain and focus on Brennan. It slammed its club down at him,

trying to smash the human who had just hurt it. Brennan flashed to the left to avoid the thick club, jabbing out with his spear to slice along the troll's legs. He skidded to a stop and thrust the spear again, this time the blade caught the troll in the side as it tried to keep up.

As the troll turned to follow Brennan, Kyra rushed forward, half watching the troll and half watching the man next to it, who was slowly getting up on his own. She helped him to his feet, slowly guiding him out of the danger zone.

"You should be running!" The man said, leaning on Kyra as she helped him limp away.

"Can you still shoot?!" She shouted, ignoring his comment.

"Yes! Just help me get some distance!"

Brennan kept poking and cutting at the much larger beast, doing damage but unable to really drive the spear home while he was also focusing on avoiding the massive club. He dashed right now, trailing the blue whispig after image, sliding onto the road and stepping backwards slowly, keeping its attention on himself

The man, now far enough away from the troll, reached down under his armor and pulled out a blue stone, which glowed between his fingers. He closed his eyes and the glow increased for a moment, traveling into his body. He shivered and tucked away the stone before standing up straight, this time without Kyra's support. Again he pulled three arrows from his quiver, before fluidly firing all three arrows at the back of the massive green beast. It bellowed and started to turn back to the new source of pain.

Seeing an opportunity Brennan focused on the spear and thrust it into the beast's side, the metal tip of the spear easily sliding into the thick green skin. A glow started at the back end of the spear and crept up the haft, speeding up exponentially until it slammed into the metal blade at the end of the spear. An impact, a loud crack and a bellow echoed along the road as the energy of the glow slammed into the beasts side, breaking ribs and eviscerating flesh.

The troll, now deeply hurt, refocused on Brennan, swung its club back and up, catching him in a backward swing that lifted him off of his feet and tossed him a dozen feet back, tumbling even further.

"Brennan!" Kyra shouted out, her eyes shifting from her friend, lying on the ground back to the still infuriated green humanoid.

"Shit!" The archer cursed, sure that he had just watched his new ally being killed.

Slowly, and with a long groan, Brennan struggled back to his feet, leaning heavily in his spear. The troll was already turning to face Kyra and the stranger, who fired another barrage of arrows at him, all three hitting in the pulped flesh where Brennan's attack had landed.

Shaking himself off Brennan rushed to punish the Troll, his spear carving a half dozen wounds into the beast's back, who tried to spin around to defend itself. As it did the stranger shot another barrage, this series of arrows catching the beast in the throat, causing it to try and cover itself, throwing itself slightly off balance.

Seeing this Brennan dashed around to the front of the beast, dropping his spear and using both hands to support his shield. Ignoring the pain in his arm he activated the blast of concussive force the shield could project, the blast pushing back against his arms as it fired out. It slammed into the already unstable behemoth, forcing it to stumble backwards. Brennan reached down and grabbed his spear and stabbed at the troll's ankle, tearing a great slice into its thick skin. The troll, already stumbling and now unable to hold its own weight, fell down onto its back, all the while bellowing and screaming.

With a shout of his own Brennan flung away his shield, and did a short dash that ended with him standing on the troll's chest. He leapt into the air double handed plunged the spear into the troll's eye socket, the blade and a few inches of the shaft vanishing into its skull. The massive beast shook as it died, forcing Brennan to stumble off of its chest and back to solid ground. As he went he yanked the spear out of its brain as brutally as possible. The green behemoth convulsed again before slumping flat on the ground, already dead.

Kyra, after a moment's pause, rushed to Brennan, catching him as he started to sink to his knees. He stumbled slightly, but with her help managed to stay on his feet. He gave Kyra a nod and a slightly pained smile.

"That... that hurt." He said with a chuckle as Kyra shook her head. "But it could have gone worse."

"I'll say." The stranger said from behind them. "I wasn't sure if I was going to survive that honestly. And the way you took him down...that was impressive my friend."

"Thanks." Brennan said simply before looking back at Kyra. "How about we take a break. I need a minute to recover."

"Yeah, alright." She agreed, before helping Brennan to the side of the road, getting him to sit on a large rock before pulling away.

Once she did the stranger stepped closer, though he still kept his distance.

"Thank you for your assistance." He started, bowing his head. "My name is Landen. I was doing a little hunting when I stumbled on a cave. Like an idiot I took a peek inside and managed to disturb this beast's dormancy. I apologize, I didn't mean to lead it back to the road."

Brennan and Kyra shared a look, the latter motioning with her head to the bowing man. Brennan rolled his eyes, but still nodded and looked back.

"It's alright. My name is Brennan and this is Kyra." He assured him before gesturing to himself and his partner. "I don't think I would be paying attention to where I was going either. And you got pretty screwed in terms of match ups."

"Indeed, my arrows were doing little, save making it angrier." He agreed with a head shake, letting out a sigh. "He shrugged off my weapons ability as well."

"Well... no one died? That's still a win, right?" Kyra asked, looking at them both.

"It's certainly not a loss." Brennan agreed before focusing on Landen. "You healed yourself?"

"I did, I needed to be steady, I couldn't risk a miss with you fighting so close." He explained, reaching into his armor to pull out a now dulled stone. "Unfortunately it is more of a last resort piece of equipment. It only works once per day."

"If we made early camp, would you stay till tomorrow morning?" Kyra asked, focusing on Landen. "And use it on Brannen."

"Yes, of course! It would be the least I could do." He said, nodding his head, before looking back on the troll's corpse. "You can also have whatever spoils we can pull from the beast. I'm not very good at harvesting but I'm sure we could pull its teeth, Maybe even get to its heart."

"No need to worry about that." Brennan said, gesturing to Kyra. "She is a harvester."

"Ah! Then her hanging back makes much more sense." He said, nodding a single time before looking around. "I suppose this is as good a place as any to make camp. Why don't I set up and start a fire while Kyra starts harvesting?"

"That... That would be fine." Brennan said, after a long pause and a look from Kyra. "Just... I would like my sword and shield back first."

Chapter 10

Once Landen had a basic fire going, Brennan moved from the rock down to it, unrolling his bedroll to sit on. As the adrenaline wore off his body grew stiff and sore, especially his left arm and shoulder, which had taken the brunt of the troll's massive blow, through his shield. He

was pretty sure it was cracked in some way, the shoulder joint grating painfully when he was forced to move it. He cursed his injuries, but understood the need to stay still and not cause more damage. At some point Landen's healing stone wouldn't be enough if he exacerbated the injury into something worse.

Landed on the other hand quickly set up a simple camp, started a campfire and put up the three simple tents, and though his was a slightly different style, he seemed to know what he was doing. Nevertheless Brennan kept an eye on him almost constantly, not trusting him in the slightest. Landen caught him staring a few times, but Brennan clearly didn't care.

Kyra, thirty or so feet away, had changed into simple clothes so she could begin harvesting anything worthwhile from the troll. Her father's journal was laid out on her pack, opened to the page on trolls so she could reference it. It was close enough to check quickly but far enough away that she wouldn't get any vicera on it.

When she was all set to start, she began removing the tusks, as they were worth two iron each. After that was its eye's, or eye since Brennan's killing blow had destroyed one of them. Its ears were worth coin as well, but only because it was outside of a lair, which meant they could collect a bounty on it. Next she managed to fill four bottles with blood, having to work the limbs to push out what little blood the unnatural behemoth had.

Once she was done with the easy parts she started cutting the hide, pulling a single sheet of skin taken from its front and two smaller pieces taken from its thighs. Together it was probably worth several iron coins, the large one enough to make two decent suits of leather armor, once it was treated properly. The back wasn't worth harvesting as it was much thinner and useless for armor.

After she was done with the hide she began to, slowly but steadily, cut the muscle away from the chest, exposing the ribcage of the unnatural beast. Once it was cleared she began scoring and carving at the thick bones, before using the slightly spiked heel of the knife to break them free. About an hour later she pulled out four ribs, which she set aside. She would have had more but some of them were broken by Brennan's flashy spear attack.

After she was done pulling out the ribs she did a final check, making sure she had harvested everything that she could get from the beast. Once she was sure she started working on removing the black spherical heart from its chest cavity. The second she cut it free and pulled it out the entire corpse started to fade, starting from its extremities and gradually moving inward until it all fluttered away.

As she watched the beast fade, the blood splattered and smeared along her arms flaked off and fluttered away as well. When the beast and its unbottled blood was gone she started going through everything she had harvested. In the end she filled an entire extra leather bag with harvested materials. She sealed it up and carried it back to the camp, placing it gently near her own tent before sitting down next to Brennan with a sigh.

“How did it go?” He asked as Landen returned with another armful of wood, dropping it in the existing pile before sitting down on the other side of the fire.

“It went well.” She said with a smile. “I got as much as I could from it.”

“How were its ribs?” Landen asked, getting a look from Kyra, so he explained. “It’s the only part I know is worth anything apart from its tusks. They are used to make heavy crossbows.”

“Oh, well a few of them were broken, but the four I pulled out whole should fetch a steel piece each.” Kyra answered. “In total it should be at least a silver piece, probably a few more.”

“Not bad... almost worth being smacked down the road like a childrens toy.” Brennan said with a chuckle before focusing on Landen with a more serious expression. “How much do you want?”

“Oh, no I don’t want any of it.” He insisted, gesturing quickly. “You two saved my life, consider it a reward for your assistance.”

“Thank you.” Kyra started. “For that and for staying around so Brennan can use your healing stone.”

“My pleasure.” He answered, pausing for a moment before continuing. “So are you guys on your way to Trenia?”

“Yeah, Kyra here needs some more experience in some of the easier lairs nearby.” Brennan explained. “Why?”

“It’s where I was heading before I decided to do a little hunting.” He explained. “Perhaps we could stick together? I find myself a lot less eager to travel alone.”

Kyra and Brennan shared a look for a moment before Kyra shrugged. Brennan nodded and looked back at the archer and smiled.

“I don’t think that would be a problem. I’ll admit I was a lot more confident before I learned there were trolls in these woods. Where did they even come from? I didn’t think there were any troll lairs nearby.”

“There aren’t, but there is one across the river.” Landen explained. “Occasionally beasts cross the river during the winter, when it freezes over.”

“...Fuck, That didn’t even occur to me.” Brennan admitted. “It’s been a few years since I was last in this area, I just knew the lairs around Trenia were relatively easy. I wanted to do a

couple easy runs to give Kyra some more experience. That and get some armor for her in the process.”

“It’s not your fault.” Kyra assured him, looking at him with an honest smile. “You can’t know everything.”

“Indeed. At least you have innocent ignorance as a respectable reason.” Landen pointed out before sighing. “I knew such a thing was possible. I am from a village further down the river> This wasn’t a surprise for any other reason than idiocy. Again I apologize for getting you involved.”

Brennan nodded, still laying back on his bedroll. The color of the sky had started to slowly shift, though they still had plenty of time before the sun started to truly set. The three sat in silence, Kyra and Landen watching the fire while Brennan focused mostly on trying to not shift his arm.

“That spear was something else.” Landen said after a while. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a piece of equipment that could do two separate things.”

“It’s a family heirloom.” Brennan explained after a short pause, telling the familiar lie easily. “Same with the boots.”

“Those ice shards were interesting but what was the second attack?” Landen asked. “Some sort of magnified secondary blow?”

“Something like that. It can only do them each once per day.” Brennan explained, continuing his lie. “You mentioned your bow does something?”

“I did! Twice a day it makes arrows explode on impact.” He explained. “It wasn’t enough to stop the troll though. I somehow managed to stagger it at one point, which was the only reason I got as far as I did...”

Landen trailed off, looking down at the fire, once again quiet. When he looked up his smile had disappeared. He looked between the two other divers.

“Thank you, you two. I... I got very close to dying and you saved me.” He said solemnly. “I owe you both.”

“Of course, we were happy to help, though I didn’t do much.” Kyra answered, smiling honestly at the diver. “Everything worked out okay in the end. I’m just glad no one got hurt.”

The three nodded and the comfortable silence once again spread over the camp. Eventually Landen started pulling off pieces of his armor, inspecting each one, using a rag from his pack to clean and tend to it. When he was done with each part he would put it back on

again. Eventually Kyra opened up her pack and pulled out some bread and dried fruits, turning to Brennan and offering them.”

“You should eat something.” She said, standing and walking closer.

“You should too.” He pointed out in response. “...But you’re not wrong. Help me up, will you?”

Kyra nodded and helped him sit up on the edge of his bedroll, the more experienced diver only groaning in pain once before managing to sit up properly. Before he could say anything she grabbed his water skin as well, leaving it on his lap.

“So... How long have you two been traveling together?” Landen asked, in the process of inspecting a piece of armor from his leg.

“This is our first time traveling together actually.” Kyra responded with a smile. “We were both fillers on the same team. I noticed Brennan had much more experience than me so I asked him to mentor me a bit.”

“Oh, I see.” Landen said, surprise evident in his voice. “I didn’t expect you to need that, you seemed to be a pretty well trained harvester.”

“My father trained me.” She explained with a small smile. “He was a diver before he retired.”

“I see. Well you’ll be in high demand once you get trained properly I suppose.” He said. “A good harvester is worth a lot on a team.”

“She needs to learn how to hold her shield before that.” Brennan teased, getting a playful glare from Kyra. “She also needs her own shield.”

“Well... You can afford to buy one when you sell what you got from the troll.” Landen pointed out. “You might even be able to get one with an ability.”

“Maybe.” Brennan agreed. “It’s certainly higher on our list of things we need. That and armor for her as well.”

The three continued to trade small talk for quite a while, before eventually the sun started to set and the forest turned dark. The trio huddled closer to the fire as the air got colder around them. They had another meal of travel food, nobody quite brave enough to venture out into the forest to hunt, especially once the night truly took over.

At some point Kyra started to nod off. Brennan put his hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle shake.

“Go get some rest.” He said with a smile. “I’ll take first watch.”

“I wouldn’t mind taking the first watch.” Landen offered with a smile. “I am a bit of a night owl.”

“...No.” Brennan said simply, earning a look from Kyra. “You can go ahead and sleep. Me and Kyra can take care of the watch.”

“What? Brennan really-” Kyra started, frowning at her companion before Landen cut her off gently.

“It’s okay Kyra. He has every right to be suspicious.” Landen assured her, not seeming offended in the least. “You guys have some expensive gear, it’s only natural he is more than a little wary. Fortunately for me, you two saving my life is all the proof I need to sleep soundly.”

He smirked and gave Kyra and Brennan a nod before crawling into his bedroll, not saying another word as he got comfortable.

“See? He agrees with me.” Brennan said softly, getting another look from Kyra. He just shook his head. “Kyra, I understand wanting me to trust more but on the road with a stranger in the middle of nowhere is not where we should be experimenting with my trust issues.”

“Fine, fine. Are you sure you want me to head to bed first?” She said, relenting from her look. “I don’t mind letting you rest first.”

“No it’s fine. I’m kind of a night owl as well.”

“Alright. Goodnight.” She said with a small smile before crawling into her simple tent. “Wake me in a few hours.”

Brennan nodded, sitting in front of the fire as he kept watch. His arm was still sore, and he could still feel something grating in his shoulder. Luckily, according to Landen, his healing stone was potent enough to repair the damage. He claimed he got it for cheap as it could only activate once per day, which is how most items worked, save for the most powerful and rare.

And the ones he had enhanced.

The fire crackling and snapping was the only sound that echoed through the forest as he sat alone. He tended to it haphazardly, poking and prodding it with a stick, occasionally throwing more wood into it. He kept his eye on Landen, though at this point he was pretty sure he was actually asleep. His breathing was slow and deep, and a slight snoring was just barely audible. With a grunt Brennan reached into his satchel and pulled out his hourglass, tipping it over to start his watch.