

On the way to the auction house, I passed by Clement's stall. I needed to stock ammunition for a possible bidding war.

Clement told me he sold all of my products. "People love the Frigid Yew Salve, my good friend," he excitedly said. "Especially the parties without healers. When you think about it, it's cheaper per point restored compared to regular health potions since it restores percentage health."

"That's exactly what I told you why it was going to sell well." I never told him that, or that the salve would be in demand. I was betting he wouldn't consider the possibility of me lying, so he'd either assume his memory was faulty, or mine.

"Regular potions during battle," Clement said, "Your salve in between, because of the Silence penalty. That's what people do. A pretty quaint niche you've got."

"Maybe the ancestors are blessing me," I said. "Just the perfect confluence of circumstances."

If had I tried marketing my creations before the world quest, I'd barely have any customers, maybe even none. Not only were there much fewer players then, but they were also of a higher level than me with no need for my low-level brews. However, the influx of new Mardukryon players and the lack of low-tier choices of useful consumables netted me tons of customers.

"Ancestor talk? 'Confluence of circumstances?'" Clement chuckled. "The NPCs are rubbing off on you, and it might be in the wrong way. I know a guy who got too deep into roleplaying fantasy shit, his girlfriend ended up leaving him."

"Eh? Who?"

He leaned forward, whispering behind the back of his hand, "That guy is me."

"Seriously? Your girlfriend left you because you were—?"

"It's either that or I was spending too much time playing RPGs."

"Probably the latter," I said. Some joking around was good to strengthen our connection. Clement had proven himself useful to me so far. "Anyway, I have another batch of Frigid Yew Salves." These were the bunch I brewed while leeching off Paritor.

"Keep 'em coming, my good friend! I'll sell them out before the day ends. With the way past the tunnels unblocked, many players are going to rush their quests to the other side. We better take advantage of this *confluence of circumstances* before the market becomes saturated when more players get crafting Ocadules."

We shook hands after concluding our business, the Artas in my inventory increasing by several million. "See you around, Clement." I waved goodbye as I trotted away. "Going to buy ingredients to make more."

Besides restocking at the auction house, I also wanted to bid on items from the just-concluded world quest. Previously only obtainable through Blighted Tokens, I could now buy them with Artas.

The event items were limited edition. World quests weren't regularly recurring game events, unlike the Great Hunt, for example. The world quest happens, the setting changes, major storylines go different routes, and that was it. The items from a finished world quest circulating the economy weren't going to increase unless the devs had some other event bringing them back. Scarcity translated to appreciating prices as time rolled forward. The cheapest the Blighted event items were ever going to get was today.

I predicted that enterprising players with plenty of capital, the whales, would bid on generically good items and those that had meta potential for investment purposes. The bidding war for those items would be insane,

not to mention the supply would be low because most players who bought them from Chief Nograss would either be using them or hoarding them to sell in the future for gain.

But the bad items...

Probably inaccurate to say bad.

The ones deemed lackluster by the masses, the unappreciated by people who think like boxes, maybe some that were genuinely bad—all that I expected to be available in droves in the auction house. And I'd be there to snap them up with my bank to ward off competitors who also had an eye for hidden gems.

Crowds surrounded the auction house. Not a surprise.

I pushed my way to the listing boards and perused the display. My target was equipment for when I reached level thirty to push me into level forty or even fifty. I didn't bother with higher-level gear because I'd most find something better by then. My resources were limited and should go on what could impact *the now* to make the trajectory of my growth steeper.

I ignored Ocadule Shards—no spare LSPs to utilize them anyway—and bid on pieces of armor and a couple of shields. I was going to replace my [Reinforced Pavise] when I leveled up. In addition to Blighted items, I also searched non-event items for sale, looking for those with interesting enchantments. If buyers were focused on the Blighted items, maybe some of the worth-it regular ones would get ignored.

Some of the equipment I chose had zero other bidders even though they were already halfway their bidding duration, making me confident I'd win those. For the others, I'd check every few hours to update my bid if someone one-upped me.

Next order of business.

"They're still not here," I muttered, checking my friends list to see who was online.

My party was supposed to gather around this time for practice and explore the areas where the Great Hunt would pass. Only Melonomi was around, and she was by the cliffs where new players spawned. Good on her for continuing to help newbies.

"Maybe I could knock off a quest or two off my list." Next stop, Gula's store.

"Are you okay back there, lad?" [Lvl 36 Mardukryon | Shopkeeper: Clovenhor] peeked from the end of the aisle.

Clovenhor was Gula's distant nephew, assigned by Chief Nograss to look after the store and continue its business. Although Gula wasn't around to administer Healing services, the villagers still needed her medicine or ingredients to make them, so Clovenhor kept things going. He had a minor background in the Healing arts and was employed in a different store, so he wasn't completely clueless. The money earned would be paid to the victims of Bawu, in accordance with village laws. Apparently, that was how things worked here.

"Yes, I know what I'm looking for," I replied.

The quest information listed the names of the items I needed. It was just a matter of delving into drawers, chests, and shelves, checking items one by one until I found them. An easy quest. The only mildly challenging part was convincing Clovenhor to allow me to search the store on my own. The guards didn't accost me because I was trustworthy in their eyes, having saved their brethren from the tunnels.

Of course, they didn't know that six of their fellow guards got turned into abominations because of me. Well, that was technically because of Bawu. But I could've saved them if I tried. Too late for that now. I bet those six mutants had already been killed by other players during the world quest.

"It's been a nerve-wracking couple of days." Clovenhor sighed deep. "Takes time to familiarize myself with things in here. And I had to rearrange everything after the guards went through the place, looking for evidence."

"You're doing a good job, so far," I said. "I'll bring you another bottle of Peely Fruit Wine next time to help with those nerves."

I found out Clovenhor was good friends with Gibil. Pathfinders supplied many shops in the village, so it wasn't surprising. Taking a gamble, I offered Clovenhor [Peely Fruit Wine]—I had some spare bottles from the last I visited the musical goat—and it paid off. He and Gibil shared a liking for this rare wine, and it was one of the reasons they became friends.

"I'll look forward to that," Clovenhor said. "Have work to do. Don't hesitate to approach me when you're done."

Five minutes later, I was back at the front of the store, my shopping completed.

"Is this all you need?" Clovenhor gestured to the materials I placed on the table. "Let me calculate how much you'll pay. Since I helped around Elemmor's store and dealt with Pathfinders, I'm somewhat familiar with the prices of most items." He set aside three items—[Mhorg Beetle Wing], [Lowan Sap], and [Murkblood].

"These, however, I'm not so sure."

"Maybe you can ask—?" I stopped myself. If Clovenhor asked other Healers, they might suspect what I was up to. Bawu's cure-all elixir was known to some Healers, the most senior ones even aware of the ingredients, including Ichor. That was what Melonomi said.

We also couldn't ask the Pathfinders. Or anyone else. Word shouldn't go out among the NPCs about what I was doing.

"Just quote me what you think is a fair price," I said. "The money goes to the families of the deceased, so it's all good."

"But I don't know what's a fair price. How about you return later while I—?"

"I need to buy these now. The Great Hunt is fast approaching and I need to make health potions for it. My party depends on me."

"These are for health potions, you say? Might be Gula's personal brew, which is why I'm unfamiliar with them. Healers do have their signature creations. If these are for health potions that someone only dabbling in the Healing arts can make, then they shouldn't be too expensive."

I eagerly nodded, picking up on the ready excuse dangled before me. "It was a simple recipe that Gula taught me. I'm not even an actual Healer, so you can be sure it's something basic."

Clovenhor quoted me a low price, which I quickly paid. And that was one quest down.

[Quest Completed: Secretive Shopping]

“Go along now, lad,” Clovenhor said. “Make those health potions. The Great Hunt is a risky business. Best be prepared.”

“Thank you, very helpful shopkeeper, Clovenhor,” I said. “You’re taking care of Gula’s store well.”

“I’m flattered you say that. My grand-aunt is an admirable Healer. Sadly, she chose to side with her witch of a sister.”

“Be careful who you associate with, lad,” said the guard following behind me as I ascended from the burrow. “An unfortunate circumstance that you associated with the traitor, the witch's sister.”

“Yes, quite unfortunate,” the other guard waiting on the street level chimed in. “Pray the ancestors guide you to meet the right people next time.”

“Sure, I’ll pray.” My prayers were already answered in advance—I had already met the right people. I learned about the true nature of Ichors because of Melonomi. Without it, Gula most likely wouldn’t agree that I try making Bawu’s cure-all potion. The [Bezoar Crucible] played a role too.

Why did Bawu give me that? I wondered, slowing my pace.

There had to be a reason.

Yes, Bawu was a Mad Brewer. But I suspected she wasn’t as crazy as she behaved. Her actions had reasoning behind them, even if not apparent. Minus the two-personality-thing, she might be more lucid than I assumed. She probably blew up the Cliff Village not only as a cover for mass kidnapping but also to destroy Elder Pabilsag’s legacy. Gula mentioned that Bawu hated him.

Two legacies at that. The displaced villagers had to transfer, and the Mirdabon field was the only wide enough open space for them. Did she foresee that too?

“I’m sure I’ll find a clue to Bawu inside Pabilsag’s cave,” I muttered. *Confluence of circumstances.* Perhaps I could go on ahead instead of waiting for my party. Music interrupted my thoughts before I could finalize my plan. Loud cheering followed and more instruments joined in.