

Chapter 55

Buffrix waddled towards one of Brightsong's newly emerging monster farms. His lightweight form, combined with his oversized shoes, allowed the koblin with his [Kobbiepack] and [Kobbiebag] to tread atop the snow.

It would seem Elora had taken some inspiration from the koblins, for Buffrix was not the only one that did this relatively easy feat.

Though it certainly wasn't for the soul aeder. Buffrix was not sure why. They were so much smaller than him! Even Komachi, the "chonkiest" of the three, fell through the snow if she didn't have a running start. Once she got up to speed, she slipped and slithered across the snow like a greased-up seal.

Otherwise, they all sank through the snow as soon as they so much as poked a paw into the powdery stuff. That recent arrival, the one with the arctic fur, was the most boisterous about it.

His good friend Lootlox dashed forward, eager to prove herself as always. She scampered beneath the sloped canvas covering that was stretched over the monster farm. While snow didn't impede the rate of monster spawns within the farm, it did make it more difficult to immediately spot the monsters.

It had been a simple addition, but it turned out to save a lot of mana that was being used to melt off the snow.

Besides, nobody liked to freeze, Buffrix included. While the koblins did have their suits to protect them against the environment, they were still more vulnerable than most.

Buffrix aimed to change that one day.

To become a Worldshard renowned healer that even the Havior would be proud of. He would heal the many ailments that troubled

his people. Their suits were crafted for reasons other than just custom and tradition.

Many kobblins were sick. They could not easily survive Aldim's Manastorm plagued environment without them.

Despite his glorious dreams, Buffrix was still so low Level! He had a lot of work to do.

It didn't help that he was usually kept out of battles that would ordinarily grant him incredible amounts of Experience points.

Though, that would involve fighting all those feral monsters that were terribly scary. The ones that spawned from the farm weren't supposed to be too much for Buffrix to handle.

The kobblin did not blame Havior and the kind, generous people of Brightsong for wanting to protect him.

But in doing so, they stifled his abilities, or so Lootlox repeatedly told him. While their efforts managed to shelter the kobblin healer from harm, they also stalled his growth.

Truthfully, this place still offered far better opportunities than he ever had known before the Havior saved them all.

He supposed Lootlox was right. That didn't stop Buffrix from stopping at the boundary of the monster farm. Despite his wishes, his desire to be brave and strong, he shook. A ball of fear and anxiety roiled in his middle.

With trembling mittens, he clutched his magical wooden staff, which was laden with all sorts of fine things and stuffed to the brim with gems. The likes of which would make the Havior very sweaty indeed.

As clan leader, Lurklox had given him all the best gems to amplify his healing and magical prowess that she had access to.

Lootlox motioned him forward, but Buffrix could not budge his trembling knees.

A few of Noth's multicolored slimes milled about, bouncing against one another. They made up the bulk of Buffrix and Lootlox's party, nicknamed the "Monster Mashers." The name made Nothricient flustered for a reason he did not understand at all. The more times Buffrix, and then later Lurklox, brought it up, the worse Noth got.

Athilan, the ice dragon slime, served as a frontline warrior-type with those strong metallic scales and magic breath attacks. The ice slime was his energetic backup, ready to soak up damage at a moment's notice.

Noth repeatedly told Buffrix that the two would go down as soon as they took even a single blow, but the koblin tried to assure her that this was not the case. So long as the foe was not too strong.

Lootlox and Lurklox both served as the party's primary damage dealers.

Lurklox was far stronger than any other koblin. She routinely did very *unkoblinlike* things, such as going out into the wilds, hunting and fighting monsters she found while performing her duties as a Shadow to the Havior.

She was their ace in the hole.

If things got too tough, she would jump in to save them. But doing so would drastically lower the Experience for all the rest due to the Level difference, so she would hang back until the last moment.

That way, should things go poorly for the Monster Mashers, she could help them out without making Leveling all but impossible.

Besides, with so many people vying to enter the Tower – Lurklox included – the farms were being run with a skeleton crew. They needed more people, especially the new plantation that the kind Mister Hamrin was making up on the slopes.

It wasn't ready yet, but a few more days and maybe they could tend the coffee fields! Buffrix couldn't wait. All of koblinkind had heard a lot about coffee from the Havior, and so naturally, he was excited to

try the exotic drink that was said to impart wondrous powers of alertness, might and time-dilating focus.

Buffrix had to admit that perhaps the koblins had gotten a little too carried away with the myth of coffee and possibly blew it out of proportion.

If coffee truly offered time-dilation effects, then it would change the whole Worldshard.

Finally, the Monster Mashers had the one named Emby, the flame slime, who kept them all warm with his fiery enhancing spells. The koblins, that was. Athilan and Snowley didn't care much for the heat, but they were growing tolerant of it in exchange for the magic.

Buffrix considered Emby to be the most essential of the bunch.

A full party of six never would have been possible without Buffrix's Leadership skill. He had been fostering it for a long time, ever since he was a little kobbie trying to protect his clan.

He always tried to foster hope and courage in others, and yet Buffrix could not do it for himself.

A monster materialized out of the mana growing from the furrowed field. Newly spawned, it was a weak thing, feral and senseless. Little more than a conglomeration of basic energy that took on characteristics from the nearby environment.

The mana here was saturated with aspects of plants, rocks, and water. The latter was consumed by the wintry conditions.

The result was a lumpy, clay-like plantoid covered in a brittle shell of ice. Like an icy snail made out of clay and compost.

Lurklox appeared behind it in an overly dramatic fighting pose, her smoky lenses gleaming menacingly in the harsh wintry light. After a few swift strikes, the thing was done for.

“Is easy, yes? Come eye-peek, Buffrix!” Lurklox said. The koblin was trying to show him how weak the monsters were. How easily they could be defeated.

Monster after monster spawned while Buffrix stayed on the sidelines. As each encounter went along smoothly and easily, he eventually put one foot onto the farm, and then another.

His fellow Monster Mashers cheered Buffrix on, for they knew and recognized that even a small step was a big victory.

Over the course of the day, his party of koblins and slimes gained a few Levels. What injuries and damage they incurred, Buffrix healed.

Each Level allowed him to heal their minor injuries with greater and greater ease. He looked forward to one day doing something about their *Aether Sickness*, the very same illness that required them to wear masks.

It was a problem the other koblins had asked him to speak to the Havior about. If anybody could solve the problem of the *Aether Sickness*, it would be the Havior.

Buffrix knew Hal better than most, partly because he watched him so intently. Lurklox knew him well, but she was guarding him, not watching him, but rather watching for threats that might cause him harm.

Hal had a full plate. More than a full plate, and he had been biting off more than he could chew for a long time.

Buffrix paused. He was making a lot of food analogies.

Perhaps I am hungry? he thought to himself.

Offloading his proper [Kobbiepack] that he kept slung on his back, he pulled out some wrapped-up sandwiches—vegetarian, of course—and began to pass them out to his fellows.

He poured hot lemony tea served in battered tin cups that were enchanted to keep the brew warm despite the cold temperatures.

On the farm's porch, the Monster Mashers sat and talked about their experiences that day while they enjoyed a soothing meal that reinvigorated their spirits and bodies.

When Buffrix went out to the fields again, he was like a new koblin. The fear had been banished. Despite the many frightening creatures that often crawled out of the earth, he stood his ground this time.

Lurklox was needed less and less until she sat on the fence watching everybody else fight. She was many Levels stronger than them, and without her aid, the fights took longer but they also awarded much more Experience.

The koblin began to enjoy himself, slowly learning that becoming stronger didn't always have to be a fight to the death like he had seen the Havior go through time and time again.

The dragon slime grew so confident he started to form little icy scales all across his gelatinous body so that he hardly resembled a slime anymore.

Buffrix called out the attacks they would use. As party *and* clan leader, he was well-versed in ordering people around. It pleased him greatly to see his party members reacting before he even said a single word, already knowing what they should be doing.

Before long, the sun began to dip below the western mountain range. Buffrix was sad to see the night come on in full, but he was looking forward to seeing the people coming back from the Tower.

It had become a nightly thing. Rather than days, people returned almost every night with *Tales of the Tower*. He enjoyed sipping lemon tea and eating a veggie burger cooked up by Mister Kow while listening to the horrible and fascinating tales that the adventurers experienced.

The three koblins and the three slimes of the newly minted Monster Mashers wandered back to the safety of glowing lights and chattering people that was inner Brightsong.

It had been a good day. And the next would be even better!

I like growing, Buffrix decided. I may not grow as fast as the Havior, but I am a different koblin. I do not need to risk my life and those of my friends to progress. The Havior has his way, and I have mine. And that is okay.

Without the terrifying threat of dying, Monster Mashers met daily at the farms to help out the crews manning them and to get some much-needed Levels. The farmers grew familiar and even friendlier with them, welcoming them back every day.

Lurklox refused to go into the Tower. She said she much preferred playing with her family to the dangers of the Tower, especially since the Havior had not returned to the dangerous Tower ever since The Scary Day.

From time-to-time Lurklox went to visit the Havior while they trained.

Buffrix did not mind. He missed her company, but she was no longer needed to fight their battles. The koblins visited the Manatree's Glade nearly every night after their training session.

It must be boring for her to watch us, Buffrix thought to himself. She is so strong, so brave. I could never follow in the Havior's shadow like that.

She never complained though. Never said a word that made anybody feel as if they were wasting her time. Buffrix was thankful for her patience.

It was a trait that even the fabled Havior lacked. And one that the koblin clan leader prized heavily.

They had come from another Shard entirely, and they were making Aldim their home, fulfilling their oath to their Matron to spread the Koblin Way across the Shardrunes.

Buffrix looked up at the stars. *I hope you look upon us with pride, Matron Kimchi. We miss you.*