



CITADEL ONLINE

**A SUBJUGATION
SIDE STORY
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)**

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Chapter 1

Some people say that you can be someone entirely different than who you are in a game, and I'm living proof of it.

I know I am, even though playing Citadel Online is so different from real life. CO is the probably the hottest game out there right now, just as popular as Vanguard, maybe even a little more popular. It's an MMORPG where Vanguard is a first-person shooter. But what makes CO different is that it requires a jack to play, which means that only adults can play the game, and that the simsense VR in it is cutting edge. When you're in CO, you feel like you're *really* on the worlds of Arca or Netherim, that you are a different race, a different person...but you're still the same you.

I got into CO after hearing the guys in the office rave about it. Two of them got into the open beta for the game, and they were so in love with it that it was all they could talk about. So, when the release day came around, I bought an account and shelled out 330 credits for the third generation simsense rig module to make my vidlink capable of handling the game. And I have to admit, the game was everything the guys said it was. It's deeply complex, it allows a player to customize his character exactly the way he wants, and the game is so huge and has so much content, it would take someone centuries to do it all.

What sets it apart from every other game out there except Vanguard is that you don't have your character on the screen do something, you *are* the character, so *you* do it. If you cast a spell in CO, you have to know the magic words and chant them yourself. If you attack a monster with a sword, *you're* the one swinging the sword, so you have to know how to do it. The game's skill system assists you in some ways, guides your movements, but you have to know the moves yourself.

Another way CO is different from most other RPGs is that there are no classes and levels. Everything is based on skills, and the skills you choose determine what kind of player you are. A player can dump all their points

into magic skills and become a mage archetype (an archetype is someone who has a type of playstyle associated with a class in another game, like a magician, or an archer, or a warrior, or a healer), or put all their points into melee combat skills and become a warrior. A player can mix and match those points to, say, have a high weapon skill with a mace but still have a high spellcasting skill, what players in game call *war mages*. There are combat skills, magic skills, utility skills, crafting skills, and even purely recreational skills, like fishing and playing musical instruments. There are over a thousand skills in the game, so the possible combinations are nearly endless.

That's what kept me playing. I was able to create exactly the kind of character I wanted, and the game play and content keeps me logging in every day after work.

Which the guys in my office would be shocked to learn. I don't play with them...I don't play with *anybody*. I play the game completely solo, alone, because it's the way I like to play. See...I'm not that comfortable around other people. After what happened during the subjugation, being put in a work camp when I was 17 and spending three and half years in hell, then cast aside and forgotten by the people that were supposed to help us when we were released, well, I just like to be left alone now, both in the real world and in the game. My job puts me in a room with other people, but thankfully I don't work *with* them. After nearly ten years of drifting through life, working a series of dead end jobs to supplement the payment I received for my slave labor, I finally got into a job training program and learned database management, so now I work as a database manager for Merrane Macrotechnology in their Jacksonville, Florida office. I'm just a little cog in the vast machine of the company, I spend my days filling out forms, retrieving information for other departments, and updating the company database so all the company's information is current and correct. When cyberjacks were offered to people in the company three years ago, just a couple of months after I started working here, the company offered to pay half of the cost of getting one to all its employees who work in computers and as equipment operators. They felt that jacks would make us more efficient workers, and in that respect, they were right. Database management is a computer profession, so I got a cyberjack for half price. And trust me, it was the best money I ever spent, because it allows me to

experience simsense and play with merge-capable toys. The jack lets me directly interface with computers mind to machine, so I can merge to computers, like becoming part of it, so I can surf CivNet from *inside* of it and merge to toy exomechs and *become* the machine, moving it like it was my own body. I can even merge to those bionoids, like having a surrogate machine body that can do whatever while I'm sitting at home.

It was the best 270 credits I ever spent.

What I use the jack for mostly is entertainment after work. I'm part of a new wave of Terrans that the news networks are calling the *mergers*, people who spend almost all their spare time merged to CivNet, or playing VR simsense games like Vanguard, Knights of Deramir, Starblade Adventures, Overwatch Evolution, Skyrim Reborn, or CO.

Just about everyone in my office pod plays some kind of simsense game, but they don't know that I do too. I tried out Vanguard and played it a while, but I quit when Citadel Online came out, and it's what I do with most of my spare time.

It's not like I have anything else to do.

Nobody in the office knows that I play, because I don't really talk to them...to anyone. But everyone knows that about me, and they respect my space, so in that respect I really respect my co-workers. They understand that I'm an introvert, that what I went through on that farm closed me off to other people. They're always polite to me, and they never make fun of it or me. After all, I'm not exactly unique. Lots of people had really bad experiences during the subjugation, and even now, fourteen years later, those scars are still there in many of us.

On me, they're very visible. I have exactly 49 visible scars to demonstrate how brutal the Trillanes were to us farm workers—we call ourselves *pickers*—including one on my face that you can't possibly miss. It goes across my left cheek and ends under and behind my left ear. At one time I had no left earlobe, it had been cut off when I got the wound that made the scar, but I did have them replace my left ear with a cloned replacement. But I left the scar there, to remind me of the life I took every time I look in the mirror.

In the real world, I'm Kevin Ball, mild-mannered database management wage slave at 2M, working in an office building in Jacksonville. I ride the tram to work, eat in the cafeteria at lunch, then go home and don't come out of my apartment again until it's time to go back to work. If I have to go to the store or something, I do it on the way home. If I have errands to run, I get them done as early in the morning as possible on my day off when it's the least busy and I retreat back to my apartment when the city starts to get busy. I live in one of the high-rise apartment buildings on the south side of town, 46 stories of one- and two-bedroom apartments, where I live in a very modest two room efficiency on the 16th floor. But I have to admit, I can kinda see the ocean from the window of my apartment, at least a small piece of it between the two buildings built in front of my own. My apartment is small and spartan, because I learned during and after the subjugation that things can be taken away from you, so the less you have, the less people will want it. My apartment is a standard two room efficiency with a utility room holding my kitchen and washer and dryer and a living room that doubles as my bedroom, a design patterned off the single occupancy apartments they have in Japan. I can afford larger...but I don't need larger. The apartment may be small, but it's what I prefer. The apartment is more than big enough for me, and that gives me the extra money to afford things like a third gen simsense rig for my vidlink. I can buy what I want when I want it, because I don't waste money on things I don't need.

I'm not one of those VR addicts, though. I don't think the virtual world of CO is my real world and do things like quit my job and live off government assistance as I spend every moment merged to a simsense game. Yes, CO is my escape from my boring life and my past, but I value my boring life and understand that even if I don't do much in that boring life, that it's there to be lived.

But I have to admit, being in CO is *fun*. I can do things in the game I can't do in real life. In the game, I'm a solo player, a player whose skills are built entirely around surviving in a harsh, unforgiving world without help of any kind, and my objective in the game is to see how far I can go without joining a group or a guild. I call it the *Solo Challenge*, and I have rules for it that I abide by as I play. And I can admit, I've done very well for myself in the two years I've played this game. I can clear dungeons that entire groups

have trouble clearing, because I spend a lot of time studying the boss monsters and waste a lot of money on powerful consumables (one-shot items that grant magical effects) as I test myself against content meant to be taken on by groups. I can kill overworld boss monsters solo, which are designed to be taken down by groups. While my gear isn't as good as people who group or raid, my skills are much, much higher than theirs. And the way things work between gear and skills, that balances things out if I come up against a raider. His superior gear covers for his lower skills, where my much higher skills cover for my poorer gear. That puts us on even ground, and on even ground, I have to admit, I can take most other players because I have far more experience in PvP than they do.

Actually, what makes me competitive is the fact that not long after I started the game, I got super, super lucky. The first time I killed an overworld boss by myself, it dropped an item that taught me an exceptionally rare and powerful Ancient Skill called Lone Wolf. Lone Wolf adds a percentage chance based on its skill rating to the chance your skills go up when playing solo, and you increase Lone Wolf by killing hostile monsters or other players and gaining experience points while not in a group. So, when I skilled up Lone Wolf, it began to have a real impact on the rate my skills increase. Ancient Skills are rare and powerful, much more powerful than standard skills, and one of the primary focuses of the game is to acquire Ancient Skills...and I got so, so lucky to get like the perfect Ancient Skill to complement my playstyle almost right off the bat. Because of Lone Wolf, my skills are *way* higher than the average player with my time playing the game, putting me on the same level as the super hardcore skill grinding players without having to do all that super hardcore skill grinding.

I found out after I got Lone Wolf that it's an *ultra-rare* Ancient Skill. Out of the approximately 1.1 billion CO players across the galaxy, only .0005% of players have it...and for a simple reason. It will only drop if a player kills an overworld boss solo, with no help from any other player. If another player even damages the boss once or casts a beneficial spell on the solo player fighting the boss, it won't drop Lone Wolf. And Lone Wolf only has a .5% chance to drop if those conditions are met.

My Lone Wolf skill is 2,183, which adds a percentage chance based on its skill rating to the chance that a skill will increase when I'm not in a

group or raid. At a skill of 2,183, it increases the chance that a skill will increase through use by 21.83% of the base chance. So, if the chance a skill goes up is 10%, Lone Wolf increases that chance to about 12.2%. And since skills have a lesser and lesser chance of increasing as they get higher and higher, that bonus to the skill-up chance is *absolutely huge*. My sword skill is 2,941, and the average chance for it to increase through use is 0.0017%. Because of Lone Wolf, that increases to about 0.00203%, because it increases the chance by 21.83% based on that .0017% base number. That may seem paltry, but understand, that 0.00203% gets checked *every time I swing my sword or parry a blow*, and that can happen hundreds of times during the course of a battle, and potentially thousands of times over an extended play session. Lone Wolf allows me to spend my experience points only on my highest skills, or the one I want to raise the fastest, because once a skill goes over 1,000, the chance of it raising by using it during the course of game play drops significantly. The bonus to my chance to earn skill increases means my skills go up faster than other players, and over time, that really adds up to where I am now. I can't really see other players' skill windows, but I'll bet my highest skills are at *least* 500 points higher than another player with the same time playing the game, and it's all thanks to Lone Wolf. The skill is overpowered in my opinion, but the game devs have never nerfed it. I guess because so few people have it, it doesn't unbalance the game.

I'm one of the rarest players in the game in other ways. For one, I'm a human in game, and just about everyone in the game believes that humans are *the worst* race in Citadel Online. And in a way, I can understand their position. Humans have no special abilities that really help them out in combat. They don't have skills that make things cheaper from merchants or have interesting or fun abilities. Humans in the game have no stat bonuses at all, considered the baseline by which every other race is compared for their stat bonuses. What humans do have is the ability to learn a whole lot of skills with either no or much lower pre-requisite requirements, where most other races have to learn other skills and raise them to a certain level before they can learn the skill they want. The devs meant for humans in game to be the jack-of-all-trades type, with access to more skills faster than any other race in the game but paying for it with no bonuses. I chose human for my starting race because, well, I'm a human in real life, and it was a chance to create an avatar based on what I always wished I could have

been. The me in game looks nothing like the me in the real world. I think that if I knew what I knew now, I would have picked another race, but it's too late now. You only get one character per server per account in Citadel Online, and no way in hell am I raising an alt character on another account on my main server or rolling a character on another server, not after all the work I put into Xen.

That's the perk of playing on release day. I got the name Xen. And I picked it because Xen Quickstrike is my absolute favorite character from any vidy or game. He's one of the crew of the *Starblade* from the vidy show of the same name, a master swordsman who is ultra-cool. He's also something of a mold breaker in Faey society, because he's a man who knows how to fight, but they also adhered to Faey traditions by making him a Terran instead of a Faey. Xen Quickstrike wasn't his real name, it was what Ethera named him once she picked him up for her crew. Apparently, there's an old legend of a male warrior back from the Faey's Iron Age, and his name was Xen, so Ethera named her new crew member after him.

I'm also rare in just how far I've come without ever once grouping with another player. I have 36 Ancient Skills, which is a number more in line with a raider, including a Legendary Skill. A Legendary Skill is unique to that character. No other character can ever get it on my server. My Legendary Skill is called *Touched by the Djinn*. Simply put, the Legendary skill grants me the powers of the Djinn in the game, which is a race of NPC humanoids most closely associated with genies in Terran folklore. I had to unlock one skill at a time as my skill level increased, then level up that skill independently of Touched by the Djinn. I gain skill points in the legendary skill by using the skills granted to me by the skill, so every time I use those skills, it has a chance to skill up both that individual power and Touched by the Djinn at the same time.

What makes it so ridiculously overpowered is that the first skill I unlocked was *Conjuring*. The skill is pretty self-explanatory, it allows me to conjure material objects using mana, and the higher I get the skill, the larger and more valuable the objects I can conjure. I can conjure most anything, but the only objects that are permanent are food, water, and objects made of cloth or wood. I can conjure objects made of other materials, but they're temporary. Objects made of bone last about six hours, objects made of stone last about three hours, and objects made of metal only last for about an

hour. I think that's in there to keep me from just conjuring gold 'til I make myself insanely rich...but whoever designed the skill didn't think things through, because the skill *has* made me ridiculously rich.

When I got the skill high enough, I could conjure high-quality cloth like the varieties of silk, brocade, velvet, and lace required for tailors in their high-skill tradeskill recipes. So are the high-quality woods used by fletchers and woodworkers. But where I make the real money is with enchanting supplies. The enchanting materials that I can conjure that are permanent (remember, I can conjure permanent water and food, which means I can conjure things like the blood and flesh of animals used in enchanting) are my biggest profit, because I've finally reached a conjuring skill that allows me to conjure items derived from magical creatures, which makes my conjured item magical itself. And if the item is permanent, so is the magic that imbues it. So, I can conjure extremely rare materials like dragon's blood or basilisk eyes, and those can go for serious gold in the player markets. I've made literally millions of gold selling materials to other players so they could advance their tradeskills, which cost me nothing to gather or produce. That money was enough for me to buy a modest shop with an apartment over it in Freeport in the Trades District, which I closed down because it never really got enough business to make it worth the trouble of keeping open. There are so few players who roll human, and the other races in the faction won't travel for hours and hours to reach Freeport just to get a good deal on silk or sandworm poison. Besides, I have to be there to sell things, and I'm too busy to stand around in a shop, waiting for customers that will never come. Where I make my money is in the merchant cities of Alder's Bluff and Serrethar, cities where players who focus mainly on the economic side of the game have made their bases and have built their financial empires. I don't have shops there, I sell in rented stalls in the player marketplaces that are automated so I don't have to be there to sell my goods, and I always sell so that I undercut my competitors and I never flood a market to the point where prices go down. If the prices start coming down, I just switch to some other high-value item I can conjure and sell that. That tactic has made me one of the richer players on the server...but nobody knows it. I never brag about what I've done or what I have in the game, because I don't want the attention.

I've unlocked five skills in Touched by the Djinn so far, with each one unlocking every 500 points as I raised the master skill. Those are what we call *threshold levels* with a skill, where a skill might gain a new ability or its operation may alter in some way that makes it more powerful, or even gain a new "child skill" related to the main skill, and we players really look forward to reaching them. I gained the Conjure skill at 1, at 500 I gained Immunity: Gas, at 1,000 I gained Immunity: Lightning, and at 1,500 I gained the iconic ability of the Djinn within the game, Imbue Arrow. Every Djinn in the game carries and uses a bow, and they have this ability that imbues their arrows with lightning, causing their shots to turn into lightning bolts that hit for *major* damage, in addition to the damage from the arrow itself. As if that wasn't enough, they don't have to lead targets when firing imbued arrows. The lightning bolt manifests the instant the arrow leaves the bow and it propels the arrow to its target in the blink of an eye, dealing both the damage of the arrow and the damage of the lightning bolt. And trust me, those imbued arrows hit *hard*.

Two months ago, when I hit 2,000 in Touched by the Djinn, I gained what I think is the final skill in the Legendary skill tree, which is Djinn Form. I can take the form of a Djinn, which in the game is a three meter tall blue-skinned humanoid that look vaguely like a Faey thanks to the skin and pointed ears, which I'm not much of a fan of...but the benefits of Djinn form more than make up for that.

What makes it so awesome? In Djinn form, I can *fly*. I can fly in the game like a Djinn, which means I do it by magic. I don't need wings, and because of that, I can't ever get tired in the air. I can fly indefinitely, which the two PC races that can fly, the Drakkin and the Sylphs, cannot do. Since they have wings, they have to land and rest about every 10 minutes or so when they fly while in combat or fly at very low altitude. When they fly at high altitude they can fly for hours at a time without resting, allowing them to travel quickly around the game world, but when they engage in combat while in flight or are flying very low to the ground, they tire very quickly and have to land and rest.

Trust me, 10 minutes is not nearly long enough in the opinion of just about every race in the game that's not a Drakkin or a Sylph. We *hate* those assholes because of their ability to fly. It allows them to attack from the air, untouchable by anything but ranged attacks while able to attack creatures

on the ground with ranged attacks, and it also allows them to escape from a fight going against them.

Believe it or not, the Djinn Form skill matters. When I first got it, I found out quickly that my clothes and equipment *did not* change with me. That little adventure cost me a very good pair of boots and nearly a thousand gold in repairs to my other gear from me tearing them during the change. I salvaged everything but the boots, which were completely destroyed...and those boots were a drop from a dungeon, so they will *not* be easy for me to replace. So, to change form, I had to take off all my gear, change, then put on an entirely different set of gear for my three-meter-tall body. I also found out that my skill rating determines if I successfully change or not. The first time I used the skill was automatic, but it took me nearly thirty tries to change back into a human. I had to raise it to 300 just to get to where I could change form every time without it failing, and when I reached 500, a threshold skill level, I *finally* got to the point where my gear in human form disappears when I change instead of me having to take it off. It's still not perfect, though. If I change in human form, my human gear vanishes, but my Djinn gear doesn't just appear on me already equipped. I have to equip it the same as before, and unequip it when I want to change back, else it'll just fall off of me when I'm suddenly an entire meter shorter. But when I change back into a human, my human gear is back on me, I don't have to equip it. However, I don't get the stat bonuses or any special abilities from my human gear when in Djinn form. I'm hoping that eventually, when I get the skill high enough, I won't have to manually equip gear after I change form, and my biggest item on the wish list is that my gear just stays with me in either form, that my human gear changes size to fit me in Djinn form. Believe me, that would be a godsend, since my human gear is far, far superior to the gear I've managed to gather for my Djinn form.

Then there's the flying. When I got Djinn Form last month, I took two weeks and fully dedicated myself to raising my skill, because I found out that how fast I can go and how well I can change speed or direction is dependent on my skill. At skill 1, I was slower than a drunk turtle. I've raised the skill to 1,383, and that allows me to fly at about 230 kilometers an hour or so, and also allows me to change speeds fairly dramatically and change direction quickly and easily. That's fairly fast, fast enough for me to

get around as fast as a flying mount, and way, way faster than I could manage on a horse when traveling on the ground. But it's still slower than how fast the NPC Djinn can fly. NPC Djinn can fly so fast that *nothing* can catch them in the air, they're the fastest flying creatures in the game. It's my hope that around 2,000 or so, I'll be able to fly as fast and as gracefully as the NPC Djinn.

Trust me, Djinn form is incredibly useful not just because it lets me fly. When I take Djinn form, the game no longer sees me as a player, and you have no idea how powerful that is. I lose the player icon that other players can see, which makes me look like an NPC. Spells designed to work specifically against players don't work on me, and I can cheese some of the rules in place that govern how players can interact with one another. For example, when I'm in Djinn form, I can attack other players in my faction while in faction territory. That's usually impossible due to the way the rules work, but when I'm in Djinn form, the game engine no longer classifies me as a player, so that lets me get around it.

That's what makes it a Legendary Skill. There are magic spells that transform players into animals, NPCs, and other creatures, but they're still considered players while under the spell's effect, and they have a duration. When I use Djinn form, for all intents and purposes, I *am* a Djinn, and I can stay like that as long as I want. The main advantage is that when I'm traveling, I'm out of reach of most monsters or hostile animals on the ground, so I'm relatively safe moving through dangerous territory. I don't show up as a player to magical detection spells, so I can't be easily located by player killers.

But Djinn form does have a major drawback that makes it not nearly as good as it could be, and that's players attacking me thinking I'm a monster, and that I'm carrying loot. Djinn are well known in the game for dropping a nearly ludicrous amount of gold, a reflection of how hard it is to kill them out in the open, and Djinn hair is a highly valuable component in fletching, tailoring, and enchanting (as thread for fletching and tailoring and as a component for the very useful Charm of Flying consumable in enchanting), so players who need money will try to kill them for that money and for their very valuable hair. What makes it especially dangerous for me is that if I'm killed by a player while in Djinn form, the player can loot *all of my equipped gear* as well as all the money I'm carrying...but that's possible all

the time. If you kill another player, you can take all the money he's carrying. Well, if I'm killed by a player in Djinn form, they can take my *gear* on top of my gold. Because of that, I don't equip my Djinn form with anything expensive, valuable, or something I'm not willing to lose. Often, I don't even bother to equip my Djinn form at all if I'm just using it to travel from one place to another, going naked and risking that I won't get one-shotted for all of the 190 hit points I have while naked in Djinn form.

Because of the threat of losing my gear on top of my gold and XP (you lose all unspent experience points when you die), I don't use Djinn Form for anything other than transportation and slipping past monsters that are hostile to a player but aren't hostile to an NPC Djinn. I don't fight in Djinn form, and I've never really even practiced fighting in Djinn form outside of learning how to shoot a bow without my feet being on the ground. I'll do that when I can risk death in Djinn form without losing anything valuable. I do have a set of crappy throwaway gear I can equip on my Djinn form for emergencies, including a kinda meh bow, but as a rule, if I'm in Djinn form, I run, I don't fight.

It has one other use, which has saved me a lot of time and money. Flying in Djinn form is far faster than my base movement speed at my current skill level (my maximum speed while flying increases the higher the skill), which is fast enough to let me move overland at a fair clip. What would take a player half an hour to run, I can fly in a few minutes. It allows me to cover large distances without having to use horses or other mounts, which in this game are both a blessing and a curse. Yes, horses are very fast, but unlike other games, horses don't just "disappear" when you're done with them. They can be killed by monsters, and they can be stolen or wander away if you leave them out in the wild. People who use mounts mostly use them to move from town to town, then they stable them in the town and head out to where they want to adventure on foot. And most people don't buy them, they rent them. It's fairly cheap to rent a horse to travel to another town, where buying a horse is *very* expensive. But no matter how you use the horse, you have to have Horse Riding skill to actually ride it. And if you raise your skill high enough, you can fight from the back of a horse, which is a major advantage in outdoor combat.

Legendary skills drop mainly from dungeons and raids, though certain overworld bosses and bosses in certain group and raid quests have a super-

rare chance of dropping them. I got mine when I solo cleared a dungeon about six months ago. I couldn't believe it when I saw it in the loot window...I'd never seen a Legendary anything before, and I didn't entirely understand what it was until I took a second look at it. And I'm not going to thumb my nose at it. It's not super flashy or powerful like most other Legendary skills, but it's really, really useful as a quality of life skill. I use it to make money, I use it for quick travel, and I use it to avoid PKers and mobs hostile to players. Believe me, if I had a choice between a combat Legendary skill and Touched by the Djinn, I'd take Touched by the Djinn every time.

Having a skill over 2,000 just six months after getting it is insane, but it reflects both how much I use the skill and my determination to raise it as quickly as possible.

The funny thing is, nobody knows I have a Legendary skill. I don't really talk to other people in game and spend almost all my time out in the wilderness exploring and adventuring. I only come into town when I'm carrying so much money that it's starting to worry me that I might lose it to another player, then I dump it in the bank and head back out. And all my skills are set up to let me do it. I have very high Hunting and Foraging skills, which lets me get food efficiently, which I then cook up using my Cooking skill. I have three different skills that hide me or allow me to hide, Hide, Camouflage, and Stalk, and two different ones that allow me to move without making noise, Stalk and Move Silently (Stalk is a combo hide + sneak skill, allowing someone to stalk prey while hunting, but it only works in the outdoors and it's not as effective as Hide or Move Silently), allowing me to be as sneaky as a ninja when necessary. I have an array of outdoor survival skills that allow me to operate far from civilization or a base of resupply for extended periods of time, and I have fairly high Spellcasting skills in multiple schools of magic to allow me to use magic spells to further increase my survivability. The most important of them for exploring is a Transmutation spell that allows me to create a temporary safe shelter, which allows me to log out in the wilderness. Usually you can only log out in a safe zone, or in an inn if you're in another faction's territory, but Create Shelter allows me to log out anywhere I have enough room to cast the spell and create the little cabin that serves as my safe zone.

Because of the critical importance of being able to log out anywhere, almost every player in the game has a Transmutation skill high enough to cast Create Shelter. And it's an easily acquired spell, it's sold by NPC spell merchants in almost every city or town in the game. It was designed to be easily attainable for players.

I'd bet that only the Drakkin and the Sylphs, the two races in the game that can fly, have maps as complete as mine...thanks to my high Mapmaking skill and my skillset that allows me to operate deep in wild territory for long periods of time.

Some players are raiders, killing epic bosses for uber loot. Some are dungeon delvers. Some are crafters. Some spend all their time in the merchant cities, buying and selling things to make gold. Me, I'm an explorer, a hardy survivor that tests himself against the unknown with his skills and his wits.

And trust me, there's a whole lot of world to explore. The continent that's our game world is about the size of South America, and the vast majority of it is neutral territory. It's wild, unexplored land, and there are players, like me, who devote themselves to exploring that territory. We're the players that find the overland boss monsters, the caves, the points of interest, and we put what we learn on CivNet sites for other players to use. Even I do that, since I don't mind other players coming along behind me and seeing the things I've already explored. I have a file on my vidlink that documents all my explorations and discoveries, and it's nearly 200 gigastrings in size. I had to install nearly 10 terrastrings of memory in my vidlink to handle my exploration data, the recordings I make of my simsense stream so I can go back later and review it, and the usual programs I keep on it.

And I've only explored about 10% of the game's two worlds!

This game is mind-bogglingly massive. It's so huge that if I were to walk from Freeport, my faction's home city on the west coast, to Salkanar, the home city of the Selkies on the east coast, it would take me nearly two months in real time to do it.

That's why it's so weird to be back in my own faction's territory, riding a rented horse into the frontier town of Auger's Ford, right on the edge of

Golden Lion territory. I haven't been back here in nearly two months. My faction, the Golden Lion faction, is comprised of four races; humans, high elves, dwarves, and the Jagaara, who are a large, physically powerful bipedal feline race. Most players in my faction are high elves and Jagaara, so it's very rare for someone to see a human player riding into town. Seriously, on my server, humans are only about .01% of the server's population. Even in our own faction, we only make up about 3% of the players. I mean, why roll a human when you can roll a high elf and start the game with a Spellcasting skill of 50 in every school of magic, deal increased damage with Evocation magic, get bonuses to Spellcasting skill-ups, and get one free spell in each school of magic right off the bat? Or roll a Jagaara with their impressive physical stat bonuses, Claw and Fang skill that lets them fight without weapons, and their special abilities? Or a dwarf who has bonus stamina, making them harder to kill, reduced damage from metal and stone weapons, infravision, and the ability to detect treasure? Humans are the red-headed stepchildren of the Golden Lion faction, even if our city, Freeport, is the largest of the four faction cities in our territory. And I'm even rarer because I'm a human that didn't delete my character and reroll. I stuck with it, stayed human, and am one of the insanely rare *old* human characters.

Not that anyone can easily tell. In this game, the only real indication of a player's capabilities is the gear he has equipped. Other players can't see my name, they can't inspect me to see what gear I have or what skills I have. They can only see the gear I have equipped, and I keep a low profile by not equipping my best gear unless I need it. I have a set of "traveling" gear that makes me look like a newbie, someone with little or no money and thus not an inviting target for "PKers," players who spend their time going around and killing other players for their money. The only indication to the players in town that I'm not as new as I appear is the fact that I have a high Horse-Riding skill, which allows me to handle my horse with professional ease.

I'm not the only one who does things like that. It's a long-established tactic to conceal your true power and worth from other players, even in your faction's home territory. Really, only the glory-seeking asshats run around with their best gear on in a city, the kind of players that want others to gawk at their uber gear and be jealous of them. I don't really need the

gear in a city. In my faction's home territory, I can't be attacked by players from other factions, so the threat of other players is removed. And when I'm in a safe zone, I can't be hurt by monsters or magic. So, there's no earthly reason for someone to need armor or weapons here unless they're about to go out and adventure or they just got back. Me, I'm in my usual traveling gear, no visible armor, low-end clothing, an old, battered sword strapped to my back. The only "good" piece of gear I have on isn't visible, a pair of magical bracers under the sleeves of my tunic. I never, ever take those bracers off, because they're magical items that give me an armor rating about equal to a full suit of chain mail armor. Given I don't wear heavy armor so it doesn't weigh me down and it's too loud and noisy for the kind of stuff I do, those bracers are probably my most useful piece of equipment. They give me an armor rating without the armor's weight, and allow me to use predominantly leather items in my other gear slots to increase my stats without encumbering myself, the armor rating of the cloth and leather added to the armor rating supplied by the bracers. That's also part of my deception, because I'm not built as a magician or spellcaster, I'm built as a warrior. I do have highly trained magical skills, an absolute requirement for a solo player, but my primary focus is on combat skills, particularly sword-based skills. I specialize in dual wielding swords, but I know some combat spells, and I have some rather sneaky skills to hide, escape, or get the drop on an opponent. If I had an archetype, it would be a war mage with very high thief skills, like a combination fighter/magician/thief. But since I'm not wearing armor, I don't *look* like a swordsman. I look like a magic-type with a sword equipped, like a war mage. So, PKers would see me and prepare themselves to face a spellcaster, not a player who focuses on melee combat.

Deception is a big part of this game.

As to why I'm here...I'm not entirely sure. They did a big content update yesterday, adding in a ton of new quests and a few new dungeons and a new raid, and when I logged on after getting home from work yesterday, I had a carrier falcon bring a summons from Freeport, the start of a quest. The letter was from Prince Aldion himself, the ruler of Freeport. I have no idea what quest it is, and I was curious enough to travel nearly thirteen hours back to Freeport, a trip that took me two days in real time, to find out. It was about time for me to return to a town to put my money in

the bank anyway. I was carrying around nearly two thousand gold pieces, and not only is that a lot of money, it has a lot of weight and was putting me on the edge of encumbrance. Even in my Bag of Carrying, the money was starting to become a weight issue. So, I decided to kill two birds with one stone and do my town chores in Freeport.

Besides, I was going to move to a new area anyway. Too many Sylphs have been showing up in the Terrorfang Forest, and I particularly don't like the flying races. They can snipe at you from in the air with a bow, crossbow, or magic, and many players can't really do all that much about it...though I can. But it's still massively annoying. Terrorfang Forest is fairly close to player-controlled territory, but I hadn't been there before, so I wanted to explore it. But now, I think I'll go back into the deepest of unexplored territory, which is mainly to the north.

The five factions on Arca occupy the shoreline of the continent in a U-shape. My faction is on the southwest corner of the continent. The Shadowmoon faction is to the north, the Amber Shire faction is to the east, and past them on the southeast coast of the continent is the Silver Blade faction. To the north of the Silver Blade faction is the Covenant faction, which is the one the Sylphs are in. The Terrorfang Forest is about four hundred kilometers from the edge of Covenant territory, and that's close enough for there to be way too many Sylphs for my taste.

Seriously, just about every other race on Arca hates the Sylphs, because so many of them are PKers. They use their ability to fly as a cheap way to kill other players, and there's not a single freakin' Sylph on this server without a super-high magic, bow, or crossbow skill. And on Netherim, I'd bet that the races there hate the Drakkin for the same reason. It's a sad thing to say, but Sylphs rule about any open area from on high, something that's become such a problem that the game devs are looking into nerfing Sylphs and Drakkin to make them less dominating in places where grounded races have no cover. If a player is caught out in an open area, like a grassy plain or desert, they're more or less screwed. Sylphs can fly faster than any players except Savasa or Silakkin can run, they can use their bows and crossbows from outside the range of a grounded player's ranged attacks by firing from outside the range of any spell or ranged weapon fired from the ground and letting gravity bring their arrows down to the target, and while they have to land about every ten minutes to rest, they can do it well away

from the other player, regenerate their stamina, then get back in the air and continue shooting arrows at their target. Most players can't run far enough to get away from them while they're resting.

We don't see many Drakkin here on Arca, because it's fairly expensive to get back and forth between the two planets. There's a spell that will allow someone with a high enough Translocation skill to cast a teleport spell to get to the other planet, but it's a super-rare spell. Most people use scions to get between the planets, and the crystal that powers a scion that does that is *ridiculously* expensive. Scions are magical constructs hidden through the world that will teleport players to other scions, but only a few scions have the ability to transport players between Arca and Netherim. I know of only one, located deep underground in the Nazgar Hills, and what I need to use it is an empowered eternity crystal, which costs about 400 gold to buy.

What I've been looking for is the scion to the Citadel. So far, no player on our server has found it, and there's supposed to only be only one of them. Once someone finds the scion to the Citadel, it unlocks it for the entire server and everyone can adventure there, even take on the dungeons and raids there. And there's a real incentive to hunt for the scion, because the first person to find the scion and use it, to go to Citadel, gets an awesome reward, awesome enough for me and many others to devote most of our time searching for the scion. And we'd know if someone found the scion, because it would cause the shield around the Citadel to come down. We know that because players on other game servers have found the scion and opened the Citadel. When a player finds the scion and enters the Citadel, the shield comes down and it opens the Citadel to all players.

It's a bit of a risky proposition going to the other planet in several ways. For one, no faction there has contact with your faction, so you're considered hostile by all of them. That means you can't shop at most NPC merchants, you can't repair your gear unless you can do it yourself, and most Arcavian races can't speak any of the languages used on Netherim, so you have no way to communicate with NPCs to start quests. The first time I went to Netherim, it took me quite a while to establish myself there, raise my language skills in the player races on the planet to where I could communicate with NPCs of those races, then raise my reputation with the NPC factions there to be allowed to enter their towns and shop in their stores. I can't enter player faction territory without risking being attacked,

but there are enough NPC factions there for me to have access to the services of a town when I need one. I had to rely on my hunting and foraging skills while I was there, as well as my own Blacksmithing, Tailoring, and Leatherworking skills to repair my gear. Then I had to track down the language tutor NPCs that taught the languages I needed to know to operate on the planet...and those aren't cheap. NPC tutors charge 500 gold to give you a language skill of 15, which is the bare minimum required for the language to increase on its own through use. But it was fun, and it was productive. I'm one of the few Arcavian race players on my server that can operate on Netherim. I speak their languages, enough NPC factions don't consider me to be hostile, which lets me resupply and repair my equipment, and I know my way around.

The players here look like they're fairly well skilled and geared. Towns bordering neutral territory hold lots of players that adventure out there and then come back to their own faction territory for the protection it offers, and for that reason few PKers will lurk close to a faction's border. It puts their targets too close to help, and trust me, when a PKer shows up near another faction's border, *lots* of players will go out there to kill them. That's just one way venturing into another faction's territory is dangerous. Most of them aren't paying much attention to me, even less when I get off the horse and walk it towards the livery to turn it in. And what's almost normal whenever I'm in a town, I'm like the *only* human player there. The only humans here are NPCs.

It's nearly 300 kilometers from Auger's Ford to Freeport...and I have to do it overland, because I keep my ability to take Djinn form a secret from other players and there are no scions I know of nearby that will take me to Freeport. One of the advantages of faction territory is I gain access to flying mounts to allow me to move very quickly within faction territory, and I can use a gryphon to get to Freeport in about an hour from here; flying mounts that fly from town to town like the gryphon I was going to use fly with magical speed. So, a winged animal flying 300 kilometers an hour is possible in the game. A player has to have Mount: Gryphon skill to ride a gryphon, even one that's flying on a pre-programmed flight path like the one I was planning to use, but mine is more than high enough to do that. Mine is high enough to control a gryphon, use it as a free-moving mount. But I don't do that, because if you think horses are expensive, just try to

buy a gryphon...if you *could* on this server. NPCs don't sell them, they can only be bought from players with the Animal Husbandry and Animal Training skills high enough to domesticate a gryphon...and while there are dozens of players on Methrian with a skill that high, only a player on our faction can tame a gryphon. It's an exclusive mount to the faction, the same as pegasi are exclusive to the Covenant faction and hippogryphs are exclusive to the Amber Shire faction. As far as I know, no player in our faction has a skill high enough to domesticate a wild gryphon, so that means that no one on our faction is going to have a gryphon until someone on our faction puts in about three months of hardcore skill training to raise the skill high enough to do it, spends another month raising their husbandry skills so they could properly care for an exotic animal, then spends about three months finding a gryphon egg, hatching it, raising the chick, then training it to be a mount. That was the only way to do it, at least to get it started. From what I read on the forums, once a player trains a gryphon, that gryphon would pass on most of its training to its chicks on its own, making it much easier to raise additional mounts.

There were plenty of trained gryphons in the Freeport Army, but they don't sell mounts. It was far too much work to train a gryphon to sell them. A player could try to steal one, but that was a fool's prospect.

About an hour later, I was landing on the platform for the gryphon aerie in Freeport. Freeport was built to resemble a medieval city, like middle-ages era Paris or London, and was the largest city in the faction. For that matter, it was one of the largest cities on Arca. It was a major seaport, with boats that could take one about anywhere, and was about the only place in the game where one was going to see a lot of humans...just not players.

Cities like this just boggle my mind. There are like 25,000 NPC humans in Freeport, and each and every one of them has a story. They have houses, they have jobs, they have hobbies, they have friends, and their AI follows schedules based on those data, making every NPC in the city somewhat unique. There were homeless bums, there were merchants, laborers, guardsmen, soldiers, visitors from other towns in the territory—and they were true visitors, when they were here, they weren't in their home town—nobles, and rich people. The city had five districts based on its main focus, the Trades District, the Harbor District, the Rowhouse District, the Traveler's District, and the Military District. The Traveler's District was the

one just inside the main gate, but the gryphon aerie was in the Military District in the center of town, not far at all from the Royal Palace. Though it was named the Military District, this district held most of the manors of the noble families, the Royal Palace, and Falcon's Roost, a military fortress overlooking the harbor. I stepped into a side alley and changed clothes, which was necessary because I was supposed to report to the Prince, and the AI of the Prince would be offended if I showed up looking like a street bum. So, I put on some acceptably nice clothes, a soft gray doublet, leather breeches, knee boots in good repair, and a wide belt with a silver buckle. I didn't look like a noble, but I did look like I tried to dress nicely...and that was what mattered.

I walked down the street to the palace, presented the letter, and was surprised when I was escorted not to the throne room, but to an antechamber behind it. Prince Aldion was sitting at a desk writing as I entered, and I bowed when he turned to look at me. "Your Highness, the adventurer Xen has answered your summons," the guard reported, which caused a quest flag update in my field of vision. This was part of the quest chain.

"Thank you, Sergeant," the young Prince replied. Aldion was the son of King Gerin, who had been missing for the last two years...since the game began. Supposedly, one of the undiscovered quests in the game was finding King Gerin and returning him to Freeport. But, since only humans could find and do the quest, it may never be completed. Aldion looked to be about eighteen, handsome and with shoulder length blond hair, wearing a royal purple doublet, black breeches and boots, and still wearing the crown of a Prince, not a King. He wouldn't declare himself King until he was absolutely convinced his father was dead. "Thank you for answering my summons quickly, Xen," he said to me, standing up.

"You're welcome, your Highness," I answered, mainly because you have to interact with NPCs to make quests advance. And some of them are pretty engaging. I once had a three-hour conversation with a Laki innkeeper in a little tavern hidden in the Malori Desert. The AIs in this game are very complex, each with their own unique personality, and some of them are incredibly lifelike. Sometimes you forget you're talking to a computer program with some of them, and the Prince would be one of those AIs. Generally, the more important the NPC, the more complex the AI governing

them is. Lore characters, heroes, and the like are very nearly as complex as living people.

“We have need of you, Xen,” he said, turning and picking something up off his table. “You have distinguished yourself as one of the greatest of the adventurers that call Freeport home. The letters detailing your exploits never seem to stop flowing to my desk, and I quite enjoy reading the latest report of your accomplishments,” he smiled up at me. “That is why I’ve called you here. I need your help.”

“Me, your Highness?” I asked in honest confusion. Was this...was this one of those new *Champion’s Quests* the patch notes said were added into the game yesterday? But those were only available to *one* player in a race! And if I remembered reading it right, only the most powerful player of that race would be offered those quests, to serve as the literal champion of the race! There was no way in *hell* I was the most powerful human on the server! Hell, I don’t even *group*! “I’m just an explorer, Prince Aldion. A mapmaker. There must surely be someone better to help you.”

“You are the best humanity has to offer, Xen,” he replied calmly. “And because of that, I would entrust this mission to no one else.”

My quest log updated, something that only I can see, and I stared in utter shock at the title of the quest: *Champion’s Quest: King Gerin must be found!* Holy *shit*, this *was* a Champion’s quest!

Good grief...how in the world could I be the champion? I’m a solo player! I don’t have any raid gear! Were there truly that few human players, that someone like me was the best the race could offer? That was... *pathetic!*

I feverishly went over what I remembered from the update notes. There was one champion for each race, so there would be 40 champions on the server. Champions received rewards for that title in the form of exclusive quests that only they could do, quests that were supposed to have server-wide implications...and if my quest was to find and return King Gerin, that *definitely* would have a server-wide impact. Champions got some other perks, like I’d get a discount on goods I bought from human merchants, I could ask for help from my faction’s military and other organizations for extra manpower, and I was allowed to use human transportation services

and military assets for free. I was also eligible for access to unique gear, the Champion's Raiment equipment, which would be Legendary rarity and have unique models, but I had to earn that gear by completing champion quests. But there were some drawbacks to being the champion. For one, if I was PK-ed by another race, or another champion, then I'd lose "champion's points," and if I lost too many of them I would lose the title of Champion and it would go to the next player on the list. After all, I was supposedly the strongest human on the server, so I shouldn't be getting killed by chumps from other races. However, I had a way to get those points back by killing other Champions. Every Champion I defeated gave me one Champion's Point, and I could kill the same Champion multiple times and gain a point for every victory. I would also lose the ability to move through the territory of other factions without attracting attention, because supposedly the tales of my exploits would extend to other factions' territory. Players in other factions wouldn't be able to identify me as a champion, but their NPCs could. Also, the other races' champions could identify me by sight, I carried a flag that only other champions could see, and one of the champion quests was killing the champions of the other races.

Because of that, the other three champions in my faction *could* attack and kill me, despite us being on the same faction. But, doing it within our own faction territory carried a risk, because the NPC guards of the same race as a champion would actively defend their champion. Human NPCs would defend the human Champion from attack, even if that attack came from one of the other races in the faction.

I listened woodenly as Aldion explained the quest. One of his spies had sighted what he thought was King Gerin in a slave camp on Netherim, and I was being sent there to determine if it truly was Gerin. I was to report back my findings, and if it was him, I was not supposed to rescue him...that no doubt would be the next step of the quest. He then gave me a magical device that would allow me to speak to him from anywhere on the Twin Worlds, a device by which he could recall me back to Freeport if I was needed...if there were new Champion quests.

That was when four new quests were added to my log. The first was a quest called the Grand Crusade, the second quest Champion of Champions, and the third quest Champion Slayer. The fourth one was a quest to kill a champion on another faction...killing one of the other three champions in

my faction didn't count. The reward would make it worth it; it rewarded the weapon from the Champion's Raiment gear set, and there wasn't a player on CO that didn't want a Legendary-grade weapon. The third one was a quest to kill all 39 other champions...yeah, like I'd ever complete *that* quest. The reward for that one was a unique flying mount, one that you could summon using a magic spell and dismiss when you were done with it, which meant you didn't have to care for it or have it run away or get killed on you when you weren't around—flying mounts were the most rare and sought-after items in the game with the exception of Legendary status gear and skills, since they didn't get tired like Sylph and Drakkin players did. The second quest would reward me with my Champion's weapon if I killed a Champion on another faction, which seemed potentially doable for me. I'm pretty good at PvP. The first quest, which represented the overall campaign of the Grand Crusade and would complete when the entire campaign was concluded, gave a staggering 500,000 gold piece reward and a monstrous amount of experience points. The Grand Crusade was the start of an epic questline that would end with something truly big, and the quest text said its conclusion would cause the entire human race to gain a new racial ability.

Wow. Just...wow. Freakin' *wow*.

I was the champion of humanity. Me, a solo player, had access to these insane quests, and could get my hands on gear even better than from most any raid except those on the Citadel.

Aldion stopped talking and looked at me curiously. I caught myself and looked at him. "I will do as you ask, your Highness," I said. "But I have a request."

"What is that?"

"I am a humble, simple man, your Highness. I would appreciate it if you instructed the guards and the people not to call me Champion," I said. I *really* didn't want that kind of attention because it would let an observant player ID me as the human champion, and given how complex lore-level characters were, he very well might be able to make it happen. "I humbly accept the discounts the merchants may give me because of my status, but I would like who I am kept quiet."

He gave me a long look, no doubt as the AI mulled over my unusual request. “I will make it clear to the people of Freeport that you would prefer not being publicly recognized as the Champion, but they may honor your status in private,” he finally said. “And it says much of your humility to ask such a thing, Xen.”

“Thank you, your Highness,” I replied. “With your permission, I will return home and study the maps and notes and begin preparing for my journey.”

“Good luck, Xen, Champion of Freeport,” he said with a smile. “Please find my father, so we may bring him home.”

I was given some quest materials, and then left the castle, still in a bit of a daze. Champion. *Me*, the champion. My god, it really said how few human players there were if someone like *me* was the champion. I was just stunned that there wasn’t at least one human raider out there that had the gear and skills to take the top spot.

But I had an opportunity here. This was my chance to get some Legendary quality gear, and if I managed to finish the entire Champion questline, I would unlock new abilities for every other human on the server. The greedy loot whore in me was going to go for that, and when I got what I wanted, I would intentionally lose my Champion title by letting a bunch of other players kill me. Once I got what I wanted from the Champion quests, I’d be happy to give up that notoriety to someone that did want it.

I returned to my very small, modest apartment over my closed shop in the Trades District, which was on a narrow street well away from the main player marketplaces and studied the stuff I was given. It was a map of Netherim, the Charred Fields, a place I’d never been to before, but I knew where it was. According to the report I read from Aldion’s spies, his father was being held in a razormaw prison camp. Razormaws...I had no contact with that NPC faction, so at least I wasn’t going to be butchering my reputation with them if it turned out they were holding Gerin and I had to fight to get him out. But, one thing I needed to do was learn the razormaw language, so I needed to do a little real-life research, check the message boards to see if anyone had found the razormaw language tutor. The Charred Fields were in the southern marches of the continent of Netharr on

Netherim, not far from the Black Fangs faction...and Black Fangs meant Drakkin.

Oh freakin' wonderful. All those damn Drakkin players flying around were going to make this much, much harder. It would be doubly hard because my Djinn form wouldn't be as useful there against players that could fly.

I'd have to do it using a spell called Improved Invisibility while in Djinn form, and it would be best if I did my recon at night for further protection. First I'd learn the language, then I'd make my move on the prison camp at night, when the Drakkin players wouldn't be able to easily see me, and do it in Djinn form which would give me a good aerial view of the camp and under the effect of Improved Invisibility, which would hide me from vision, infravision, and certain detection spells. I wasn't even sure if the razormaws would see my Djinn form as hostile, some "intelligent" creatures did not. Netherim monster races have different behavior than Arca monsters, they may see an alien creature like a Djinn as a hostile entity and attack. But first I had to get there, so I'd be taking a long trip to the Nazgar Hills to get to the scion leading to Netherim. That was nearly all the way across the continent, out by the Silver Blade faction, which held the wood elves, the Spriggen, the Pixies, and the Ursoks. Most of Silver Blade faction territory was a vast forest known as the Luran Forest, so its four races were all sylvan.

So, the first quest in this chain was a recon mission...and I have the skills to do a recon mission. At least I was starting strong.

Much to my shock, I found out that I wasn't nearly as anonymous in the real world.

While I was doing my real life research, looking for the razormaw language NPC—which I found thanks to a very useful map on a CO resource site—I stumbled across an article on *CO Today* about the champion quests...and while I wasn't mentioned by name, my status as a champion was certainly noticed.

I found out that players could look at the stats and average skill rating of the champions of each race on each server, but they couldn't see their in-

game handle or a picture of them, nor could they see their equipped gear and skills, to prevent champions from knowing what their opposition could do. They could only see their stats, which would give someone a rough idea of what kind of gear the player had, and an average value of all their skills. And mine are pretty damn high thanks to Lone Wolf. Someone from the site had inspected the champions on selected servers—there are 250 servers for Terra and like 10,000 servers through the Confederation, so that's way too many to inspect them all— and naturally they chose mine. Methrian, my server, is the lowest population server in the Terra server cluster and is somewhat well known for being far behind the other servers in progression. The reason for that is something of a mystery, because Methrian is one of the original 100 servers from when CO began, and most of the other original servers are flourishing with high populations and their progression is cutting edge. Most of them had opened the Citadel and were doing the raids there. Well, whoever did the article decided to compare the champions on the most populated server to the ones on the least populated server to see how wide the power gap was between them, and that's how he noticed me. The fact that I was obviously a solo player had attracted attention, in the form the author's scathing assessment of me. *There's no stronger evidence at how pathetic the human race is in CO than this guy, the article read. He's the human champion on the least populated server in the Terra server cluster and take a look at him. His listed stats make it clear he has no raid gear. The only thing going for him is the fact that his skill average is significantly higher than normal for his server. Despite that, it's obvious that this guy is a solo player, because his stats don't even meet the threshold of a player that does dungeons. Take that in for a moment. A solo player is the champion of the human race on the Methrian server. That is beyond pathetic, into the realm of epic fail. Devs, this guy is your clarion call to DO SOMETHING about how pathetic humans are in CO.*

Well, that was highly offensive. I happen to be proud of how much I've accomplished on Xen, thank you very much.

But another article read a little different, and again, it referred to me directly. *On the least populated server in the Terra server cluster, Methrian, the champion with the best chance to complete the Champion of Champions quest is the Drakkin champion. His stats show that he has cutting edge raid gear for Methrian, though it's still well behind other servers, and a very*

high skill average. But the one champion you should keep your eyes on is the human champion. His stats show that he has the worst gear among all the champions, but he has the highest average skill score by far. What makes him dangerous is the fact that he is obviously a solo player, and solo players are brutal in Player Versus Player. They're used to being completely self-reliant, they're accustomed to fighting against opponents stronger than they are and are usually very cunning. And since the Champion of Champions quest won't give a champion credit for a kill unless he kills another champion completely solo, that gives the human champion a major edge. Solo players are some of the craftiest and most unpredictable PvPers in the game, and that makes the human champion the dark horse on the Methrian server.

Well, that made me feel a little better.

Even the guys in my office were talking about it. They played on a different server than I did—I made sure of that—and they were talking about the champions...which seemed odd. None of them were champions, were anywhere near being champions, yet they seemed obsessed with the idea of it. I listened as I did a database search and heard that on their server, the most populated one with like a million players, there had already been a champion against champion fight, and it was caught by several in-game streamers. And from the way they talked about it, it was some hour-long epic duel to end all duels. But I suppose that a fight like that would be pretty epic, since the champions on the Azjar server were like the best geared players on the entire Terra server cluster. That server was the first to unlock the Citadel, so they had raid gear from the Citadel raids.

No doubt those guys could one shot me.

It was servers like Azjar that made servers like mine so far behind. It was human nature to want to be where all the action is, so most new players don't roll on servers like mine. And people on my server, frustrated they're not doing the cutting-edge raids and getting that uber loot, quit servers like mine and reroll on the big servers. So, over time, servers like Azjar get more and more crowded, while servers like mine lose more and more players. People would get so impatient that instead of just sticking with the character they'd worked on for months, maybe even years, they would abandon that character and roll a new one on the populated servers. And if

they ever offered character transfers, moving a character to a new server intact, the imbalance would get even worse.

In a way, I'm glad that I'm on Methrian. I'd hate being on a super-crowded server, where there were people everywhere and it would be hard to find any place to yourself no matter where you go. Yeah, sure, there are tons of people that run dungeons and lots of guilds that raid on the cutting edge, but it just makes everyone even more competitive than they need to be. On Methrian, the vast majority of the game world hasn't been explored by anyone, and that makes the server a paradise for players like me. The loners, the explorers, the characters that leave faction territory and don't come back for months, or even years.

Methrian is the "slow lane" in CO, and it suits a turtle like me just fine.

After work, I rode the tram home, picked up some groceries at the store in the concourse of my apartment building—a store that more or less serves just my building—and got to work. After logging back in, I began my quest to find King Gerin, which would be a rather tedious five-and-a-half-hour journey from Freeport to the Nazgar Hills, all the way across the continent. Distances in CO are vast, and they're meant to be vast. The continent that holds the five factions is the size of a continent in real life, in Terran measurements it's nearly 6,000 kilometers across, so I had to travel a distance about equal to the distance between Bermuda and Los Angeles just to get to the scion that would take me to Netherim. Packed into those 6,000 kilometers is an absolutely uncountable number of quests, hundreds of dungeons, and dozens of raid zones. If I was to try to cross the continent on a horse, it would literally take me weeks to do it, just like it did for the western settlers back in the 1800's. But fortunately, CO has some shortcuts to let players cross massive distances in a relatively short time, and those are the scions.

I mentioned scions before, but what I didn't mention was that there's a large network of scions spread over the Twin Worlds, and one of the most important things a player can learn is where those scions are and which scions they are connected to. To get to the Nazgar Hills, I'll first need to travel to the Shadeweaver Forest, where there's a scion that connects to a scion in the Arubis Desert. I'll travel from Arubis to the Steppes of Morr, where there's a scion that connects to the Melsandra Plain. From there, I'll

have to hoof it quite a distance to the Underbog, where there's a scion that connects to one in Nazgar Hills, not far at all from the cave that will take me down to the scion that would get me to the Blasted Land on Netherim. It will take me about four and a half hours to get there from Freeport, and once I do get there, I'm looking at another seven or so hours of travel time on Netherim to get to the Charred Fields, because I know of no scions that will get me there faster. I don't know the locations of nearly as many scions on Netherim because I haven't adventured there as much as I have on Arcavia. I'll have to fly to the Charred Fields from the scion in Djinn form and be damn careful while I'm doing it.

But I can cut nearly two hours off that. I felt a bit silly after remembering that I can use human transportation services for free as a champion, and that includes *gryphons*. I can take a gryphon to Shadeweaver Forest. That would usually cost me nearly 500 gold, but since I'm the human champion, the aerie will lend me a gryphon for free, and the gryphon will fly me to my destination—as long as it's within faction territory—drop me off, and then return to Freeport. The flight would take about 50 minutes, which was a hell of a lot better than it taking four hours by horse or over twelve hours on foot.

So, after hitting a few shops in Freeport to restock on supplies I can't easily get, I headed to the barracks, got a gryphon, and headed out. I opted to go "autopilot," where the gryphon flies to my destination and I don't have to guide it, because that allows me to do other things while I'm en route. I can't control the gryphon, I'm just along for the ride, but that lets me do other things. And like any smart CO player, any time I find myself in a position where I've got time to spare and can't log out, I practice my skills. There are some skills I can practice riding a gryphon, and that was what I did.

I think I mentioned that while my skills focus on melee combat, I do have magic skills, and that was what I needed to practice. About three weeks ago, I picked up a pretty cool spell from a boss drop, but I didn't have the spellcasting skill to use it. I spent a couple of weeks focusing on getting my Spellcasting: Illusion skill up to where I could use the spell, and once I hit the minimum, I could learn the spell. But that just meant I could learn it. To cast it without it fizzling, I have to raise my illusion skill even higher; your spellcasting skill has to be 100 higher than the spell's

minimum skill to cast it without a chance of it failing. The spell I picked up had a minimum skill of 700 to cast, and at the time my illusion skill was only 670. It only took me a couple of days to raise it 30 points, but now my goal is to reach 800 so I can use the spell every time without failure. And trust me, raising any skill from 700 to 800 in this game is *hard*. I've been working on it in my spare moments while I adventure for nearly two weeks, and I've only raised my illusion skill to 753. As it stands now, the spell only works about half the time. So, I spent the entire flight working on illusion, and was quite happy to raise it three points during the trip.

The spell itself is pretty cool, and worth working weeks to raise my skill to use. It's called Dark Cloud, and what it did was create an area of dark shadows that blocked vision for those outside looking in, but not for those inside looking out. The spell had to be cast on a target, the victim, and he was effectively blinded by the spell as well. The spell had tremendous use when I'd be up against multiple enemy players, particularly when a player had a healer backing him up, who was hanging far back from the fight to constantly heal the player attacking me. Dark Cloud would break the healer's line of sight, which would prevent him from casting spells on my target, prevent the target from easily seeing me, but not interfere with my ability to see him. For me, that would be an indispensable spell once I could cast it.

I have all the other magic skills raised to at least 1,100—illusion was my lowest one because I didn't have any high-skill illusion spells until a few weeks ago—and while that's pretty high for someone that doesn't focus on magic, it's nowhere near as high as those who focus on magic have theirs. There are spells out there that have minimum magic skill ratings of like 2,000 to learn. The magic I know isn't focused or comprehensive, it's a mishmash of random spells I've picked up over time. Some are useless, some are almost indispensable. I mean, I'd be all but crippled without my Create Shelter spell, which allows me to log out of the game outside of safe zones and inns. But what I can say is that my magical skills are high enough to allow me to attack with magic and hit fairly hard when I do it.

Oddly enough, my highest magic skill is in Evocation, which is a school primarily devoted to combat magic. I raised it that high because of one spell, Magic Missile. When you get your Evocation to 1,500, you gain the ability to aim your Magic Missiles at a specific target, like a particular part

of a monster, and that can be absolutely invaluable against flying monsters and player races. Hitting their *wings* with a few magical missiles injures them, and it forces them to land.

The journey across Arcavia was uneventful. I got all the way to the scion to Netherim without seeing another player and without getting attacked by any monsters, and that was all thanks to my Djinn form. I stepped into a scion deep under the ground of one planet, then stepped out of one on a mountaintop on another. The planet of Arca was visible hanging in the sky in my field of vision as I came through carefully—scion campers are a thing in CO, attacking people who come through scions before they can react—and in front of it was the moon-like body of Citadel, which had the Citadel built on it...the citadel for which the game was named. Citadel is kind of a moon, but it doesn't orbit, it's always between Arca and Netherim, in the same place relative to the two planets. The two planets orbit the sun here and rotate, but the two planets don't orbit one another, they're always fixed, and Citadel is always fixed in its position between them.

It had been a few months since I'd been to Netherim. The planet is designed to be a blasted, hellish wasteland, the result of thousands of years of war between the five player factions on Arca and an NPC faction called the Salamanders, culminating in the effective destruction of the planet by the Salamanders, whose driving goal was to burn the Twin Worlds to bare stone. There's very little water on the planet, making it a desert, and very few forests or woods or green places. The planet is also highly volcanic, with volcanoes almost always erupting in the distance, and lava flows are a constant danger here. Netherim is also considerably hotter than Arca, but not so hot that Arca races can't survive here...it's just distinctly uncomfortable.

After ensuring that there were no gank squads around the scion, I referred to my map, pulling it out of a small scroll tube belted at my waist and unrolling it. I have a super, super high mapmaking skill, so my maps are comprehensive and detailed, and that's critically important when in a place like Netherim. It lets me navigate around box canyons, cliffs, and potentially deadly hazards when I'm moving on the ground. From here, I had to cross the Sea of Dust, which I'd have to travel on foot due to the visibility issues, then would take me to a pass that would let me cross the

Talon Mountains, which I'd be able to fly over. The Talon Mountains block in the dust in the Sea of Dust. From the Talon Mountains it was a short trip down to the shore of the Boiling Sea, the only large body of water on Netherim, where I would turn west and follow the shoreline to the Shattered Plain. I had to do that to avoid a large lake of lava, and the air over it would be so hot that it would kill me if I tried to fly over it. Once there, I would turn inland a little bit and cross the plain, and on the other side was the Charred Fields. I'd traveled to the Shattered Plain once before using this route, but it was always smart to check a map to make sure you know where you're going in this game. This game changes, and the way things were the last time you were there may not be the same as the next time.

In this game, players can interact with the environment, and their actions have permanent, lasting effects. Chop down a tree in CO, and it doesn't just "respawn," or reset. It's gone, and the stump left behind stays there. The game does have something of an environment protection feature to protect the maps from large scale destruction by griefers, and those are monsters that get summoned to your location to deal with you if you're doing anything outrageous. Set fire to a forest, and a swarm of Treants will spawn and kill you, for example, then they use magic to repair the damage you did. That protects the world from widespread destruction by asshats, but still allows players to feel that their actions in this game have a lasting impact.

It took me nearly five hours to reach the Shattered Plain, which when added to my trip time across Arca, made it nearly nine hours. It took me almost nine hours just to get to within one hour of my destination. And I decided it was too late for me to continue on, I was getting hungry and there were a few things I wanted to do before going to bed. So, I found a nice sheltered spot in a small valley not far from the route I'd take to get to the Charred Fields, then prepared to camp. I used my Create Shelter spell to raise a small, sturdy little cabin, that also caused a sphere to shimmer around it as it created a safe zone. So long as I was inside the sphere, I was unattackable by other players and wandering monsters would not enter it. Monsters could enter the sphere and attack, but they would only do that if I was outside the sphere and they had aggro on me and chased me into the sphere. So long as I stay inside my cozy little cabin, no player or monster can attack me. But the Create Shelter spell has limitations. You can't cast it

within one minute of being in combat with a monster or within 10 minutes of being in combat with another player, which prevents people from using the spell as a cheesy escape mechanism. The spell will last indefinitely so long as you're logged out, but the cabin is still there and your character is still there, and players can find it and set up an ambush outside the spell effect to nail you as you leave. You only truly "disappear" from the game when you log out if you do it in a bed, be it in a player-owned home, or an inn, or an established NPC residence where you are invited to stay as a guest. If you cast the spell and don't log out, the time it lasts depends on your spellcasting skill; for me, it lasts about 315 minutes, or a little over five hours. There are times when you want to do that, like when you're eating a meal in real life and don't want to log out or using a skill that requires your undivided attention, it gives you a completely safe place to do it. I use it quite a bit to give me safe place to use my Mapmaking skill, drawing maps of the places I've explored that session. I have to actually draw the maps, it's not instant, so using Mapmaking takes time.

So, after getting things ready inside my cozy little cabin and updating a couple of my maps, I was ready to log out...or I *was*. Just as I put out the light and moved towards the bed—I have to be laying in the bed to log out if I want my body to disappear—I saw movement through a window and moved to it to look out...and sure enough. *Freakin' Drakkin*. Four of them, up on the top of the ridge that formed the valley This is fairly close to Drakkin faction territory, so I was more or less expecting to see a few of them. No doubt, they were telling PKers that there was someone out here, so I'd need to be careful when I logged back in tomorrow and headed out. There very well may be a gank squad of Drakkin, looking to take my money.

Dealing with other players is part of the game, so I wasn't angry about it. Hell, I've killed quite a few other players, and when I first started playing, I was doing the PvP quests and killing other players for their money out in neutral territory. But I outgrew that phase. It was fun until I realized that my fun was coming at the expense of someone else, and I quit doing it. Now, I only PvP when someone else attacks me or I'm defending a town or objective where I have an interest; defending an NPC faction town from other players is a fast way to raise your reputation with them. And from time to time I'll duel other people for fun, since nobody loses any

money or experience points in a duel. So, I know how to fight other players...and something told me that that may come in very handy tomorrow.

I lowered the shades on the windows to prevent anyone from being able to see into the cabin, then climbed into the bed and logged out.

And boy was I right.

I logged back in after work and was careful not to alert anyone outside that I was back online by not lighting any lanterns inside, and as soon as I carefully checked a window by peering through the tiny gap between the shade and the window frame, I looked up to the top of the ridge...and there they were. Two Drakkin, crouched down on the ridge, weapons in hand, waiting for whoever was in the cabin to come out. Drakkin are kinda like lizard people, they're bipedal reptiles that look kinda like a Crai, but they have large leathery wings. They're one of only two races in the game that can fly, and because of that, they're like *hugely* popular with players. There are more Drakkin and Sylphs on any CO server than there are any other race. In the case of my server, there are more Drakkin and Sylphs than there are other player races *combined*. And if you add in the Pikk and the Nazetar, who also have really powerful racial abilities, that accounts for the vast majority of the players on a server. The Nazetar are aquatic, so they breathe water, and the Pikk can walk up and down walls, which is super useful in caves and for things like getting up buildings. Pikk are also fairly small and they receive bonuses to thief-oriented skills, so they're super-effective thieves. They're able to walk up the wall, get into a window, and pilfer the room beyond.

Yeah, in a game where I could have had wings or been able to breathe water, I choose a race that can do...nothing.

Two visible Drakkin, and a quick check of the other windows showed no others...at least visible. If it were me out there, I'd put someone visible out to attract attention and have ambushers hidden in a position where the victim's attention is pulled away from them, and in this game, that's fairly easy. Invisibility spells don't take very much skill in Illusion to cast, and there are non-magical skills that hide players, like Stalk, Concealment,

Camouflage, and Hide in Shadows. And that's why the spell Detect Hidden is such a godsend in this game. The spell sees through all spells and abilities that hide a player or NPC from sight, with one exception. The spell Improved Invisibility can hide from the Detect Hidden spell, at least if the invisible player's skill in Illusion is higher than the detecting player's skill in Abjuration.

I have an Abjuration skill of 1407, which is *super* high for someone not a magician archetype...but that's because I rely more on the protection spells of Abjuration than I do any other magic. I cast more Abjuration spells than any other school, which naturally translates to it being one of my highest magical skills. If not for me actively practicing Evocation to raise it over 1,500, Abjuration would be my highest spellcasting skill.

Speaking of Abjuration, I prepared myself for the possible ambush. I cast several protection spells on myself, to raise my armor rating, raise my magic resistance stat, and to raise my resistance to poison—poisons are a major threat in this game—then I cast Detect Hidden and looked out the window again.

Yup, there they are. Two more Drakkin, hidden by Concealment skill, just outside the door and to the right. Which would put them behind me if I came out the door and turned towards the two Drakkin up on the ridge. These two had better-looking gear than the two up on the ridge, including some powerful-looking crossbows they had loaded and ready, which only made sense since they'd be striking the first blow. I debated how to handle this, at least until I realized that if I slipped away from them or ran, they'd just chase me...and they're *freakin'* Drakkin, so they could just fly.

They had to die.

The first rule of ambushers is that they're easy to ambush in return, because their attention is fixated on their target. But, given there were two pairs of them separated by some distance, it meant that whichever group I attacked, the other group would get into the air and outside of my reach, then just harass the life out of me by shooting their crossbows at me from extreme range, using gravity to add to their range so that it put them out of spell or bow range in return, one of the cheapest and most hated tactics in the game...at least for non-flying players. Drakkin and Sylphs *loved* being able to kill other players while being effectively unattackable in return.

The second rule of ambushers is that when you know what they're going to do, you can use it against them. The other pair is going to take off when I attack, then try to shoot me from range. And since I know exactly what they're going to do, it lets me counter their strategy. The two by the cabin have the more powerful-looking crossbows, so they were the ones I'd take out first. The other two would take off before I could get up the ridge and use the tried and true cheese method of one of them harassing me with a crossbow as the other rested his wings, which would allow them to chase me *forever* until they killed me. I pulled my full combat gear out of my inventory and donned it, then prepared for the counter ambush. I cast one more spell, the Haste spell, which doubled my movement speed and allowed me to attack 50% faster. Haste is a nasty spell, very nearly overpowered, but it came at a cost; when the spell duration expired, I'd be too tired to fight, effectively a sitting duck for half the time I was under the effect of the spell. The key to using Haste is to only use it as long as absolutely necessary, to minimize your vulnerability when the spell expires. And I followed that rule by immediately ending the Create Shelter spell after Haste took hold. When that spell ends, the cabin doesn't just instantly disappear. It wavers for a second and then fades away, and for a critical split second, the *image* of the cabin is there, but the *walls* are not. You can move through the image of the cabin, and that was exactly what I did. I came through the image of the cabin just before it vanished moving at magically augmented speed, which gave me a major jump on the four gankers. The two ambushers seemed surprised for a second, then they rose up and tried to bring their crossbows to bear, but it was too late. A sword in each hand, I was on top of them before they could line up their shot. I executed one of my Ancient skills, Sword Blitz, which allows me to close to melee distance with a target outside of my range very quickly and strike a moderately powerful blow when I get there. At my skill level, I can blitz a target up to seven meters away from me, and the blitz attack hits hard enough for people to not ignore it. And when under a Haste spell, the movement part of the skill goes even faster, like me moving so fast they could barely track me with their eyes. Sword Blitz was my first-ever combat Ancient Skill, so it's the most skilled-up one I have, and that high skill with it showed in the attack. I closed on the two Drakkin in a split second from six meters away and then used another Ancient Skill, Blazing Sword, with practiced precision. Blazing Sword imbues my sword with fire, significantly

increasing the damage it causes by nearly doubling the damage rating of my weapon, and the higher your skill level, the more times you can attack before the effect expires. The only drawback to the skill is that I can only imbue one of my swords with the fire aura, not both, so I'd have to use one sword to execute the attacks. At my skill level, I can strike three times before the effect fades, which I was hopeful would kill one of the Drakkin with the first two blows and maybe allow me to use the third blow on the second one. Before the dust from my movement with Sword Blitz even reached me, I was striking the closer Drakkin with my right sword, which was the one imbued with fire. To my surprise, he went down from that single hit, which caused me to switch targets, and the second Drakkin died from the third and final fiery blow before the fire faded from my sword. I killed both of them in one Blazing Sword, which told me they weren't all that well geared or skilled. They had no armor rating or Defense skill to reduce the power of my attacks.

That's why skills are *much* more important than gear in PvP in this game. Their gear is not as good as mine, true, but my exceptionally high skill ratings make my attacks hit like a Mack truck., especially against players with a low Defense skill...and most Drakkin don't have a high Defense skill because they're all about *not* getting hit. And getting hit is what raises Defense skill. The increased damage from my very high attack skills just rips right through any player that doesn't have equally high defensive skills, seriously good gear to boost their armor rating and hit points to soak that damage, or is buffed out the ass with protection spells.

These guys had none of those three.

It's entirely truth to say that I could kill many players with a butter knife in this game, because of how high my attack skills are. Weapons only add their damage rating to the damage that your skill rating determines, and my basic Sword skill is more than high enough for me to kill lesser-skilled players with virtually any weapon that qualifies as a sword that would allow me to use the skill.

And God help them if I use one of my heavy-hitting sword skills, like Mortal Strike or Doom Blade.

The other two Drakkin seemed shocked, but they did exactly what I expected them to do. They took off from the ridge, both of them raising

their crossbows, and I countered with a spell I know that I can cast very quickly. It's a one word spell and takes almost no skill in Transmutation to cast. It's called Bubble Shield, and it creates an opaque shield around the caster that breaks on the first hit, protecting the caster from one attack; the higher the caster's skill, the longer the shield lasts before it fades on its own if it's not struck by an attack. But the critical part of it is that it casts exceptionally fast and it *hides me from the enemy while it's up*. As soon as the bubble was up, I used Djinn Form, used one of the most useful consumables in the game, a shrink charm, cast Improved Invisibility on myself, and immediately canceled the Haste spell. The Fatigue debuff I inherited when the Haste spell ended also reduces my move speed, but my Djinn form's ability to fly increases it, which more or less cancels out. By the time the shield was popped by one of their crossbow quarrels, I was only about half a meter tall and already hidden behind a small boulder that was inside the bubble shield.

Remember, when I'm in Djinn form, the game does not in any way classify me as a player. I don't show up to Detect Player spells, and True Sight spells don't reveal the fact that I'm actually a player. The fact that Touched by the Djinn is a *Legendary* skill makes it very powerful. So, when I heard one of the Drakkin chant the words to a Detect Player spell, a smile bloomed on my face. They must have thought I used a magic spell to escape, and they were going to try to hunt me down.

Detect Player spells work through Invisibility and can penetrate Improved Invisibility if the caster's Divination skill is higher than the hiding player's Illusion skill.

"What the hell man, he's gone," the caster said to his friend, speaking Drakkin. I speak Drakkin.

"Did he use a teleport spell?"

"I only heard the bubble spell, and what sounded like an invisibility spell," the second replied. "He may have used a warp crystal."

"Then he can't be very far away."

The Fatigue debuff cleared, and when that happened, I returned to human form, still out of their line of sight, and that made me suddenly appear on the Drakkin's Detect Player spell. "There!" he suddenly shouted,

no doubt pointing at the boulder hiding me. But it was too late. They heard me chanting the words of power for another spell, one that was also fairly quick to cast. It was Magic Missile, something of a staple attack spell that about anyone with any skill in Evocation has in his spellbook, but a spell that most players stop using when they get fancier spells...and they are *morons*. Magic Missile is very nearly overpowered once you raise your Evocation skill past 1,500, because at that point, you fire seven missiles (you get one missile per every 200 points in your Evocation skill), each of them hit hard enough to not be taken lightly, you can specifically aim them exactly where you want, and they *do not miss their targets*. Magic Missiles can only be blocked with magical shield spells, they cannot be evaded, and that is *crucial* in what I'm trying to do.

I can cast spells while shrunk, and they hit for full damage. My size has nothing to do with the spell's power, and that's one reason why shrink charms are so, so underestimated.

I usually don't attack other players with magic for one very important reason, and that's Magic Resistance. Most players have a strong Magic Resistance rating, or MR, since most gear and buff spells raise it, and you can also raise it with the Resist Magic skill, adding a percentage of your skill to your MR. MR reduces the damage you take from any magic attack, be it a spell, a magic-based weapon skill, or monster special ability, which turns a spell into a contest of the attacker's skill rating with that school of magic or magical weapon skill against the target's MR rating. Only dedicated mage archetypes have magical skills high enough to overcome the average player's MR rating to do significant damage with magic. At lower skill levels, magic is a great tool for fighting monsters and other players, because those kinds of targets have very low MR. But when a player gets his MR rating over 1,000, magic damage is significantly reduced from both other players and monsters, so just about every player works his ass off to make his MR rating as high as possible. I fully expected my missiles to only do light damage to the two Drakkin, but I wasn't going for the kill.

Did I mention that once you get Evocation over 1,500, you have the ability to *aim* the missiles at a specific point, rather than just at a target? I think I did.

That's what makes them so absolutely nasty in PvP against flying players. Magic Missile is the counter to the airborne crossbow cheese tactic, but only if you can get close enough to hit the flying target with the spell and you can aim your missiles exactly at your target...and me hiding in Djinn form waiting for Fatigue to drop off made those two hesitate for the critical few seconds I needed, keeping them in range of the Magic Missile spell. I aimed those missiles specifically at their *wings*, which is entirely possible in this game. When a Drakkin or Sylph takes too much damage to their wings, they can't fly anymore and have to land. That's the weakness of Drakkin and Sylphs that smart players can exploit. And the seven missiles I sent up at them did more than enough damage to make both of them drop out of the air.

And once they were on the ground, they were toast. I used a dispel charm to remove the effects of the shrink charm, and then I charged.

They both tried to shoot me as I rushed them, but I evaded both hastily aimed quarrels and closed the distance, and it only took a few attacks on each of them with my swords to finish them off. I didn't even need to use an Ancient Skill. They weren't highly skilled players, so they didn't have much of a chance against me once I took away their ability to snipe at me from outside of my attacking range.

I sheathed my swords as I looked down at the two corpses. Their player icons were still over the heads of their bodies, which meant that they hadn't released to reincarnate at the nearest graveyard. It also meant that the two dead players could still hear and see, at least if they died with their eyes open. "You can keep your money. Consider that payment for you not bothering me again," I said in flawless Drakkin, which no doubt surprised both of them. Very few Arca races could speak Netherim player race languages. "Losing your unspent XP should be punishment enough."

So, that was the beginning of my play session. It didn't get less exciting in any way.

It took me almost two hours to find the razormaw language tutor NPC, and after shelling out 500 gold, I traveled to where the quest said the prisoner camp was located. I shifted into Djinn form when I got close and flew in the rest of the way, using an invisibility spell to keep hidden and get close enough to hear the razormaws talking, which would raise my skill in

their language. If I didn't interact with them, just listened, it would take about 40 minutes for the skill to max out, and I was patient enough to do just that. It let me observe their camp from the air, get an idea of the behavior of the monster AI, if they tended to move alone or in groups, where they went, and so forth. After learning their language, I did a slow flyover of the camp to assess it and to find King Gerin. It had been built in a narrow ravine with ropes and nets strung over the top of it, a defense against flying Drakkin, and a barrier to me as well...but I wasn't there to attack them—yet—just get a look at their camp. I paused here and there to look around, get an idea of the layout of the camp so I'd know how to escape from it when I came back to rescue King Gerin—if he was here, anyway—and counted about 40 or so razormaw NPCs, which was a fairly sizable force. I wasn't sure what kind of skill level they had. They were close to Drakkin faction territory, so logic dictated that they'd have lower skills so they didn't overwhelm players who had just left faction territory and were starting to adventure out in the neutral lands, but this *was* a Champion Quest, so these monsters may have increased skill levels to present a challenge to me. The game could dynamically raise or lower monster skill ratings, and I suspected that that was the case here. These monsters would fight me toe to toe but wouldn't have those same skill levels if other players attacked them.

The slave pens were outside the ravine, on a bluff at the other end of it, hidden from the main camp by a rocky spur, and there were several dozen people in them of lots of different races. I moved through them and saw that in the last cage, near the canyon wall, there were three humans in it. Two of them looked to be regular civilians, wearing nothing but rags and looking hopeless.

And there was King Gerin, in the back of the cage. I've seen pictures of him, so I know what he looks like.

As soon as I recognized him, the quest updated to *Complete*, meaning that I had done what I needed to do. I supposed I could try to rescue him now, but if I did that, it might glitch the quest chain. Besides, the objective of this quest was to *find* the king, not *save* him. I'd found him, so now I had to return to Freeport and get the next quest.

Or, I could use the magical device Aldion gave me and contact him. That might complete the quest and trigger the next one and save me two days of travelling around.

That was not something to do in the middle of a hostile NPC camp. I flew back over the ravine back the way I came to get some distance from the camp, looking for a good place to hole up to contact Prince Aldion. I found a nice little ravine similar to the one the razormaw were using, advanced up into it, and found a cave entrance. I floated in and a grin bloomed on my face, because the cave was large enough to hold a Create Shelter cabin. That would hide my cabin completely from the air, and where I was, that *mattered*. I then returned to my human form and cast the Create Shelter spell, which caused the cabin to shimmer into existence within the cave chamber. I entered the cozy cabin, sat on the bed, and dug out the communication crystal the Prince gave me. When I activated it, it created a magical disc in front of me, which shimmered to form a window of sorts, through which I could see the Prince in the study he was in when I met him to start the quest. “It’s good to see you well, Champion,” his voice came over the softly glowing crystal. “You have news?”

“I’ve found King Gerin, your Highness,” I answered. “He’s in the razormaw camp as your spies reported.”

“Thank all that’s holy!” he said in a sudden emotional voice, putting his hand to his chest, and in my field of vision, the quest disappeared off the log. I received a pretty healthy amount of XP for it to boot. “We have to rescue him, champion! What kind of defenses did you find there?”

“Forty or so razormaws, and they’re in a ravine that gives them considerable defense,” I answered. “The King is being held in a slave pen at the other end of the ravine. It’s open to the air, but the ravine itself has defenses against aerial attack. Most likely due to the camp being close to Drakkin territory. There’s no way to reach the slave pens without going through the ravine, at least on the ground.”

“So, we’ll have to fight our way in,” the prince said after a moment.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” I said, digging into my belt satchel. “Let me draw a quick map of the ravine, your Highness, so you can get an idea of things.”

“Go ahead, Champion.”

I scribbled out a fairly good depiction of the ravine, and as I did so, I came to realize the true objective of this quest chain. It wasn't meant for me to complete it alone...or more to the point, for *humans* to finish it alone. "Here's the slave pens where your father is being held. As you can see, it's surrounded on all sides by cliffs, either going up or going down. The razormaws will see us if we try to fly in on gryphons, they have sentries posted along the top of the ravine holding their camp, and that may put the King at risk. If they see a swarm of humans descending on them, they may kill their human prisoners in retaliation. What I propose we do is seek out the help of the Jagaara," I told him, his expression intent and serious. "They have many extremely skilled climbers among them, who can climb these walls. What we need to do is make a show out of attacking the entrance to the ravine, draw their defenders away from the slave pens, and give the Jagaara the chance to climb up onto the bluff, free the King, and then get him back down. They can climb out of sight of the sentries here, along this cliff," I told him, pointing to that part of the map. "The decoy attack at the gate can't all be humans, it may incite the razormaws into killing their human captives. So we need to seek out the help of the high elves and the dwarves as well. If each of them can send us maybe five or six skilled warriors or magicians, we can assemble a force strong enough to draw the razormaws to the entrance and give the Jagaara the chance to free the King without them killing him in retaliation."

In my field of vision, I got what most players love to see. *Bonus Quest Completed!* flashed across my vision, and I got another healthy chunk of XP. Bonus quests were hidden quests that were completed when a player solved a puzzle or came up with a solution to a problem that the game's controlling AI considered to be very clever, in the spirit of the intent of the original quest, or in the spirit of role playing. My solution to the problem would bring in the three ally races in our faction to help, and utilized strategy rather than brute force, and that must have been why I was awarded the bonus.

"I find merit in your plan, Champion," the Prince declared, and a new quest popped up in my log, named *Free the King!* "I will seek out our allies for their aid and start them on their way there. Are you returning to travel with the expedition, or staying there?"

“I’ll stay here to keep an eye on the King, your Highness,” I answered. “I don’t want them moving him on us without us knowing. Your spies can give the expedition maps to reach this place. Here, let me draw you a map of the surrounding area,” I said, pulling out another piece of parchment. “Do you have a mapmaker nearby that can copy what I show him?”

“I’ll have one brought in immediately.”

After showing the NPC mapmaker a map of the area around the camp, I pointed out the ravine I was in. “I’ll be making my camp here, your Highness,” I told him. “This cave entrance is hidden from the air and not easy to reach by the razormaws, but I can keep a visual on the slave pens from the bluff above it. Have the expedition come here.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Champion,” he answered.

“How long will it take them to get here, your Highness?”

“I can’t tell you exactly, Champion, but I will say that they’ll be on their way there by tomorrow.”

Given that the game didn’t magically spawn NPCs for quests like this, that they’d be traveling here like any player—though no other players would mess with them, quest NPCs like them would have insane skill ratings that would let them annihilate about anything but an army to deter players and monster NPCs from interfering with the quest—it may take them three or four days to get here. That was one way the game maintained a level of realism. So, I was looking at spending three or four game sessions here keeping an eye on the razormaw camp, waiting for the expedition to arrive.

I’ve done stuff like that before. Hell, it would give me the chance to raise my Illusion skill and forage some rare cooking mats only available on Netherim.

“I’ll be here waiting, your Highness,” I told him.

“Very good. I will pray for the success of your mission, Champion, so I may see my father again. Let me arrange the expedition, so they can get there as quickly as they can. Until you return, Champion, good fortune to you,” he said, and then the magical image dissolved.

That was the easy part of my day. The hard part started very soon afterward.

Barely half an hour after I left the cabin—but didn't dismiss it—to scout the crags and rocks around the ravine, I noticed a Drakkin player circling high overhead. I wasn't in Djinn form or hidden by invisibility, so no doubt he could see me. I kept half an eye out for raining crossbow quarrels but wasn't at all expecting the Drakkin himself to land on a rocky outcropping on the other side of the ravine. And when I looked at him, I saw a strange design around his player icon.

He was the Drakkin *champion*!

"I can't believe my luck, finding you while I was out gathering crafting mats," he said in a smarmy voice, speaking barely intelligible Common. He was grinning eagerly at me. "I saw your stats on *CO Today*. I can't believe a champion is a solo *scrub*. Just goes to show how much of a joke humans are in this game." He drew a nasty looking scimitar, which began to glow with a reddish radiance. It was a raid weapon, and carried an enchantment, with a buckler on his other arm for protection. "This'll be the easiest piece of gear I ever got."

Then he attacked. He rushed over the empty air in the blink of an eye, slowing to a stop behind me with his scimitar in an extended position, then looked back without changing posture expecting to see me laying on the ground dead. His eyes widened when I simply rose back up from my lean, after evading his strike.

"Oh, you'd *better* have more than that," I said in fluent Drakkin as I drew my swords.

He certainly did. He had raid gear, which made up for the fact that my skills were higher, turning it into a back and forth slugfest up on that mesa. He proved that he had some skill in PvP, making very few mistakes, but he also showed that he wasn't used to fighting solo. Players like me, who never have help or backup, we play a certain way that maximizes our survivability. We don't go for the kill if it puts us out of position, we don't overextend thinking that the healer behind the lines will just heal us up if we get counterattacked. We're more conservative than other players, preferring to wear down opponents over time rather than try to take them

down in a mad rush, but we know when that's exactly what you need to do to win. My defensive skills were enough to counter his gear advantage, and the gear bonuses he received cut down on the damage of my attacks enough to where it became a back and forth battle of attrition. We struggled back and forth across the mesa top, each of us gaining an advantage, then losing it, striking for critical hits, pulling back into a defensive position as our Regenerate skills worked to heal the battle damage.

For nearly ten minutes, we fought on top of that mesa, until the tide started to turn and hold. That was when I started getting the best of him, as the fact that I'm a Dual Wielder finally started to accumulate damage on him. It took a while, but the fact that I deal slightly more damage per second than he did was starting to show itself as the fight dragged on, as well as the fact that I know how to use my defensive skills in a one against one duel more effectively than he did, keeping him from taking big bites out of my health bar. His tactics changed when he realized that I could just wear him down over time, that his HP bar kept going down and down and down while mine never went below 40%. He managed to get me with a Shield Rush attack, knocking me back, then he turned, opened his wings, and vaulted up and off the mesa. He switched from his scimitar and buckler to a crossbow, revealing his intent to use the cheapest of Drakkin cheese tactics against me.

Oh no.

I waited patiently, carefully measuring the distance as he flew away, then I chanted the three words of power that form the Magic Missile spell. I released it a split second before he would have been out of range, and the seven missiles raced away from my hand and unerringly streaked towards their target...his wings. And just a heartbeat before he was clear of me, they struck, slamming into his left wing in rapid succession.

They did enough damage. His wing shuddered and cramped up, and that made him fall out of the sky...and me waiting patiently to get him at maximum range meant he would fall a *long* way before he hit the ground.

The fall damage took a giant bite out of his health bar. I saw it as I raced over the mesa top, leaped to another bluff, then vaulted out into open air as he hit the ground, seeing him lose nearly 30% of his health when he hit the ground. That put him into the red. He tried to climb to his feet, his left

wing's membrane in scorched tatters from my spell, and then my shadow fell over him. He turned and looked up with shock and disbelief in his eyes, and then I used Sword Blitz while in the air, falling towards him, which made me all but slam into him like a rocket. I hit so hard I took nearly 20% of my own health bar in damage, but the damage against him was just *devastating*, especially since it was added to the attack of the skill, which caused both of my swords to impale him, literally pin him to the ground when the tips hit the stone under him.

It was enough. His eyes turned vacant and he collapsed back to the ground, and his player icon turned gray, indicating he was dead.

"Sometimes jokes kill," I said in Drakkin in a panting voice before he released to the graveyard, his player icon vanishing. When he did so, I pulled my swords free, then rose up and took a deep breath...then wisely used a very expensive Full Healing totem the instant the game's engine considered me to no longer be in active combat to prevent some lurking Drakkin from shooting me while my health was so low, getting an easy kill.

I beat another champion. I almost couldn't believe it. But what was most unbelievable, I beat the best-gearred champion on the server, the one that article said had the best chance of completing the Champion of Champions quest first. The no raid gear scrub took down one of the best geared players on the server.

In my field of vision, I was awarded one Champion's Point, and the two PvP quests updated. The *Champion of Champions* quest updated by graying out *Drakkin Champion* on the list, and the *Champion Slayer* quest was flagged as *Complete*.

It hit me, just what the reward for completing that quest was ...a Champion's weapon of my choice...which was *Legendary quality*.

A Legendary weapon! Holy *crap*! I was going to get a Legendary weapon! And the quest was going to complete here and now! A winged angel-like being descended from the reddish sky of Netherim, wearing gleaming silver armor and over twice as tall as I was. This was an Agent of the Powers, a well-known race of NPCs in the game. "Hail, Champion," the figure said. "Today you have proved your worth by defeating the champion of the Drakkin. The Powers have decided to reward you for your heroic

deed. Speak forth the form of the weapon you desire, and it shall be made so.”

In my field of vision, a game menu popped up. It offered me an array of weapon types, dozens of styles of swords, axes, maces, you name it. I scrolled through the swords, I nearly swallowed my tongue when I saw *pairs* of them...of course, I’m a Dual Wielder! I was going to be rewarded with a pair of swords rather than just one, because it was only fair! After all, if I chose a two-handed sword, I’d have all that power right there in one weapon, where if I was only awarded one sword, I’d be more or less receiving half the reward! I scrolled through the available weapon types, and selected probably one of the least flashy of the designs, which was a pair of elegant double-edged longswords made of black steel that looked to be about the perfect length for someone my height, the hilts and the etchings on the blades looking very much like the equipment carried by the Djinn. But while the swords weren’t blinged out, they did have an obvious enchantment, a dark reddish-black aura that surrounded the blades which seemed strangely out of place on weapons. One thing I did notice was that the stats of the weapons weren’t visible...I had to choose what I felt was the most fitting type of sword for me, not pick whatever I felt had the best stats. Those swords were very close in design to the swords I was using now, which I’d made myself. I’d be very comfortable with them, so I chose them for my reward. “These. The longswords,” I told her.

“You have selected the Soulblades of Shatra Sha,” she called when I confirmed my choice, and the weapons appeared in a blaze of golden light, hovering in front of me, their scabbards appearing under them and dropping to the ground at my feet where the swords remained in the air. They were black-bladed weapons with relatively simple crosspieces and wrapped hilts, the hilts wrapped in fine black metal wire with onyx in the hilt behind the wrappings. The blades were etched with dragons going up the blades, which was quite beautiful. My hands were almost trembling when I took them, holding them in my hands, and I could feel the power rippling through them. These were *Legendary* weapons. Holy shit, they were *Legendary*! They were unique, no other player on my server would ever get them, not even the other champions that finished the quest! The swords would be removed from the reward list for the other champions! It meant they had stats out the ass, a monster damage rating, special properties, and they also

had *weapon procs*, special effects that randomly happened when the swords were used! I looked at the description and was nearly shocked when I saw that their proc was *Lifesteal*, draining health from the victim and healing me for the health drained. What an *awesome* proc for a solo player like me! I couldn't have asked for anything better!

Their special property was just as good. They had the special property *vorp*, meaning that they had the potential to kill an enemy with one blow. If I managed to strike an enemy in the neck, the lethal sharpness of the swords would decapitate the victim. They also had the potential to more easily lop off arms and legs for the same reason, and could cut through wood, stone, and even metal. But, the *vorp* killing effect only worked on monsters whose necks were small enough to be severed, and it wouldn't instantly kill a monster who didn't need its head to survive, like a zombie, golem, or troll for example, or didn't have a head to begin with. Because *vorp* weapons were magically sharp, they were capable of dealing structural damage to wood, metal, and stone objects; in gameplay terms, the weapons were so sharp that they could cut through almost anything. In game mechanics terms, *vorp* weapons did extra durability damage to objects struck by them, making them break faster. I've seen *vorp* weapons before, weapons with the *vorp* property drop as loot from raid bosses, and all of them are damn nasty. A *vorp* weapon turns *anyone* into a threat, because all it takes is one super-lucky hit to the neck or a limb, crippling the target. I'd always wanted one, and now, here was two of them...two *Legendary* weapons.

I noticed that it had one more rather curious effect. The swords' stats would drastically increase my resistance to Necromancy spells, rendering me all but immune to all but the most powerful of necromancy magic. That had to be a function of the procs and the overall theme of the swords. They were supposed to be infused with legendary necromantic magic, the magic that drained the life of enemies and used that life energy to heal me, and that focus extended to me virtual invulnerability to necromancy magic. The swords protected me from any and all necromancy magic except the magic the swords themselves used. And that was *damn useful*. Many monsters had magical attacks based on necromancy, many NPC enemies were necromancers in the game, and some of the nastiest spells in the game at the high end were Necromancy. And since most paralysis and physical stat

debuff spells were necromancy, it would render me immune to some of the favorite spells in the game used by player killers.

I felt the weapons take effect, increasing my stats, making me stronger, faster, more agile, increasing my MR, buffing my Necromancy resistance to the point where necro spells did virtually nothing to me, and adding nearly 500 hit points to my health bar. I felt the swords bind to me, as most magical and all high quality gear did, meaning that only I could use them, and they couldn't be sold, stolen, or traded, and if I dropped one or let it go, I could summon it back to my hand with nothing but a thought (but I couldn't do that if it was in its scabbard, requiring me to draw the weapon). And the best part was, Legendary items did not lose durability. I never had to repair these swords, and they could never break. Weapons like that had some clever uses by exploiting their indestructibility, such as using them to wedge open doors.

And it wasn't done. In my skills list, a new skill appeared: *Legendary: Blade Dance*. My god, I got a Legendary combat skill along with the swords? Holy freakin cow, this was beyond awesome!!!!

"Well done, Champion. May the Powers smile upon you," the angelic being called, and then she rose back up into the sky and vanished.

Wow. Just...*wow*. I never expected to every fight another champion, let alone beat him. I never really believed I'd get Legendary weapons and had no idea Legendary weapons were so absolutely badass. But here they were, the Soulblades of Shatra Sha. Legendary *freakin'* weapons. And they were mine.

I stood there like a sitting duck for several minutes, then woke the hell up, gathered the scabbards, and retreated back to my cabin to make sense of what just happened. I fixed the scabbards to my cross harness while I processed this miracle, replacing the swords I had and putting them in my item storage. I'd have to practice with these swords, get used to their weight and length, and I had to start practicing that new skill...Blade Dance. I'd have to learn the motions that activated and guided it, then practice them and practice them and practice them. I had no idea what Blade Dance was or what it did, but I was eager to find out...and I was betting it was *awesome*.

Well, change of plans. I'd spend the next three days raising Blade Dance as high as I could while I waited for the expedition to arrive.

And the best part? Only two people in CO knew what happened, me and the Drakkin. And I think he was too embarrassed to say anything.

I checked the forums out of curiosity during lunch the next day—still a bit giddy over my luck—to see if other human champions had started the Grand Crusade, and if the quest was the same for them as it had been for me. CO is like super dynamic, where many quests were personalized to the player. And while two different players may accept a quest from the same NPC at the same time, supposedly the same quest, the NPC often had the players do different but related things. It was a way to keep players from getting bottlenecked, all of them trying to do the same quest and getting in each other's way. And since the effects players had on the environment were permanent, it also prevented many quests from being done over and over by players. A quest to sabotage a catapult in a goblin encampment was going to work only so long as there were unbroken catapults in the camp for the player to sabotage. Once all of them were broken, that was it. They *stayed* broken until the goblins repaired them, and that could potentially make the quest incompletable for other players if the goblins were particularly lazy about repairing the catapults. So, just because only one person on my server could do my Grand Crusade quest line, that didn't mean that the human champions on the other servers would have the same quest...or more to the point, quest objectives in the same place. On another server, that razormaw camp may have been completely wiped out by players, which would make the surviving razormaws move somewhere else, so there would be no camp there holding an imprisoned king for the human champion to scout.

That was what made CO so incredible. The world was dynamic, always changing, and the AI that governed quests was able to work with the changing world to make sure quests could be done in a timely manner by all players.

I found out after surfing the three main CO sites on CivNet that my battle with the Drakkin champion had not been noticed, that or it wasn't considered noteworthy enough to mention. But other servers were

mentioned, mainly the servers with the most cutting-edge players. The Ogre champion on Azjar had already killed three other champions, and the arrogant buttmonkey had flooded CivNet with pictures of himself with his new Legendary two handed axe, and the pictures included the item description window—usually something that only he could see—letting everyone see just how awesome his axe was.

What an elitist prick. And what a complete idiot, because with that info, knowing what his axe's special property and proc was, I could plan a counter to it if I had to fight him. His axe was named *Krozar the Burning Destroyer*, and its special property was called *Crusher*, which increased his axe's chance to break the bones of a victim when it struck, crippling them, and also allowed him to deal damage to structures the way my swords could. And like *vorp*, he had the ability to one-shot victims if he hit them in the head. It was a reflection of his massive axe's sheer size and weight and the dreadful injuries it could inflict. The weapon's proc was called *Firestorm* that dealt a pretty respectable amount of fire damage, so a Fire Resist spell cast before battle would eliminate that. The weapon also significantly increased the Ogre's fire resistance, to the point where only the most powerful fire spells would do any damage to him at all. The dude could swim in lava with a fire resist rating that high.

Eh, my swords were better.

I found out that the quest line was similar for all humans, but the locations were different. The human champion on the Solria server had posted her progress. She was at the same point I was, calling in an expedition to help free the King, but her camp was on Arcavia, in the Skittering Marsh, and the monsters holding the king in her quest were Arachnauts.

I was glad I didn't get that quest. I'm in good standing with the Arachnauts, and it would have murdered my reputation with them to have to go in there and take their prisoner. The Arachnauts were well known in the game because they offered quests with very good equipment rewards if you raised your reputation with them, so a lot of players did so. And I was one of the players that had done it. My current bow, for times when I need one, was a quest reward from an Arachnaut quest.

Though, the funny thing is, I didn't raise my rep with the Arachnauts for those quest rewards. I didn't even know about the bow when I decided to do it. I did it to be able to shop at an Arachnaut NPC's store...but I'll tell you that story some other time. Getting the bow was something of a lucky bonus after raising my Arachnaut rep.

So, that told me that champions couldn't camp other champions by reading up on their Grand Crusade quests and putting themselves in a position to intercept them as they did them. It would also make it significantly harder for players to grief a champion doing his quest by gathering a raid force to attack him or his NPC helpers while they did the quest.

Theoretically. If more Drakkin saw me there as I waited, realized I was hanging around, and word got to them of the expedition from my faction moving in that direction, they very well may mass up to wipe it out. Players could interfere with other players in the game and dealing with it was part of the game.

Oh great. I bowed my head and stared at my handpanel, doing my best not to attract *her* attention. *Her* was a supervisor over in accounting, Maila Hevalle. She was a Faey, and Faey...well, I don't like Faey. Kinda silly that I work for a Faey company, but there's a difference between working for people you never see and having them in your face. Just about everyone in the company here in Jacksonville is human or Makati, with only a few dozen Faey executives from the company that supervise the departments. Faey are nice enough, maybe a little pushy and obnoxious, but what I went through during the subjugation has permanently poisoned me to them. The guards at the work camp where I was held were cruel and the things they did to us had left scars that were never going to heal. After all, it's hard to recover from people who invade your mind, rip out every one of your dark little secrets, then broadcast them to the entire camp for everyone to hear.

Or guards that take over your body and make you kill your best friend, and make sure you're conscious of exactly what was happening.

The only solace I got from that entire experience was the 63,000-credit settlement I got from the House of Trillane for my suffering, and the fact that those guards are still in jail.

What drives me absolutely crazy about Maila is she knows that what Faey did to me makes me uncomfortable around them, and that's exactly why she won't leave me alone. She gets some kind of perverse thrill out of making me as uncomfortable as possible, though she's never overt about it. She pretends to be nice to me, while no doubt listening to my thoughts and reveling in how freaked out I am.

Luckily for me, she seemed too busy to waste a few minutes torturing me, grabbing a few snacks from the table and leaving.

I do have one friend here, someone I'll talk to with more than a hello, and she's one of the most exotic people here in the company. There are tons of other races here now, ever since the planet was granted independence and became the hub for the Confederation, and they were starting to filter down into everyday life for us non-heroic types. Mrima was a Pai, which was a very small bipedal cat-like race, complete with the ears, muzzle, fur, and tail. She was only about two and a half feet tall, and she came to Terra—Earth—to work to put her son and daughter through the Academy. When the Pai joined the Confederation, they were like majorly behind in technology, so a ton of them are here to learn about modern technology so they can take it back to their home planet. Mrima works over in accounting, same as Maila, and I've heard she's on the fast track to management. She's like super-smart and has a head for math, and we're friends because we live in the same apartment building. She makes way more money than I do, but she sends every credit of it she can to her kids so they can enjoy being in the Academy. "Check it out, Kev," she said after jumping up onto the table and sitting on it next to me, turning her head and pointing to behind her left ear. There behind her ear was the metal jackport of a cyberjack, and some of the fur had been shaved away from the edges of it. "I just got it yesterday!"

She was speaking Pai, because Pai couldn't have languages telepathically inserted like most other races could. But my interface could translate it, acting like the universal translator from *Star Trek*. She understood English well enough for me to speak that back to her, but the shape of her mouth made it hard for her to speak English very well.

"Congratulations, Mri," I told her. "Did they pay for it?"

"Half," she replied with a smile. "I decided to treat myself."

“It’s about time,” I told her. “You start the assimilation training?”

“Today after work,” she answered. “How hard is it?”

“Not very,” I answered. “Learning how to do full merges to computers is kinda tricky, but it’s easy once you figure it out. You buy a simsense rig yet?”

“No, I used up all my budget on the jack. I’ll have to wait ‘til next month for that.”

“I have my old one you can borrow until you buy one,” I offered. “My second gen rig.”

“That’s sweet of you, Kev,” she said with an honest smile. “I may take you up on that. I can’t use simsense ‘til I finish that block of assimilation training, but when I do, I’ll be knocking on your door.”

“Come get it tonight before I log in,” I told her. “That way it’s right there when you do.”

“Nah, the temptation will be too great,” she grinned. “Pai have impulse control issues, Kev. Best to not dangle that shiny object in front of me.”

I had to laugh. “Well, hurry up and finish, simsense games are tons of fun.”

“They said you could use your interface’s gravband for some things, but some applications require a hardwire connection. How do you do simsense games at home?”

“Hardwire connection,” I replied. “I can plug the dataline into the input jack in my interface, or I can jack directly into my vidlink if I want. That’s what I usually do, I don’t like wearing my interface all the time.”

“Cool. I definitely want to buy a third gen rig,” she mused, opening a plain brown bag and taking out a can of Friskies Ocean Whitefish cat food, of all things. She seriously eats cat food, and she *loves* it. “But I have to buy the interface first. I’ve looked around, you can get some really cheap used ones.”

“Avoid the used ones,” I warned. “Lots of them have memory leak issues. If you do go used, buy brand new memory chips and swap them out. Don’t use the original chips.”

“Are they expensive?”

“Not at all, you can buy a one gigastring chip for thirty credits,” I answered. “But you’re still best suited getting a new interface. The new interfaces are designed to handle third gen simsense if you jack through it, and they have faster throughput speed for merge stuff. I’d spend the extra hundred credits on a mid-tier new interface over buying a top tier used one.”

“I’ll take your advice there,” she said, looking up at me as she picked up a tiny fork. I was used to her eating cat food by now, so I didn’t so much as flinch as she started forking it right out of the can and into her mouth. Different races had different tastes, and if she liked cat food, then more power to her. Besides, cat food was super cheap, and Mrima was always on a brutal budget, saving every credit she could so she could send it to her kids. “So, what’s new in the life of Kev?”

“Not much,” I said modestly. “Just play games all night when I get home from work, same as you. How are the cubs?”

“Mrada got a perfect score on his plasma systems midterm!” she said brightly. “And Mridi got onto the Dean’s list this semester!”

“Sounds like they’re overachievers, just like their mom,” I teased, which made her laugh. Despite having two kids old enough to go to college, Mrima isn’t considered very old at all by her own people. She’d be considered around 30 years old in human years by the Pai, which is just a year younger than me...subjectively. In reality, Mrima is 56 years old, even though she’s only considered a young adult in her society. Pai have much longer life spans than humans. Despite being 56, Mrima is almost like a little kid in some ways, like her enthusiasm and her love of games and movies. Mrima is a gamer girl, and I’ll bet most of her motivation to get a jack is to get into the hottest games around right now, which are all merge only. That, or she got tired of getting wrecked by jacked players in Vanguard. Non-jacked players, or “exies,” were at a major disadvantage in games where jacked and non-jacked players faced off against each other. Only races like the Jhri, Jobodi, and Shurai, races with insane reflexes or inhuman manual dexterity, could hold their own against jacked players.

We chatted a while longer, then the need to make money broke us up. We headed back to our respective departments and got back to work, me going back to the mind-numbing repetition of inputting numbers and data into forms to keep 2M's information up to date, or running database searches to retrieve information for other company employees.

After work, I went straight home and got to work in my other "job." I spent the entire evening waiting for the expedition to arrive in the cave holding my cabin practicing Blade Dance, and I found out quickly that it wasn't only an attack. It was also a buff, and it was a *massive* one. Blade Dance was like a Haste spell, but it didn't give me a Fatigue debuff when it ended. The strength of the speed buff and the duration of the buff increased with the skill, but like most Haste spells, it had a limitation to keep it from being overpowered. Blade Dance had to cool down of twice the amount time it was used, so if I used Blade Dance for thirty seconds, I had to wait a full minute before I could use it again. It was best to save it for when it would do the most good and then use it, and not to just leave it up as long as possible. Smart players could counter someone using Haste, by just stalling until the spell faded and they got Fatigue, and people would think that my Blade Dance was Haste by how it affected me. I could use that to my advantage by baiting them in to try to kill me when effect faded. They'd think I was suffering from Fatigue, and then I could nail them when they charged in thinking I was defenseless.

But that wasn't all Blade Dance did. It was actually a combo buff/attack skill, like how Sword Blitz had both the charge element and the attack element. Blade Dance was triggered with a fairly hard-hitting attack with both swords, the motions of which took me a couple of hours to master, and then the haste effect kicked in and sped me up so long as I continued the Blade Dance up to the maximum duration dictated by my skill level. That did lock me into the skill, counted as one of my active skill slots—a player could only be under the effect of two active skills simultaneously, and using Blade Dance would take up one of my active skill slots—which left me with another usable skill, like using one of my other sword skills to execute powerful attacks also influenced by the Blade Dance buff. So, it was a very potent mode that locked me into an aggressive posture, but it greatly increased my damage per second, giving me the ability to "burst" on an opponent for a large amount of damage in a short period of time. And it

didn't carry with it a Fatigue debuff, which I could use as a trap for players who thought Blade Dance was a Haste type spell. So, in other words, it was a *powerful* skill, the kind of power a Legendary skill was supposed to have.

Trust me, a Haste buff without a Fatigue penalty when it ends is *massive*.

It did have a drawback, though. The Blade Dance could be broken before it reached its full duration against my will if the target parried enough of the attacks to the point where it broke the form, disrupting the flow of my movements. If I was jarred out of the Blade Dance, then it ended, and the cooldown took effect.

I could see how to best use it already. Basically, use it only in very short windows, almost never use it to its full duration, executing the Blade Dance attack and using maybe only four or five seconds of the buff, then letting it refresh. That would allow me to use the Blade Dance attack again quickly if I needed it...but I shouldn't constantly use it. That would create a pattern that my opponent could read and then counter, parrying enough attacks to disrupt the skill. Blade Dance should be saved for when it could do the most good, like an opening or a mistake by my opponent, then I Blade Dance and make them pay, maximizing the potential damage it could do without using it so much that my opponent could understand how it worked and figure out a way to counter it.

Only arrogant jackwagons and idiots showed off in this game. An opponent that you know is an opponent that you can defeat. That was how I took out the Drakkin champion, because I knew exactly what he was going to do when he tried to disengage from me, and that let me beat him.

By the time I logged out, I was entirely pleased with my progress. Like most newly gained skills, it raises very fast at first and slows down as it gets higher and higher, and that let me raise it from 1 to 173 in one day. That made the attack hit harder and the haste effect more powerful and last longer, and the higher the skill got, the higher those elements would become. I worked out that when I got the skill to 1,000, the attack would hit nearly as hard as my Sweeping Death Ancient skill—one of my staple attack skills—the haste buff would be nearly 100%, effectively doubling my speed, and it would last for nearly 20 seconds before the buff expired.

Haste on demand that I didn't have to cast as a spell, with no Fatigue.
God, I love these swords.

Chapter 2

There would be no hiding after this.

Dismounting from a gryphon in the bailey of the fortress, I looked over at the freshly cleaned up King Gerin Vedran, who was wearing a suit of plate armor and with a two-handed sword strapped to his back. He looked excited but was trying to keep his Royal composure, because he'd be seeing his son any minute now.

It had been a long nine days. I spent three of them waiting for the expedition to arrive, and then on the fourth day, we attacked the razormaw camp. My plan was a success, the Jagaara got in and freed all the prisoners, not just the King, and got them all out down ropes while we held the razormaw warriors' attention at the entrance to the ravine. Aldion had sent 40 soldiers for the operation, including 4 high elven mages, and that was more than enough for the razormaw to respond to us as a major threat. But we didn't really attack, we just engaged them at the ravine entrance and held them there, which pulled the guards from the slave pens and let the Jagaara get in without resistance. The last five days were getting back, because I had a new quest to escort King Gerin back to Freeport once I completed the quest to free him, to get him home safely, and that meant I had to travel at the speed of the expedition. And naturally, the quest had programmed encounters, where we had to fight off several ambushes by monsters and enemy faction NPCs, forcing me to work for it to get Gerin back to Freeport.

Gerin was a lore character, so that meant that he had a deeply complex AI, and I honestly enjoyed traveling with him. He was engaging, intelligent, kind, wise, and very clever, almost shockingly modest for a king and aware of his own faults and limitations. He wasn't the greatest fighter in the world, which was how he got himself into that situation in the first place, and that made him more realistic, less of a Mary Sue like most lore characters were. King Gerin wasn't a badass raid boss-level opponent, and he was aware of it and worked around that limitation with his intelligence.

But now, the quest was over, and so was my anonymity. Heralds shouted from every rooftop that the King had been found and returned, and they *called my name* while doing so, hailing me as the Champion of Freeport that had brought back the King. Now everyone in Freeport knew the name of the human champion...but that wasn't the end of it for me. Since I'm a solo player, nobody has ever seen my name in a group list, and player names are not displayed for others to see. You only see the player icon that warns you that character is a player, and if you're in combat with that character, you see his health bar. That's it. Nobody knows my name unless I tell it to them, and I can even lie about it if I want. Only another Champion can see the truth of me, thanks to the Champion overlay on my player icon when he sees me with his own eyes.

Now more than ever, my request to Aldion to keep my status secret came into play. The NPCs of Freeport would not give me away, allowing players to match my face with my position.

But, I'm sure as hell not complaining about finishing the quest. Not only did I get a *huge* amount of XP, enough to buy nearly 50 skill points in Blade Dance, I also got my first piece of Champion's Raiment gear. Returning the king was a major milestone in the quest chain, and that meant I got a sizable reward for it.

I was wearing it now...and it certainly didn't *look* like a piece of Legendary gear. It was a very simple black silk cloth headband, which like any other Legendary piece buffed my stats out the ass, including having the same armor rating as a steel burgonet helmet. But it also carried with it a powerful effect called Faerune, one of the most sought-after effects in the game. So long as I wore the headband, I could see as if it were bright as day in any condition, I was immune to Blind spells, and I could see through any type of magical or skill-based invisibility or concealment, *including* Improved Invisibility. Faerune and a powerful Divination spell called True Sight were the *only* guaranteed means to see through that spell.

And the best part about it? Faerune also granted me the ability to breathe comfortably at all times no matter where I was, which allowed me to breathe under water, breathe in a vacuum, and also rendered me immune to the effect of toxic or poisonous gases or any attack that affected me through the lungs...though that ability was a waste on me, since Touched

by the Djinn did the same thing with Immunity: Gas. I could dunk my head in a barrel of water and take a deep breath, but instead of water, I'd take in air. Water would be in my mouth, but only air would enter my lungs.

That was what made Faerune so powerful, and why I jumped all over it the instant I saw it on the head piece when I was looking over the different pieces of Champion's Raiment gear. Faerune was on other gear, but it was usually only on raid gear dropped from the main boss of the raid, and that made it very rare.

The cool part about it was that Champion's Raiment gear could be affected by permanent cosmetic illusion spells that changed the look of equipment and could even hide it completely. That would let me change my look if I so wished. The most common form of that magic was "racial appearance" spells that turned a piece of gear into what was commonly worn by a player's race, within reason. It couldn't change a cloth tunic into a steel breastplate, the appearance had to be faithful to the material of the item. But the item's appearance could be altered to appear to be the common style worn by a race of that material.

I was stuck here because of the quest chain, the quest wouldn't update until the Prince arrived, and that made me super uncomfortable when other players started showing up to see what was going on. They'd seen the gryphons fly in, heard the announcement from the criers, and they got there and saw that I was the only player in the group of NPCs, which meant I had to be the one that completed the quest. But I forgot that when Aldion arrived and got to witness their emotional reunion. "I'm happy beyond words we brought you home, father," he told the King, looking up at him with tears in his eyes. "I've done my best to stand in your place while you were missing, but it never felt right. I am happy beyond words to return your throne to you."

"I'm sure you served the people of Freeport well, my son," Gerin smiled down at him, patting him on the shoulders. "Now, we should return to the palace and discuss certain affairs. Champion, I would request your presence there."

That updated the quest. So, the next part of the quest chain looked like it was going to involve whatever he had to talk about, and he wanted to do it in private.

And again, I was exposed to the public, because I ended up riding a horse with the King's party from the fortress to the palace, which wasn't really all that far. But even more players had made their way to the Military District to see what was going on, and I heard them whispering with each other and the NPCs as we rode by. And naturally, I heard what I knew was eventually going to come. "*That* guy is the champion?" someone scoffed. "He's an ungeared noob!"

I just had to sigh. So many players in this game just did not get it.

When we reached the palace, the King brought me, Aldion, his master of spies Merria, and his most experienced military advisor, Admiral Rogers of the Freeport Navy, into a war room I'd never seen before. On the large table in the center of the room was a huge map of Arca, but I found out quickly that this discussion wasn't going to be about Arca. The King took out a new piece of large parchment and set it on the table over the map, took out quill and ink pot, and started making a crude drawing. "I was on my way to Tul Mora when I was ambushed by a large contingent of soldiers bearing standards I've never seen before," he began, drawing what looked like a coastline. "I found out that these humans aren't part of the Golden Lion alliance. They came here in ships from across the sea. They called themselves the Kanlon," he said. "I was taken back to their island nation, which sits just off the coast of the continent of Sarvenia."

Whoa, they were from one of the other continents? But those weren't open to players, they were supposed to be part of future expansions—

Holy *crap*, was the Grand Crusade questline part of a pre-expansion event? Did this mean that a new expansion was going to be released soon? Or would the new continent open for a race or faction only when its Champion completed the quest line?

I listened as Gerin described nearly three years of captivity, as the Kanlon tried to make him surrender Freeport and all human lands to the Kanlon king, and when they realized he would never do it, they sold him into slavery rather than kill him, to further humiliate him. He ended up on Netherim after being bought and sold several times by various groups (which would explain how the King Gerin on every server would be in a different place), at least until Merria the Spymaster tracked him down to the razormaw camp. The willowy woman smiled at being praised by Gerin for

her diligence and determination in finding him. What I learned from the briefing, and from the new quest that popped up in my quest log, was that the Kanlon Navy was going to attack the western coastal cities of Arcavia, which put three of the five factions at risk of attack. The Golden Lion faction is on the south side of the continent, with the Moonshadow faction to the north of us, and the Amber Shire faction to the east. While there was little a single player could do against a naval vessel, what my quest was going to have me do was travel to the Underdark and find out who down there was working with the Kanlon. They had allies on our continent, and my quest was to find out who it was. Gerin suspected it was the Salamanders, a race of fiery beings that lived in and around the lava lakes deep underground, who were well known by all the player factions as the sworn enemies of just about every other race or species on Arca. Many plots and schemes that caused turmoil and strife on the overworld had the Salamanders behind them, because they wanted to conquer the overworld and transform it into another Netherim. But they couldn't do that so long as the player factions remained strong, so they worked to weaken their enemies so they could invade the surface and burn everything to ash.

The Salamander War was a major part of the lore history of the game, because that was what devastated Netherim. Netherim was once a world of green and blue, but the Salamanders managed to destroy it during a nearly thousand-year-long war with the surface races. The lore was that they banished most of the water on Netherim to Arca through magical gateways, draining the oceans, drying up the lakes and rivers, and then they burned the entire planet when there was no longer enough water there to stop the infernos. But it was a hollow victory for the Salamanders, because they were hunted down and exterminated by the surviving races of Netherim, driven completely off the planet and into the deep pits under Arca, denying them the land they nearly conquered and exiling them to a life trapped in the bowels of Arca. And in some ways, Arca supported that theory. Off the coasts of the continent were vast, expansive ruins of what were overland cities and villages, as if half the land of Arca had been drowned by rising seas.

And the lore behind the Nazetar was that they were once humans that used magic to adapt to the ocean when their kingdom was drowned. Instead

of leaving their beloved Nazeria, they instead became water-breathing beings so they could stay there.

Really, this game is so unbelievably freakin' deep. Sometimes it almost feels like more than a game.

It made a kind of sense. There's been a long-standing rumor that the Underdark connects the five continents of Arca through long tunnels, and if that was true, then the Salamanders would have contact with the Kanlon because Salamanders lived underneath their island nation.

So, my first quest in this leg of the chain was similar to the first quest in the chain...recon. I was tasked to travel deep into the Underdark and determine if the Salamanders were allied with the Kanlon. I wouldn't have to go all the way to the lava lakes of the Salamanders, I was instead going to go to the Free City in the Underdark, something of a major hub for all the underground races, and search the city to see if there were Kanlon agents there. Kanlon were humans, so it would be easy to do...humans stick out like a sore thumb in the Free City. I should know, I've been there before.

I considered the quest on my way out of the palace. I've been to the Free City before, so I know where it is, and know it would take me about four hours to get there. There was a scion that would take me to a point close to the Free City only about three hours from Freeport, sitting in a grassy plain east of the Everwood known as the Bone Fields, which was High Elven territory. The Bone Fields was named so because an ancient war there had left thousands of skeletons behind, and farmers sometimes unearthed them tilling the soil. And because of all the easily available dead bodies, the area is a well-known haunt for necromancers, raising skeletons from their resting places to serve as minions. Most of the quests for starting High Elf players in the Bone Fields deal with preventing necromancers and their undead minions from gaining a foothold on the plain.

I was involved enough to nearly miss something very important. A high elf was standing outside the palace, dressed in a white robe with gold trim, and what made me nearly stop dead was the Champion design around her player icon. This was the high elf Champion, and I wasn't surprised at all that she was a mage archetype. "Well, I wasn't sure the forums were right or not, but they are," she said, looking me up and down. "The human champion isn't a raider."

“There’s more to the game than raiding,” I told her guardedly. “Why are you here?”

“I heard about some major event going on here and came over,” she replied. “You brought back the king?”

“Yea,” I answered. “And have the next quest in the chain.”

“Wow, I’ve only finished one of them in mine,” she said. “I guess since you don’t have to raid, you have time to work on them.”

“You don’t have to raid either,” I countered.

“True enough,” she chuckled. “I wanted to ask you a question.”

“What?”

“Would you be willing to cooperate to get the flying mount?”

I realized what she was about quickly. “Win trading?”

“You bet,” she nodded. “There’s no rule against it, and it would work. We all get together and agree to let each other win the fights we need to get the mount. We stagger them so nobody goes below nine points or above eleven, and if we plan it right, we all end completing the quest with ten points.”

“Well, good luck convincing the others of that,” I said dryly. “If the way the Drakkin guy acted when he attacked me is any indication, I’m not sure many of them will go for it. They’d rather only they get the mount, so they don’t have to share the glory with anyone else.”

“Be careful, Sebirk is in my guild,” she said directly. “And so are thirteen other Champions. And all of them are on board with the idea.”

“I shoulda realized,” I said dryly. “The strongest guild on the server would have the most Champions.”

“So, you’re in with the idea?”

“If you can get the other thirty-eight to agree, yes,” I replied. “It’ll let everyone get their weapon too, since they’ll finish that quest with the first fight they win. That way all of us get what we want and we don’t have to take it away from the others to get it.”

“Excellent. Let me friend you so I can message you.”

“No. Just leave a message on the community board in the Fair Winds Market here in Freeport, to set up a day and time for us to meet about it once you get the rest of us to agree to the plan,” I replied. I wasn’t about to “friend” her because it would let her see my location in the world on her friends list...and I don’t trust players I just met. Especially not ones that have a vested interest in killing me.

“Wow, you’re paranoid.”

“When you play solo, you learn quickly to trust no one,” I told her bluntly. “Just put up a message and I’ll read it the next time I’m back in Freeport.”

“And what name do I use for the message?”

“Use the Human Champion. That will get my attention,” I answered.

“Alright. So...what kind of weapon did you get?” She was asking because I didn’t have any weapon equipped, part of role playing the meeting with King Gerin. One does not have an audience with the King while armed.

“I’m surprised you don’t have one yourself, you’d know what it has on it,” I said.

“I do have mine, I was curious to see if all champion weapons have the same stats.”

“And seeing the stats of the weapons of the other champions in your guild didn’t tell you that?” I asked pointedly. “Because I’ll guarantee that all fourteen of you have already win traded so all of you have the weapons. You’d want them for raids.”

She flushed a tiny bit.

“You’re talking yourself out of this plan, elf,” I said bluntly. “Because the more you talk, the less I trust you.”

“Alright, I was curious if the stats on your weapon was the same as ours, despite the fact that you don’t raid,” she blurted.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I told her strongly. “And nobody else should care either.”

As I walked away from her, I could feel it in my gut. I should not trust her. And if she did arrange the win trading so everyone could get the mount, then I'd better approach that event with extreme skepticism. I'd do the win trading so people could get the mount, it would take away the impetus for the other champions to hunt me down and leave me in peace, but something just niggled at me about her, and that conversation.

I'd better be extremely careful.

"Oh come on, Kev!" Mrima nearly wheedled as we walked towards the cafeteria. It had been three days since my encounter with the high elf, and I'd finished the quest into Salamander territory. I confirmed that Kanlon agents were in the Free City, which confirmed that the Salamanders were working with the Kanlon to destabilize the player factions of western Arca. My new quest was a bit of a doozy and would require some sneakiness and brashness. I was supposed to kill the Kanlon agents and bring back any intelligence they were carrying that might tell us what the Kanlon had planned. Killing someone in the Free City wasn't exactly easy, because the city had magical guardians that responded to any violence...and those guardians were *nasty*. To kill the agents, I'd have to be very careful, and come up with a very good plan to either lure them out of the city or find a way to kill them in a way that wouldn't cause the guardians to respond.

For that...I needed a professional.

That was my plan. I was going to hire an NPC assassin to kill the Kanlon agents and have him bring back their possessions. If I found a highly skilled assassin, he could kill the agents with poison, which wouldn't incite the guardians. So, my mission now was to search the underworld of the Free City and find an assassin that was good enough to get to the well-protected agents, kill them, and bring back their stuff so I could go through it for intel. If I couldn't find an assassin willing to take the job, I'd have to secure a supply of poison and try to do it myself.

There's much more to Citadel Online than beating on stuff with your sword. It is truly a deeply complex game.

"Why do you want to play on my server, Mri?" I asked, looking down at her. "You should play on Azjar like everyone else in the office. You'd have

way more opportunities to get into dungeon clearing and raiding guilds. Playing on my server will hold you back.”

“No thanks,” she said with a face. “I mean, they’re okay and all, but I think it would be much more fun to have you around to talk to while I’m playing. I mean, I know we can’t adventure together because you’re like way higher level than me, but we could still meet in inns and do non-fighting stuff together.”

“That would be nice,” I said. “But Methrian’s the smallest server in CO, Mri. We’re like way, way behind the other servers. Hell, no guild on the server has cleared the Undermine yet, and that raid is like two patches old,” I warned. “If that doesn’t bother you, then sure, go ahead and roll there. But I think after a couple of weeks, you’ll probably be rerolling on a bigger server. And if you do, I won’t be mad,” I smiled down at her. “The way we play on Methrian isn’t for everyone.”

“Hey, can’t ask for more,” she said as we entered the cafeteria. She saved our usual table as I hit the food line, and she was already well into her can of cat food by the time I sat down.

“So, you buy the game already?”

“Uh-huh! Got it last night, but I haven’t played it yet.”

“I’m surprised you burned your money on the simsense rig instead of an interface,” I mused.

“Priorities, Kev,” she winked, which made me laugh. “I’ve lived without an interface this long, I can wait ‘til next month. But I *really* wanna try out this game. So, why don’t you tell anyone else you play it? Tons of people in the office do, it was them gushing about it that got me interested in trying it out myself.”

“Because I don’t want them bothering me outside of work too,” I replied, which made her give me a glance. “I play solo, Mri. I’m not in a guild, I don’t group with other people. I spend most of my time in the game going places I haven’t gone and exploring and testing my limits to see how far I can go, what I can do on my own. It’s a very different playstyle than most other people.”

“It must be lonely sometimes.”

“I prefer it,” I answered. “I mean, there are a few people in the game I know fairly well, and we talk when we come across each other, so it’s not like I shut everyone out. I just like to play by myself, that’s all.”

“Well, you’re gonna be hanging out with me from time to time, so you’d better put that in your busy schedule,” she said, which made me chuckle. “So, any advice for me before I roll?”

“Well,” I said, picking up my sandwich and taking a bite. “The Drakkin and Sylphs can fly, so a lot of people play those races. Outside of that, just about any player race can learn any skill with a few rare exceptions, so play what you find the coolest and then seek out the skills that tailor your character to the style of play you enjoy most. There are three different cat-like races, if you wanna stay close to home, but you can play as a lizard-like race like a Crai, or an elf, which is Faey-like, or an Ogre, who are really big, or even a bug-like race called the Pikk, who are kinda like miniature Kizzik.”

“What do you play as?”

“A human,” I told her with a chuckle. “I stayed close to home. But I don’t recommend humans to new players.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re bad,” I admitted. “Every other race has cool or very useful special abilities, but humans don’t. All the humans have is that they start with more skill points to buy skills than any other race and they don’t have to get the prerequisite skills to get some skills. Neither of those are anywhere near as cool as flying, or having night vision, or having bonuses to your magic skills, or having claws that let you deal damage without weapons. It’s so bad that the devs have said on the forums that they’re looking into rebalancing humans to make them more appealing to new players. Humans have become a running joke in CO, about how like *nobody* plays them but people like me. You know, the masochists.”

“Well, as long as you have fun playing a human, what difference does it make what others think?” she said sagely.

“Exactly.”

“So, if you’re a human, is there a cool race in your faction I can play?”

“The other three races in my faction are the Jagaara, who are cat people like you, high elves, and dwarves. High elves have major magic bonuses, so if you want to play a mage archetype, high elves are a great choice. Dwarves and Jagaara are more tailored around fighting with weapons, but both of them make kickass magicians too if you build them right.”

“Jagaara, hmm? Are they cute?”

I had to laugh. “Vain, vain, vain,” I accused, which made her grin impishly. “They’re cat people like you, Mri, but Jagaara are taller than humans, so you’ll be the one looking down at me if you roll one. They look more like a Jirunji than anything else, just much taller than most Jirunji.”

“I’m sold!” she declared in a voice that made me crack up. “So, I’ll roll my character when I get off work. Are you close enough to where I’ll start so you can come meet me? You know, show me around?”

“Sorry Mri, right now I’m like way away from where you’ll start. I’ll be coming back in a few days, though, so we can meet then. But what we can do is friend each other, that’ll let us chat without us being in a party, and we can send stuff to each other through the mail. You just have to promise me something.”

“What?”

“When you friend someone, you can see where they are in the world. You have to promise me that you never tell anyone where I am,” I told her. “I like to explore where nobody else has gone, so I don’t want people who know that to find out where I am, so they know where the unexplored territory is.”

“How can you tell something’s unexplored?”

“It’s a little hard to explain, but if you’ve played long enough, you can tell if no other player has ever been there,” I answered. “So, that okay with you?”

“Sure,” she replied. “You’re my in real life bestie, Kev, I don’t want you punting me in real life over something I do in the game.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re too cute to punt, Mri,” I told her. “I wouldn’t do that. I’d demand to be allowed to give you a belly rub.”

“Watch it, Terran,” she said in an insincerely hostile voice as she unsheathed her claws and brandished them at me, which made me laugh even harder.

Mrima did exactly as she promised. She sent me a message over CivNet that she’d created a character and was in the game, and lucky for me you can set the game to route CivNet messages into the game for you. I sent her a friend request, she accepted, and suddenly it was like lunchtime in the cafeteria. I got to listen to her *ooh* and *ahh* as she wandered around the Jagaara starting area, and I explained a few things to her as I navigated the Free City, using friend chat so what I said wasn’t what my character was saying. It takes a little practice to be able to easily bounce between talking over friend chat and talking as your character, and a lot of people get them confused and say some pretty embarrassing things out where anyone can hear them.

Funny that a guy like me that has no friends on my friend list and never groups can manage friend chat as well as I can.

It was fun to hear her react to how stunningly gorgeous the game is, and how insanely realistic the simsense is, to the point where she asked me a rather astute question. “Do you feel pain in here?”

“Not exactly. You have what I call an awareness of your injuries,” I answered. “You know how bad you’re hurt and where you’re hurt, but it’s not real pain. So you’ll feel it if a monster hits you with a weapon, but it’s not pain. It’s you knowing that you’ve taken damage, how much damage you’ve taken, and where that damage is.”

“Oh, okay. Cool,” she hummed. “So, if I break my leg in the game, I can’t walk?”

“Exactly. The game’s very realistic in the impact an injury can have, and yes, you can break bones in the game. But unlike real life, you can heal even something like a broken bone or losing a leg with a healing spell.”

“I noticed that I couldn’t even buy the skill at character creation. It was grayed out.”

“That’s because it costs 100 skill points to buy the Invocation school, that’s what healing spells are, Invocation. Only a few of races can buy Invocation right off the bat, because they either start with enough points to buy it or the skill costs them less to buy than other races.”

“Okay. Is it worth it?”

“Yes, it is, but using healing magic when you’re a solo player like me has a lot of restrictions. The game is balanced around the idea that if you’re not a dedicated healer who’s being actively protected by other players, it’s virtually impossible to use healing magic in a fight. My Invocation skill is pretty high, but the only time I can really ever use it is well after the fight’s over. I rely on my Regenerate skill for healing during combat, and I use healing items to raise my hit points out of the danger zone immediately after the fight. I have to wait around two minutes to use healing spells after the fight’s over.”

“Wow. Why so long?”

“To keep solo players like me from backing out of a fight and stalling long enough to be able to heal, then get back into the fight,” I answered. “To prevent that, you can’t cast any spells flagged as healing for five minutes after taking any kind of damage at all,” I explained. “The higher your Invocation skill, the faster the cooldown wears off, though. Most raid healers have an Invocation skill way up there, like well past two thousand, because it makes the healing debuff drop off in a matter of seconds if they take damage.”

“Then that’s what you should do. Then you could use healing magic in a fight.”

“Ah, but there’s another side to that,” I told her as I walked down the street in Free City. “Using a healing spell causes a different debuff that reduces all the damage you deal, and the higher your healing skill, the more the debuff affects you. And the damage debuff lasts twice as long as the no-healing effect. Those two thousand skill healers do virtually no damage at all with spells or weapons. Sure, you can’t really kill them, but they can’t do anything to you either. That prevents extremely high skill healers from being invulnerable powerhouses,” I told her. “Without that, super-high skilled healers could lay waste to anything and everything just by raising

their Evocation skill high enough to deal respectable damage with attack spells. That was how it was right at the release of the game,” I told her. “Healers were insanely, ridiculously overpowered because they could heal while people beat on them then turn around and blast them to hell and back with Evocation magic, or just beat them to death with a weapon. The devs moved very fast to stop that. The way it is now, healers are powerful, but they’re set so you can either heal damage or deal damage, you can’t do both, and you have to be smart about how you heal, else you’ll get your healing magic locked out long enough to get your party members killed. The tactic nowadays is what people call the pocket healer. You have a duo, one of them skilled out to heal and the other skilled out to deal damage, and the healer keeps the damage dealer alive. It’s a pretty rough combo, it’s very hard to beat unless you have some way to put the healer out of action, with a sleep spell or paralysis or something. When pocket healers became a thing, there was suddenly a huge market for sleep dust, an item enchanters can make that puts you to sleep if you breathe it in,” I said with a rueful chuckle.

“Cool. See, this is why I wanted to roll here, you know so much about this game,” she told me. “I won’t feel like a total idiot with you helping me.”

“When I can. I’m about to drop this chat, Mri, I have to focus on what I’m doing.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking to hire an assassin to kill some NPCs for me. It’s for a quest.”

“Cool! You can do that in this game?”

“You can do just about *anything* in this game, Mri. That’s why it’s so awesome.”

Mrima let me focus on what I was doing, and it let me get it done. It took about two hours to find an NPC assassin, a female NPC dark elf—dark elves were a player race, but not every NPC member of a player race was part of the player faction—and we negotiated the untimely end of the four Kanlon agents in the Free City. She charged me four thousand gold for the service, requiring me to take a trip to the player bank in the city, and much

to my delight, she guaranteed that her service would be rendered in a matter of hours. I decided to stay logged in and work on some magic skills while I waited, and just about when I decided it was getting late and I should log off, she returned carrying a large satchel. "This was everything they had on them and in their room," she told me, speaking Undercommon, the trade language of the subterranean races of the Underdark. Naturally, I'm fluent in the language.

"Thank you," I said, taking the satchel. As soon as I had my hand on the strap, the quest updated to *Complete*, but I had to report back to Freeport to get the reward...I had to take the intel back to Merria the Spymaster and have her examine the documents. "Your services are most appreciated, my Lady," I told her with a small bow.

"I'm no lady," she scoffed. "And I think I like you, human."

"That may not be a good thing."

"It's not," she grinned, which made me chuckle. "Look me up next time you're in the Free City, human. We'll have a drink together."

Have a drink with a master poisoner...riiiiight.

It was too late to start back for Freeport, so I told Mri I was logging off and did so in the inn. I got some chores done, then checked the forums on the CivNet CO site that was tracking the Champion quests, the forum where I shared info with the human champion on another server. He was well behind me in the quest chain now, forced to go back to raiding, so I dropped him some info on the quests I'd done so far and my approaches to completing them...which may or may not help him. While the basic objectives of his quests may be the same, the locations of them would be different, and he might be called upon to do different things than me. It may not be the Salamanders and the Kanlon in his quest chain, it might be the Efreeti and some other faction on the other continent. He may not be sent to the Underdark to steal documents from enemy agents, he may be ordered to ambush agents on their way to a meeting...or just about anything else. These quests were very dynamic, where even players doing the same quest chain were doing very different quests.

I was a bit surprised to find out that the head article on the site's news feed was about *me*. *Methrian Server in the Lead on the Grand Crusade*

Quest Chain was the title, and the picture heading the article was an in-game screenshot of me when I brought Gerin back to Freeport, snapped by one of the players that came there to see what was going on. I read the article and was quite startled to discover that while each race had a different Grand Crusade, the quest chains of all the other races were reliant on the *human* champion completing his quests first. And that made sense. The impetus of the entire campaign was recovering King Gerin, and that couldn't happen until the human champion completed the first chain in the Grand Crusade quest line. And since I'm not a raider or a dungeon delver, I don't belong to a guild and all my playtime is my own to do whatever I want, it's given me more time to work on the Grand Crusade than any other human champion in the server group. And the article made specific note of that: *At first a lot of people were having a cow over a solo player being the human champion on Methrian, but we bet they're not quite so furious about it now. That's because the human champion on Methrian has advanced the Grand Crusade questline further than any other human champion, and his efforts have unlocked the second chain of the Grand Crusade quests for the other champions on his server.*

But the player himself is something of a mystery, the article continued. Only one player on Methrian knows anything about him, and she told us that he's a complete solo player. He never groups with others. He spends weeks and even months at a time out in the wilderness, and only comes back to towns to restock his supplies. But not even she knows his in-game handle. What little she could tell us about him is that he's specced into melee combat, "specced" was an in-game term, short for "specialized," he never wears armor, which is a bit of a surprise for a melee-specced player, and that he is extremely smart.

Given he's advanced his quest chain further than any other champion, we're going to agree with that assessment. The Grand Crusade quests don't just test a champion's gear or skills, they test his wits. The solutions to the quests aren't always about charging in with your sword drawn and killing things, and he's managed to get all the way through the first chain and has started the second when some human champions haven't even cleared the first quest yet.

This guy seems to be uniquely suited to doing this quest line, and him playing solo may be why. Solo players are looked down upon by most

raiders as scrubs, as undergeared wimps that can't hack raiding, but most raiders don't understand how clever and capable solo players can be. The world of CO is a dangerous place, and these hardy souls specialize in surviving out in that harsh, unforgiving world, even thriving in it, and that's something that many raiders simply can't do. No amount of gear and skill points can make up for just being a smart player, and the human champion on Methrian is definitely a smart player.

The human champion of Methrian is a solo player, he plays this game in a way that very few of us do, and it looks like it's given him a decided advantage in completing the Grand Crusade quests. Not just in that it gives him more time to do the quests without raiding or guild obligations, but also in how he approaches these quests and completes them. Maybe it's because he doesn't immediately resort to trying to complete the quest with his sword, maybe it's because he always seeks the most efficient means to achieve his goal, and that gives him a more strategic outlook than the rest of us. But whatever it is, it's working for him, and we hope it keeps working for him. We want to see how the Grand Crusade ends, and right now, the plucky scrub from Methrian is the player guiding us on that journey.

If you're reading this, human champion of the Methrian server, we're rooting for you. May the Golden Lion roar!

Well, that was...*flattering*. I was glad someone out there *understood* what being solo is about. Surviving out in the neutral territories as a solo player isn't easy, it requires you to be smart about what you do and think about things in ways that groups of players don't. Out there, the tiniest mistake or moment of distraction can kill. I don't have a pocket healer to keep my health up, or another pair of eyes to make sure something doesn't sneak up on me. Everything I do, I do by myself, and I don't just lurk around the edges of faction territory either, ready to run screaming like a little girl back to a safe space. I go *out there*, further than any other player, and I survive in some of the most dangerous places in the game without any help. To have someone explain that in a way that gets the point across, it really made me feel...well, feel *good*. I knew that at least one CO blogger *gets* solo players and doesn't think we're scrubs.

The plucky scrub...I kinda like that. It's a badge of honor.

I knew I was right.

It was a good thing I was in Djinn form, using Improved Invisibility as I observed from above, because if I wasn't, I'd be screaming right now.

It's been six days since I left Free City, and that was enough time to get back to Freeport, get the next quest, and even spend a little time hanging out with Mrima...and her avatar didn't surprise me at all. She went for the *cutest* female Jagaara she could make, one with a coat modeled after her own, complete with a longer than average tail for a Jagaara to mirror that Pai emulation. It was fun being logged in but not doing anything but sitting in the common room of an inn in Twinfang, drinking Jagaara blood mead, and just talking with Mrima. Lots of players do stuff like this in the game, just hang out and socialize without adventuring, and it's something I don't really do since I tend to avoid other players. But I could admit, I kinda liked it.

I didn't have much else to do. My current quest in the chain was literally *wait for Merria to study the documents, and King Gerin will summon you when she's done*. I couldn't finish the quest until she got back to me, and I've been waiting two days. It's almost like this quest is about being patient or something.

Something else happened during that time. The high elf champion put up the message on the board, arranging a time and place for us to meet, and like any paranoid person, I came early to scope out the place. It was in the village of Dawnsong in elven territory, a village that almost immediately set off my alarm bells. It's fairly remote, and it was a well-known grieving spot for other faction players because there were very few guards in the village. Enemy faction players couldn't kill players in faction territory, but they could kill NPCs, and grief groups often invaded another faction's territory to slaughter NPCs to mess with lowbie players who needed to buy supplies or turn in quests.

I got there four hours early, shifted into Djinn form, and set up above and behind trees growing on a ridge overlooking the village. It was well known as a camping spot for mages to rain hellfire down on the NPCs in the village. While invisibility spells aren't foolproof given that smart players learn detection spells to see through it, me being in the air and

nestled into the foliage at the top of the trees on the ridge kept me out of sight.

It was the players that didn't belong there that got my attention.

Two hours before the meeting, who shows up on that ridge? The *Drakkin champion*. And he wasn't alone, he had six other players with him, each a different race, including a human player. They didn't talk once they arrived, moved back into the woods so they weren't visible, and I moved above them to a position where I could hear them talking in low tones. And about fifteen minutes later, the high elf champion entered the small clearing and met them. The moment she showed up, I started recording my simsense stream to the memory in my vidlink, so I could go back and watch it again in case someone said something I didn't catch the first time. It's a trick I use quite a bit when I'm working out how to solo dungeons and overworld bosses.

"I'm not so sure about this, Emelda," the wood elf said. "Isn't it going to completely reset the Grand Crusade quest? We'll be starting over."

"Only Merrik will," she replied in a calm voice. "We can help him finish the entire thing, Baron said we'll suspend raiding to finish the quest line."

"You're assuming he's going to go with this," the Drakkin said.

"What choice does he have?" she replied with amusement in her voice. "He'll lose his champion title five minutes after he sits down to talk to me. Merrik's got to be the next in line, he's the most powerful human raider on the server, so he'll be the next human Champion. We'll help him get through the quest chain. We can have him up to where that scrub is in the chain in a week."

"He can log off and not come back just to spite us," the Harian said sourly. "Or he can stop doing the Grand Crusade quests and just disappear into the wilderness for a few months. Either way, *we're* the ones that get hosed."

"Jak, how is he getting out of here with his title?" she asked patiently. "It won't matter what he might do, because he won't be the champion anymore."

I should have seen this. The apparent runner-up to the champion title among humans *was in their guild*. They wanted me to give up the title so their guildie could take over, get the legendary weapons, get the perks, and get the credit. And it made me *furious*. The offer to win trade to get the mount was just a pretense to get me alone so they could either threaten me or gank me.

“Are you sure we’re not gonna get wasted up here?”

“No, the guards won’t aggro you from up here, as long as you use ranged attacks. It’s a well-known bug in the AI of the guards here,” she replied smoothly. “But don’t start until I give the signal. And remember, you have less than a minute to get to the graveyard to grave gank him when he dies.”

So *that* was their game. Because I’m a champion, I *can* be attacked in my own faction territory by *other* champions, and Dawnsong isn’t a safe zone. Small villages and towns this deep in faction territory aren’t considered safe zones for the players of that faction, because many quests involve players fighting spies, infiltrators, and bad guys within the villages. They were gonna graveyard gank me, kill me and make me reincarnate at the graveyard, and then kill me there before I could so much as start back to my body to collect my stuff. They could take all ten of my champion points in a matter of minutes, which would make their lapdog human the new human champion.

Of all the cheap, sleazy, dirty, underhanded tricks, this was the gold cup winner.

And they were *not* going to get away with it. That high elf slut was overlooking something very important that I was going to exploit to make sure all of them walked out of here with far fewer champion points than they did when they came in...champions can *petition their race’s leader for help*.

I retreated far enough away to not be overheard, then I pulled out the communication crystal Aldion gave me. It was King Gerin that answered my call. “I need your help, my King,” I told him quietly, keeping my voice down.

“Is that you, Champion? Your voice sounds different.”

“It is, I’m using magic at the moment that alters my voice. I’m in disguise,” I explained. “I’ve found agents from other factions in our territory, who have come here to assassinate me. There are too many for me to take on alone. Can you get some elite soldiers to Dawnsong in elven territory quickly?”

“I’ll send the Skyriders at once,” he replied immediately. “They can be there within the hour.”

“Thank you, your Majesty. If you would, please, tell the commander of the Skyriders that the enemy has set up an ambush point on the west side of the village, on the ridge overlooking the inn. I’ll be nearby, and I’ll move to assist when they engage.”

“I will tell them to attack immediately upon arrival, if that works for you.”

“It will, your Majesty. Thank you.”

I hovered behind the canopy of a tree abutting the clearing they were using, and I waited. The high elf bitch left the group to wait for me at our meeting spot, which worked for me, because she was probably the most dangerous of all of them. And the beautiful irony of this was, when the NPCs attacked her guildmates, *she could do nothing to help them*. She was in her own faction territory, and if she attacked the NPC guards of her own faction, well, there were *massive* penalties for doing something like that. She could be put in jail for a few days, which meant she could do nothing but sit in her jail cell if she was logged in. If she was a repeat offender, or her crime was particularly egregious, like treason, she might even be exiled from the faction, become what was known as a *renegade*, a player that was unwelcome in her own faction territory and was forced to make her way out in neutral territory. If she pissed off Queen Evisandra, the high elf ruler, she could very well get permanently banished from faction territory.

I didn’t have to wait long. I heard the gryphons of the elite aerial military unit the Skyriders pass over us, no doubt landing on the road just outside the village, and I landed, returned to human form, and moved up into a position to attack. I heard them moving through the trees, heard their armor clanking, and I saw that the five other champions and their human toadie were unsure what to do. But I made sure they didn’t decide to run by

rushing forward. The instant I was in range, I used Sword Blitz, which caused me to streak across the ridge and strike the Harian in the back, who had turned towards the sound of the soldiers. The instant I made contact, I used Blade Dance, used it for the first time in a real fight, and I felt the speed boost take effect, which would make my attacks come faster. I didn't activate another skill, holding my second skill back in case I needed to use a defensive skill, so I attacked the Harian with the basic sword attacks that were part of the Blade Dance, which I had to perform to maintain the haste effect. I scored two hits before he could react, and I was almost as startled as he was when his head suddenly popped off his body and he collapsed to the ground.

The *vorp*al effect! It had scored me my first kill!

My attack caused that fatal moment of indecision for the other champions. They looked to turn back to engage me, but then the Skyriders charged through the brush and was on top of them, twenty elite high-skill NPC guards capable of killing just about any player. The human toadie, Merrik, wisely turned and ran—he couldn't risk getting on Gerin's bad side, if he got exiled he wouldn't be able to complete the Grand Crusade questline—leaving the four remaining champions to their fate. And it was a short, messy, violent fate, as the Skyriders mowed them down in a matter of seconds. They even managed to kill the Drakkin champion before he could fly away.

When the last of them went down, the wood elf, I came to a stop with my swords in my hands and regarded the Skyriders. Their captain gave me a broad smile and a salute with his sword and stepped over to me. "Your timing was perfect, Commander," I complemented him.

"As was yours, Champion," he returned. "Are these all of the spies you discovered?"

"I saw the human working with them run off in that direction," I said, pointing the way Merrik ran with my sword.

"Then we have a traitor in our midst," the Commander growled. "Evans, Barker, Wildon, track that spy! Harrin, Trent, Kane, aerial observation, look for any human running from this location! Fried, go

inform the commander of the Dawnsong garrison of what happened, so she can put her guards on alert!”

And *that* would keep that weasel Merrik busy.

Oh, and the best part? I killed the Harion without any help from the guards, so I got credit for the kill on the *Champion of Champions* quest. I now had twelve champion points, further insurance against losing my title.

The one thing I couldn't resist was walking down the ridge towards the village, where several elf players were watching from the open-air common area of the inn, and one of them was the high elf bitch. What did they call her? Oh yeah, Emelda. I walked up to the low wall separating the dining area from the grassy lawn outside the inn, then I sheathed my swords in a slow motion. “Are you going to try now, or is there too much risk I'm in the protection range of the guards? They *do* have buggy AI here,” I said in a low, mocking voice. Then I spoke much louder. “You tried to set me up to grave gank me and take my title, Emelda,” I called, letting everyone know what had happened. “I told you when we met that I didn't trust you. You should have kept that in mind when you tried this little stunt.”

She glared murderously at me.

“I got a kill credit for the Harion, so your guildie is down a point he can't get back. The NPC guards are chasing down your little human toadie, and he very well may get thrown in jail if they catch him. So, mighty member of the most elite raiding guild on the server, how does it feel getting owned by the *scrub*?”

“You won't be champion long, you asshole,” she snarled.

“Maybe. But when I release the stream recording I took of you planning out this attack, I don't think many other guilds on the server are going to trust you,” I said bluntly.

“Bullshit!”

“Just keep an eye on the server forums at *CO Today* then. It'll be up by dinnertime,” I replied calmly.

The commander came down to me. “Is everything alright, Champion?” he asked.

I glanced at the high elf, whose eyes were a little fearful. “Yes, Commander. Do you think I can borrow one of your gryphons to get back to Freeport? I need to report this to the King at once.”

“Of course, Champion. Just tell the stabler at the aerie to send a gryphon back here.”

I considered rubbing it in a little with the high elf, but I decided against it. That’s not my style, no matter how mad I get. I’d beaten her, and she knew it. No more needed to be said. I turned and walked over to the Sky rider gryphon that had been brought over from the road, mounted it with a practiced motion, then turned her and urged her up into the air, never so much as looking back at the high elf champion...a member of my own faction that tried to betray me.

While direct confrontation is not usually my thing, keeping a promise is.

After getting back to Freeport and telling the King what happened, I logged off right there in the palace—I didn’t even want to waste the time walking back to my house—formatted my simsense recording into standard non-simsense audio and video, and posted it to our server’s forum on *CO Today*. I made sure to write a quick explanation of what the video was about: *This is vid of seven members of the Dragon Knights plotting to graveyard gank the human champion and make him lose his title, so the second in line for it could take over. The human in this vid is that second in line, who is also a Dragon Knight.*

So you know, the human champion turned the tables on them and got them all killed by NPC guards. Their plot failed.

And that just absolutely *blew up*. The guild master of the Dragon Knights responded to the vid with a staunch denial, but the elf players that had seen everything go down who browsed the forum confirmed everything. They saw the fight, they saw that it involved the human champion—me—they heard Emelda say to my face that I wouldn’t be champion much longer, confirming she was part of the plot, and the facts were too much on my side for any other explanation to make any sense to people.

My vid got way past the server forums. It got mirrored to other forums, and it even invoked another article on the main page: *Major Drama on Methrian Server: Guilded Champions Fail in Plot to Make Human Champion Lose Title*, and the article absolutely *blasted* the Dragon Knights...not for scheming to make me lose my title, intrigue was a part of the game, but in using a cheap exploit to do it. Graveyard ganking was considered the lowest of low behavior, only practiced by cowards and sleazeballs. That branded the entire guild as cowards and sleazeballs.

And much to my absolute shock, it even incited a response from the game developers themselves. The next day after work, I read the hotfixes posted on the message of the day window after I logged in, and right there at the top: *Champions can no longer lose Champion's Points if killed within their own faction territory by other Champions, but can still lose Champion's Points if killed by a non-Champion player whom they attack. Champions killed within their own faction territory by another champion still give the slayer quest credit for the Champion of Champions and Champion Slayer quests. Champions can no longer lose Champion's Points if killed by another Champion within twenty minutes of respawning at a graveyard after death.*

And the second line of the hotfixes? *Graveyards are now considered safe zones. Reincarnating players have the Safe Zone effect so long as they stay within the boundaries of the graveyard, including having the ability to fully log out. Leaving the Safe Zone area cancels the effect, and it cannot be reapplied by moving back into the graveyard.*

Not only did they fix the exploit the Dragon Knights were going to use against me, they completely removed graveyard ganking from the game.

Awesome. And a major *bite me* to Emelda and the Dragon Knights.

Mrima finally made it to Freeport, and I showed her around town, showing her my favorite taverns and some of the best shops, and we did exactly what she rolled on the server to do, us just sitting around in a tavern drinking beer and talking. And since she'd had her chance to go out and play like a newbie, I decided to gear her out a little bit. I have a fairly high blacksmithing skill, so I set her up with the best chain mail I could make for her that she could use—really good gear has minimum skill requirements that prevents *twinking*, or giving a new player overpowered gear so they

could blow through quests easily—and a pretty nice axe, since her axe skill was her highest weapon skill. I also gave her some nice consumables like healing totems and some other useful items that I had, stuff that I collected over my adventures that I don't need anymore because they don't do very much for me. I mean, a totem that heals for 50 hit points doesn't do much for me, since I have 3,700 hit points. Everything was usable for her since she took my advice and really worked on raising her skills.

"I've had a lot of fun so far," she told me as the NPC barmaid put two new tankards on the table. "I've met some pretty cool people, and we even grouped up and did that dungeon under the Dark Thicket together. It was really fun!"

"You get any drops?"

"Nah, but that's okay. Besides, thanks to you I feel like I can take on an army by myself," she grinned, showing off her fangs.

"Eh, I had plenty of iron ingots to make the armor and axe for you," I said dismissively. "And the consumables, I've had those in my item storage for like ever. I just kept forgetting to clear them out and sell them. My laziness is your gain," I told her, which made her laugh.

"Is there a cap on item storage?"

"I think it's two hundred items," I replied. "I just know that sometimes I hit the cap and I have to go in there and clear out the stuff I'll never use. Item storage is about the only part of this game that isn't realistic. I guess they felt it would be too cumbersome to have to carry backpacks and take them off and root through them for what we need."

"Yeah, but you have little satchel you always carry, and that scroll case on your belt."

"Those are a little different," I said. "Even though you don't actually *carry* carry your money, the game still counts its weight against your encumbrance cap as if you were. The satchel I have is a magic item called a Bag of Carrying, and what it does is reduce the weight of any money I'm carrying. I can also keep items in the bag that I can pull out without having to go through my item storage menu, which makes it much faster to get at them. That's why you see so many people carrying belt pouches, packs, or

satchels, it's an old trick to put your critical healing totems and consumables in a bag so you can get them out really fast if you need them."

"Ohhhh. Cool."

"The scroll tube is an item that does the same thing, but only with maps. It stores all my maps and lets me access exactly the map I want without having to go through the item storage menu. I reach into it, and the map I want is always the map I pull out."

"That's pretty cool too."

"It's been really useful," I told her, then took a drink. I do like the ale in the game...which can actually make you drunk unless you build up your Alcohol Tolerance skill. Funny thing is, I don't drink in real life, only in the game. "I'm always referring to my maps, because the majority of the time, I'm somewhere I've never been before. If not for the maps I make, I may never find my way back to civilization."

"You ever buy a house in the game?"

"Yeah, I have a small house here in Freeport. It's not all that fancy, but it does the job. But seriously, I'm almost never there. I use it mainly to store stuff I don't want to carry around with me, like my crafting materials."

"What's the upside of them, outside of having your own space?"

"Item storage," I answered. "If you own a house, your house acts as a bank for items, but with unlimited storage. People heavy into crafting skills are the ones that most want to own a house, so they can convert it into a shop and use the unlimited item storage to stock up on the mats they need to make their stuff, plus have a place where they can easily sell what they make. Trust me, when you're making the high-end stuff, it can take like thirty different items, between the tools you need and the materials to make it. So doing high end crafting can fill up your item storage real quick. Craftsmen are usually the only ones that can afford houses," I chuckled. "Crafting skills are the most profitable skills in the game, and you need those profits to buy a house. The cheapest house I've ever seen was a one room hovel, and it cost seventy thousand gold."

"No way, seriously?"

I nodded. "A house in the Military District here in Freeport can cost upwards of two hundred thousand gold. That's where all the rich NPCs and nobles live, as well as the richest human players," I explained. "And almost all of them are the high-skill human crafters on the server. So, if you're interested in making money, Mri, get into crafting. Just be prepared to invest a lot of time and gold in it to raise your skill. It takes a while before it starts turning a profit."

"I did kinda want to get into blacksmithing, so I could make my own stuff," she said. "And I thought it would be fun."

"It's not bad," I told her. "Blacksmithing can be a bit of a pain to raise, but the rewards are worth it. Some of the gear blacksmiths can craft is as good as raid gear, and blacksmiths can craft special items that only they can use that are more powerful than most loot drops. That's why I got into it, I wanted to be able to make phantom horseshoes."

"What are those?"

"If you put them on a horse, they increase its speed, letting you get from place to place faster. I worked on it a while, then I got something else that made it obsolete. But I kept raising the skill because I realized I could make weapons for myself far better than I could get from a boss monster or a dungeon."

"Oooh, what did you get?"

"I, uh, got a spell that lets me travel faster, and found out it was faster and easier to raise my magic skill to cast the spell than it would be to raise my blacksmithing skill to make the horseshoes. And then I found out it was better than a horse," I hedged. I don't tell *anyone* about my Djinn form. "Horses are a bit of a pain in this game. If you buy one, you have to take care of it, and if you dismount and go into a cave or dungeon or something, your horse is still there. It doesn't just vanish after you dismount. So, monsters can kill it, or it can wander off."

"I didn't know that. Strange, I see people riding them all the time."

"You can rent horses to ride from one town to another," I told her. "Most likely it was a rental. Not too many players actually own a horse, because to care for it properly, you have to either own a house with a stable attached or pay a stable to care for it. So, you want to be a blacksmith, eh?"

“Why not? I think it’ll be fun to have a hobby in the game that has nothing to do with killing stuff. I can work on blacksmithing when I don’t feel like adventuring.”

I had to laugh. “You’ll be killing stuff to use bits and pieces of them for blacksmithing,” I winked. “I have some extra blacksmithing tools. I’ll give them to you as a starter kit. Some of them are a bit expensive for new players to get, and you need the tools to make things. And since you need a place to work, I guess I can let you use my smithy. I converted the first floor of my house into a smithy so I could work on blacksmithing, so it has all the equipment you need to do your work. And you should work on your Negotiation skill, it’s critical for any craftsman.”

“Why?”

“Well, if you don’t have your own shop, you have to rent space from an NPC smithy to make stuff. I don’t think you’re carrying a forge and anvil in your pants,” I smiled, which made her laugh. “Negotiation makes that cheaper, and it also lets you bargain better prices from NPC merchants for just about everything, from renting a room at an inn to buying a new weapon. Craftsmen have to buy a lot of supplies from NPC merchants, like coal and flux and iron stock, so the better your Negotiation, the easier it is on your wallet.”

“Okay. Glad I already got that skill.” She took a drink, then gave me a long look.

“What?”

“Just musing that you’re so much different here than at work,” she winked. “You’re always so quiet and mild-mannered there. I’ve heard you talk more in this tavern than I have for a week in the cafeteria.”

I had to laugh. “I almost never do this. Most of the time, I’m way, way out in the hinterlands, being as by myself here as I am there.”

“Why don’t you group? I did it, and it was super fun.”

“I guess...I just don’t really want to,” I said. “Besides, by now, I don’t do it because it would ruin what I’ve built for myself. I got where I am all by myself, Mri. I’ve never been in a group, not even once. At first it was

because I didn't understand the game and didn't want to look like an idiot to other people. And then I met Grul the Ravager," I chuckled softly.

"Who's that?"

"He's a rare overworld boss on the Umbral Plain, just on the other side of the Twilight Hills, in neutral territory just outside Jagaara territory. He was the first monster I ever killed solo that was supposed to be killed by a group. But I didn't just walk up to him and smack him down, Mri. The first time I encountered him, I had no idea what an overworld boss mob was, I thought he was just a regular mob, and he annihilated me. That made me kinda mad, so I went back to try again, and again, and again, and kept trying until a group killed him.

"That mob made me so mad I vowed to myself I was going to kill him. So I went out and worked on my skills, farmed money to buy better gear, and when I felt I was ready, I camped where he spawns for four days waiting for him. And when he spawned, I tried again. And he wrecked me," I sighed. "But I didn't give up. It had become a moral crusade by that point, so I went out and trained some more, got even better gear, and then tried again. And again. And again. I spent nearly three weeks trying to kill that monster, Mri. But then, finally, I *did*. I literally only had three hit points left when he went down," I chuckled. "But I did it. I killed a boss monster, meant to only be killed by a group.

"I certainly got rewarded for my effort," I mused. "The mob dropped an Ancient Skill called Lone Wolf, which increases the chance that my skills go up when I use them so long as I'm not in a group. It's a super-rare skill, Mri, it only drops from a boss mob if someone kills it solo, and even then, the chance it drops is like super-rare.

"But that skill got me thinking, what else could I do by myself? Just how far could I go? Could I clear a dungeon by myself? Maybe even kill a raid boss by myself? I mean, I'd just killed Grul the Ravager solo, and at that moment, I thought I could do almost anything in the game by myself, if I was dedicated enough and I raised my skills high enough. And with Lone Wolf speeding up the skill training grind, it seemed feasible. So, that's when I started down this path," I told her. "I made a decision to see how far a player could go in this game without grouping, without a guild, to be as self-sufficient as possible. I bought crafting skills so I could make my own

gear and equipment. I bought a wide array of utility skills I knew I'd need out in the world. Hell, I even bought hunting, fishing, foraging, and cooking so I could feed myself out in the wilderness. I worked my ass off raising all of them, weeks of just grinding skills, grinding skills, grinding skills, then weeks of grinding mobs, grinding mobs, grinding mobs to practice combat skills and farm money. And it worked. I got stronger and stronger and stronger. I got to the point where I could kill overworld bosses, and then I started working on trying to conquer dungeons by myself. Since you can only get loot from an overworld boss monster once, I started venturing out into the unexplored lands looking for ones I hadn't killed yet, always seeking out challenges to see if I could overcome them by myself, to truly *progress* as a solo player. So, now, I've kinda evolved into the server's most hardcore explorer, the guy that's always so far away from civilization that it takes him days to get back to a friendly town, and it's become my secondary goal in the game to have the most complete, comprehensive maps of the entire game world. I want to go to every place, see everything there is, Mri, and make maps of it to bring back so it helps the players that come behind me. And I don't think I'm done yet. I think there's more I can do solo, more I can accomplish, and I'm going to work hard to find my limits. I'll never group until I find those limits, because it kinda goes against my personal code of honor," I said wryly. "To group with someone else would make me feel like I got help, and I would never know just how far I could have gone on my own."

"Wow, I had no idea you were so hardcore," she smiled. "And I think it's awesome that you're doing something so hard. I remember that dungeon, I think I'd pee myself if I had to do that by myself."

"If it's not hard, it's boring," I quipped with a smile. "But I don't suggest what I do to other players, Mri. There's so much of this game I don't get to experience because of the playstyle I've chosen. My suggestion to you is to find a good guild. Find a good core group of friends and play together. Get stronger together and accomplish great things together. Solo play is a lonely life, it's a harsh, unforgiving life, and I don't recommend it to anyone but a dedicated masochist."

She laughed brightly. "Well, I hope that with me here, you at least have someone to chat with when you feel lonely," she smiled.

“Until you annoy me,” I winked. “But, if I’m nearby and you need help that doesn’t require me grouping with you, I’m only a call away.”

“Won’t even group with me, huh? Even when I’m not helping in any way?”

“The code prevents it,” I said lightly. “I can’t risk being in a group, Mri, not even with you. Because being in a group can cause group quests to trigger, and part of the challenge I’ve given myself is to never have a group quest in my log. So, to prevent a group quest from accidentally being added, I don’t group at all. But I think I may have to bend that rule,” I said, picking up my mug again.

“Why is that?”

“I’m currently doing a pretty big quest line,” I told her. “It’s the kind of super-rare quest that you can’t *not* do. I really lucked out starting it, and I want to finish it. But I suspect that the end of the quest line may require a group to finish it. And I’ve decided that if that happens, then I’ll do the quest. I know it ends my solo challenge, but I think doing the quest is more important to me than the challenge.”

“Wow, it must be the mother of all quests to make you do that.”

“It is,” I told her, taking a drink. “I guess I can tell you, but you can’t tell anyone at the office, Mri. Not one person.”

“Okay.”

“I’m the human Champion,” I admitted.

She gasped. “*You’re* the champion?” she blurted loudly, causing several heads to turn in our direction.

“Keep it down,” I hissed. “And yes, I am. Trust me, I was more stunned than anyone when I got the champion’s quests. Those are the quests I’m doing, Mri, they’re called the Grand Crusade. And the reward for completing the quest line is that it will give a new bonus skill to every human player in the game, at least on our server. I...I can’t *not* do that, Mri. My solo challenge isn’t as important as a quest that benefits all the other human players. I mean, there are so few of us as it is, and we take a lot of crap from other players because everyone thinks humans are the worst player race in the game. For us few, proud human players, I’ll put my solo

challenge aside and group if I have to in order to complete the Grand Crusade.”

“Holy crap, even a newbie like me has heard of the Grand Crusade,” she breathed, then laughed again. “Well, it doesn’t end your solo challenge, Kev. Being the champion and doing epic quests like that, I think it’s fair to call that a reasonable exemption to the solo challenge code. I mean, if you get any gear from any quest you do that requires a group, just don’t use it when you’re out doing your solo stuff. And if you get XP from it, you can just commit suicide to lose the XP, that way you don’t benefit from it. That way the code is maintained.”

I laughed. “You know, Mri, that’s not a bad suggestion,” I smiled. “You’re right. I just put aside any gear that I get if I have to group while doing parts of the quest, give away the gold reward, and suicide the XP so I never use it. That way I’m not using anything I didn’t get on my own, and it upholds the spirit of the solo challenge.”

“There, see how easy it is to solve problems when you bring them to the smart person in the room?” she winked.

“Bite me, Mri.”

The rumble with the Dragon Knights had some lasting repercussions.

I read about it yesterday at lunch while checking the server forum...the Dragon Knights were *disbanding*...and the reason was because of the failed plot to take my title.

Some of the members of the guild were so appalled and disgusted over what their guildmates did that they left the guild, and there were enough of them that did it that it reduced the guild’s numbers to the point where they could no longer raid. And when the guild master tried to recruit new members, he found that people didn’t want to join a guild full of graveyard gankers. Unable to raid and discovering that the server community was going to hold them accountable for what they did, the guild leader decided to just disband the guild. The members had to find new raiding guilds to join, at least except for a small core group of ex-members that formed a new guild...which held all five of the other champions that were in on the plot, the guild master, and a couple of other ex-guild members.

I suppose they were hoping that if they had a new guild name, people wouldn't associate them with the Dragon Knights. They decided to name themselves the Golden Crusaders, and the forums said that they were going to focus on completing the Grand Crusade questlines for their five champions.

The amusing thing that happened was from the high elf champion, Emelda. The bitch had the absolute nerve to put a post up on the forums asking all the champions to meet to discuss win trading so all of them could get the mount, something that four other servers had already done. I didn't have to post to shoot that in the ass, either. The very first reply was from someone claiming to be the dwarf champion, and his simple snarky response, *will this meeting take place beside a graveyard by chance?* ended it then and there. The rest of the replies burned Emelda to the ground, not letting her forget that she tried to cheese me out of my title. It got so bad the forum mods had to lock the thread.

It went to show how a server's community policed itself, and how being an ass in this game could have severe repercussions. Nobody on the server was ever going to trust Emelda again, at least outside her circle of friends, and she was starting to discover the depth of it.

I wasn't happy to see the Dragon Knights fold. Not all of them were in on what happened to me, and I felt bad for the people that suffered because of the actions of their guildmates. It also left even more of a hole in our server's poor raiding community, because the Dragon Knights were the top guild on the server, and now they were gone. That put us even further behind other servers when it came to raid progression. Even if I don't raid, I certainly don't want to see the raid community take a hit.

I also learned something else. Other champions had posted pictures of their weapon stat windows, and I found out that all the offensive Champion weaponry shared one trait; every one of them had a special ability that allowed the user to score an instant kill against an opponent. Weapons had abilities like mine and Crusher, but the spellcaster weapons, the staves and wands and daggers, had abilities that caused spells to have a chance to cause instant death, an ability called *soul rend*. Like the physical weapons, that chance was based on the user's spellcasting skill opposed by the target's magic resistance, so the more potent the player's offense was over

his target's defense, the better the chance that soul rend triggered. The only weapons that didn't have an instant kill ability were the ones designed for a dedicated healer. But those weapons had a fairly powerful ability themselves, an ability that allowed a healer to place a *hex* on a target. Whenever the healer cast a healing spell, the hexed target would take a proportion of the hit points healed as magical damage. That was pretty powerful, allowing a healer to deal real damage, allowing them to bypass the damage debuff when casting healing spells. What balanced it was that the healer could only hex one target at a time, and they could only use the hex once every two minutes.

I found on the forum that someone that had worked out a formula for the instant kill mechanics on the weapons. It turned out that there was a hard cap on our weapons' special abilities to score an instant kill, and that was a defense of 2,730. At that point, it doesn't matter how high my sword skill is, that defense skill lowered the chance of a vorpal strike to 0%.

What it told me was that the Harion didn't have a defense skill of 2,730.

That made sense to me after I thought about it. Many raiders don't actually get hit all that much unless they're the tanks, the players who spec—short for *specialize*, players who dedicate their skills to a defined role—for taking damage from the boss. The job of any raider not a tank is to *not get hit*, because it puts undue pressure on the healers to keep the raid members alive during boss fights. A player like me, on the other hand, gets hit *all the time*, and every hit on me is a chance that my defense skill increases, boosted by Lone Wolf. In a way, I'm like a tank spec raider, I have a super-high defense because I get beat on by the monsters I fight solo.

Needless to say, just about every dungeon and raid boss has a defense higher than that, which would prevent a champion from cheesing a boss fight with a super-lucky hit. Dungeon bosses from the most recently released dungeons have defenses above 3,000, and current raid bosses well over 5,000. And as for myself, I was already there. My defense skill is 2,912, which puts me well over the hard cap. That meant that the instant death ability on champion weapons wouldn't work on me.

That was an amusing thought. I nearly have the defense skill rating of a current content dungeon boss...though dungeon bosses usually have ten times more hit points than I do, so they're still way tougher than me.

In my case, being over the hard cap was going to come in very, very handy. It meant that champions gunning for me to get the mount couldn't one-shot me with the instant death aspect of their weapons.

I thought about that a while as I stood at the rail of the *Wavestrider*, one of Freeport's naval ships, as it plied the waves two days west of the city. I was on the next leg of the quest chain, for Merria's research of the papers I brought her said that there was a secret Kanlon outpost on a small island known as Skull Rock. It was one of three outposts or naval bases the Kanlon had built for their navy to use to prosecute an invasion of Arcavia. The only way to get there was by ship—it was way too far for a gryphon to fly without dying of exhaustion—so there I was, on a ship. I was being sent along with an expedition of ten human Marines, five elven mages, eight Jagaara rangers, and eight dwarven warriors. Our job was to determine if the outpost was still there, and if so, to attack it and capture as much intelligence as possible, and if any Kanlon ships were in port, to do our best to capture them. Admiral Rogers wanted us to bring back a Kanlon ship so he could get an idea of how formidable they would be if Freeport's navy came up against them.

That was only smart, in my opinion.

Even though I was the only player on the ship, I certainly didn't feel alone. I've said that NPCs in this game are very complex, have personalities and are able to hold conversations, and the NPCs on this ship were no different. For one, Captain Breeg was a lore character, so his AI was *very* complex. Breeg was a famous—or infamous—NPC in Freeport for being a bit, well, weird, but he was supposed to be one of the best ship captains in the navy. He had a habit of talking to himself, always referred to himself as “we,” and whoever programmed his AI had dialed up his *talk like a pirate* setting to eleven. Yesterday, out of nowhere, he screamed something about fire fairies, ran across the deck, and jumped overboard. The ship had to stop to fish him out, and when he got back on deck, he went on about his business as if he'd done nothing unusual whatsoever.

So yeah, he was a little crazy...but I have to admit, he made this trip very entertaining.

I used the time practicing my skills, building a target dummy on the deck that would allow me to practice combat skills. I used my time raising

Blade Dance, trying to get it as high as possible as fast as possible. I had to get it over 1,000, over that threshold, and I was a long, long way from that. I only managed to get the skill to 603 by the time the lookout called that he could see Skull Rock.

I looked at the time, and realized I wasn't doing this today. The ship was probably still an hour from the island, and by then it would be too late. I went up to Captain Breeg and used the in-game roleplaying equivalent of *I have to log out*, and he replied by assuring me he'd anchor the ship well away from Skull Rock so they didn't know we were coming. The ship would then wait there for me to log back in, though things would happen while I was out. No doubt the mages would use scrying spells to see if the base there was still occupied, and they'd tell me what they found out when I logged back in.

I sat up in my bed and stretched, then unplugged the datafiber running from my vidlink to my jack. I switched the vidlink to viddy mode, putting it on the news as I went to the kitchen area and started making some coffee. I heard the news anchor talk about the Karinnes establishing a Stargate in a new galaxy to open it to exploration for the rest of the Confederation—

Wow, had things changed. Just a couple of years ago, the Karinnes had invented an engine that could let ships go to other *galaxies*, and now the Confederation had ships out in other galaxies exploring them. Just sixteen years ago, we had no idea there was even life beyond Earth, and now my best friend was an alien and they were reporting about exploring other galaxies.

Talk about progress.

Eh, I'm only an explorer in CO. No way in hell I'd be capable of doing anything like that for real.

I sat at the desk by the viddy and activated my handpanel, and naturally, I went straight to the *CO Today* forums. I checked the sticky topic at the top that champions from various servers were using to share information, and I checked the newest posts to see if any of the human champions had managed to get to where I was in the chain yet. And nope. The closest was the champion on the Underwalker server, he was at the stage where he was bringing intelligence he'd gathered back to Freeport for Merria to go over.

That was two quests behind me. I was curious to find out if he had to wait the same amount of time I did, so I posted, asking him to keep track of the time he had to wait.

The Grand Crusade had certainly taken over CO. Raid guilds were suspending raiding to help the champions in them do their quests, champions were now devoting all their game time to the quests, and players from every server were watching on like kids waiting for Christmas, eager to watch the streams of champions doing the quests, video of the quests they didn't stream, posts about the quests, and how the quests were starting to affect the servers. On Methrian, Kanlon ships had been spotted off the west coast of Arcavia multiple times, and in one case, a small raiding party of Kanlon marines landed just off the Kuato village of Ruvia. The Kuato NPCs and players fought them off and sank the ship, and we found out the next day that it was *not* part of the Kuato champion's quest. My progression of the quest chain had caused the Kanlon to start appearing, and now they were doing stuff like trying to raid coastal villages.

They were probing our defenses, that was what they were doing.

And I liked it. In a way, it was allowing everyone take part in the Grand Crusade. While players like me were doing the actual quests, everyone else got to help by doing things like fighting off Kanlon raiding parties. And it made me wonder if the actions of other players might influence or change the quests that I had yet to do. Maybe some Kanlon NPC that was supposed to be important to one of my future quests gets killed in a raiding skirmish...well, that removes the NPC from the game—"named" NPCs don't respawn except for overworld rare boss mobs and lore characters, who get resurrected after they die—and that would mean that my quest would change to reflect it.

And I was betting that at some point, there was going to be a major Kanlon invasion, and players from all over both worlds were going to flock to the western coast to fight them off, to do their part in the Grand Crusade.

It wouldn't be the first major, huge battle in the game. A year ago, a massive orc invasion threatened all of Arcavia, and there was this gigantic battle in Stonefang Pass as players and NPCs fought them off. On our server, the orcs managed to destroy the hill dwarf town of Stonemead, who were part of the Covenant faction along with the Harian, Selkies, and

Sylphs, slaughtering all the NPCs there, and we stopped them right at the end of the pass, right before they would have broken through and swarmed into hill dwarf territory. I was in that battle, and it was both super fun and freakin' scary.

The skeletons and rotting bodies of the dead were still in the pass, and there were tons of undead monsters running around there now. Most of them were around the ruins of Stonemead. The hill dwarves had just finished building a fort at the mouth of the pass about three months ago, where we stopped them, and a few NPCs had moved there from other towns in hill dwarf territory to help support the soldiers that were stationed there to keep the undead in the pass from getting into hill dwarf territory. Those NPCs were now handing out new quests.

It was an example of how the world of Citadel Online changed, how the actions of players had a lasting impact on the game, and it was one reason so many of us were utterly *addicted* to this game. Stonemead had been a quest hub, but the orc invasion had destroyed it, and it didn't just magically go back to normal after the event was over like it would have in a game like *World of Warcraft*. Stonemead was *gone*, the NPCs that had populated it were *dead*, the quests that had once been offered from Stonemead were removed from the game, and nothing could change that.

I could maybe try streaming someday. I've never streamed the A/V portion of my simsense feed while playing before, but I know how it's done. And I could maybe post some of the simsense recordings I have of part of the quests I've done; I tend to record them so I can go back and study them, catch the things I missed the first time.

But...I don't really want the attention. I mean, I think it would be kinda cool for people who are interested to see what a Grand Crusade quest is like from the inside, like other champions were doing, especially because all of them were different. My quests weren't the same as the other human champions. But I didn't want people to know who the player was behind the character. What I was experiencing was unique, and it would be nice for people to see my quests from my perspective.

Besides, I don't want people seeing my character window. It would show people what gear I have equipped, what my stats are, what skills I have, and in a game like CO, the more people know about you, the easier it

is for them to kill you. It wouldn't take people long to connect the streams to the Methrian human champion, and that would allow the other champions to study my info and come up with a strategy to beat me.

So, yeah, it would be cool to do it, but nope, nope, nope.

I'd save the recordings I have, and record much more of them from now on. I'd record entire game sessions whenever I was working on the quests, that way I'd catch anything that might happen. I'd save it all, and when the Grand Crusade was done and I handed the Champion title to someone else, *then* I would release those recordings. I'd edit them, turn it into like a movie or something, let people see the Grand Crusade from start to finish and skip over the boring parts like me spending days traveling to where the quest objectives were.

I checked my vidlink's memory, and saw that it wasn't going to be a problem at all to record hundreds of hours of A/V feed off my simsense stream...and if I started running out of memory in the vidlink, I'd just transfer the stream files over to datasticks or buy some memory expansion chips for my vidlink, no problem. I checked all my game record files to make sure I hadn't deleted any of them, and much to my delight, some of the recordings I had were hours long, where I'd started recording and forgot I turned it on, which recorded the rest of the game session.

It would be fun. I've never done anything like video editing before, so it would be something new to try.

I wanted to make a couple of setting changes to the game to make it easier to record my simsense feed while I was thinking about it, so, I hopped over to the bed, laid down, grabbed the datafiber and jacked it in, then restarted the game. And as soon as the simsense stream started, I found myself laying on the floor of my cabin, and the sounds of cannons and shouts were hitting my ears. The ship was under attack! I rushed up onto the deck and saw that our ship was engaged with two Kanlon rakers, cannonballs flying back and forth between the three ships. The Kanlon ship to port had its mast shattered by a shot, and I dove to the deck when a spray of wooden shards came from the sterncastle behind me, feeling a few hit me and do a little damage to me.

“Champion, they’re about to board!” Breeg screamed from the steering deck. “Hard to starboard! Port cannons, prepare for broadside!”

“Port cannons!” the bo’son relayed from near the mainmast. The ship on the other side launched grapples, which tangled into the rigging and dug into the railing. Then the ship pitched a little as they started reeling us in.

“All port FIRE!” Breeg screamed.

“All port FIRE!”

The thunder of twelve cannons firing simultaneously rang in my ears, and the ship lurched under me from the recoil. They shredded the Kanlon ship to port, blowing huge holes in it, blowing off its bowsprit and mizzenmast, and killing the helmsman and wiping out the wheel. “Prepare for boarders!” Breeg screamed, drawing a cutlass and rushing down to the deck, standing beside me. “Archers to starboard! Mages, loose on them!”

The Jagaara rangers and high elf mages responded, and they sent waves of arrows and spells at the enemy ship. The Kanlon had archers and mages too, returning fire, and the two ships traded blows as they slowly pulled towards each other. I took cover under the stairs up to the steering deck along with Breeg, and I saw that our mages were more powerful than theirs. They managed to kill several Kanlon sailors, as did the Jagaara archers, but took no casualties themselves. That wasn’t a surprise; my troops are elite soldiers, and the Kanlon sailors are just normal NPCs. Elite NPCs have way higher stats and skills than regular NPCs, and that translated to my troops blasting the hell out of the enemy as they sought to board our ship.

They did manage to board, and that was when I got involved. Me, Breeg, and our human marines and dwarf warriors met the Kanlon boarders at the rail, and it turned into a complete scrum in seconds. They came at us both from boarding planks and swinging over from ropes, and the organized lines dissolved into a pitched battle on the deck. “Rangers, fire arrows, set fire to their ship!” I barked at the Jagaara, then parried an attack from a Kanlon sailor’s cutlass and riposted, slashing him across the upper arm and chest. I felt my sword’s proc trigger, draining life from my opponent and using it to heal the wounds caused by the wooden shrapnel. I saw the other ship that ate a full broadside start to list, it was sinking and its sailors were abandoning ship, jumping into the water and swimming towards us. My

opponent went down and was replaced by a Kanlon wearing a waistcoat, a twisted snarl on his face, but that snarl turned to a vacant look of shock when I took off his head with one swing. The Jagaara used their ranger magic skills to set fire to the heads of their arrows, and they loosed them at the Kanlon ship. “Staria, the boarding ropes!” I shouted to a willowy high elf woman standing behind a shield with her companions. She nodded and used the words of power for the Air Scythe spell, and seconds later, it swept across the void between the two ships, shearing through both the grappling ropes and the boarding planks, cutting off the Kanlon reinforcements. Several of them that had been on the planks trying to board were pitched into the ocean, and one of them was cut in half by the spell.

But there was no blood. I play with blood and gore set to off, because the sight of blood and gore can trigger a PTSD-like effect in me, from the time when I was a slave on the farms. Visible wounds for me don’t show blood and flesh and tissue and bone and organs, it just shows a red light filling the “wound.” You can set it so it’s totally realistic, but I’d rather not throw up all over myself or have a panic attack in real life after watching some guy’s guts spill out of a belly wound.

No. Thank. You.

The battle raged for several more moments, but since no more Kanlon sailors were boarding the ship, the fighting tapered off. The surviving enemy ship was turning away from us, the sailors in the water swimming towards it as fast as they could, and they were raising their sails as other men put out the fires set by the Jagaara. Our mages and rangers had put a beating on them, and now they were going to try to retreat to warn the outpost on the island. “Don’t let that ship escape!” Breeg barked, pointing at it with his cutlass. “Mages, blow it out of the water! Helm, hard to port! Starboard cannons, prepare for broadside!”

“Starboard cannons!” the bo’sun repeated in his booming voice.

They weren’t needed. Now that they weren’t under active attack, the five mages had time to cast the *big* spells, and they used them. They chanted for nearly twenty seconds, and then five pillars of fire came down from the heavens and immolated the Kanlon ship. When the pillars winked out, it left behind an instant firestorm on the deck, the sails, ropes, and wood of the ship burning anywhere the pillars of fire touched them, and the

fire spread quickly to where it didn't. The sailors that survived the initial spell were charging through the flames to jump off the ship, most of them on fire when they hit the water, and not all of them surfaced.

"We've got 'em! We've won the day, mateys!" Breeg boomed, which caused a cheer to rise up from the deck.

"Staria, you know any charm magic?" I asked her.

"I do," she nodded.

"Then let's pick up the survivors and have her interrogate them," I told Breeg.

"Aye, Champion, good idea," he said with a gap-toothed grin. "Pick up the survivors! Prepare the brig!" he ordered. "Mateys, full sail, let's get away from that burning ship before the smoke draws in more enemy rakers! Helm, come about and get Skull Rock back under the horizon! Mages, any of ye know any magic that can hide the ship?"

"I know a spell that will raise a bank of fog around us," one of them said.

"Get it ready. We'll put some distance between us and these ships, circle around Skull Rock to get out of the line of any pursuin' ships, then hide in yer magic fogbank. We'll hold there 'til the Champion is ready to land on the island. We'll be hidin' to the west of the island, and they'll be lookin' for us to the east," he predicted.

Well, that was exciting. I watched as the NPCs did their jobs, picking up about 20 Kanlon sailors and taking them to the brig, then the ship raised full sail and retreated from Skull Rock, making it look like we were retreating back to Arcavia, getting out of line of sight of any lookouts on the island. That was probably how they found us. After making sure that everything was going to be alright, I logged back out and blew out my breath.

The game is dynamic...well, that just proved how dynamic it was.

Chapter 3

I was starting to feel *weird* being...famous.

As I walked down the street in Freeport, I heard the whispers. People were recognizing me now, because I'd done enough of the Grand Crusade for me to have to be visible. People had posted screenshots of me sailing into Freeport on a captured Kanlon raker and meeting King Gerin and Admiral Rogers, and combined with the other things I'd done, it had slowly let word spread about who the human champion was and what he looked like.

That felt like forever ago. I'd completed that quest almost two weeks ago and had completed the second chain of the quest line. I'd earned my second piece of Champion's Raiment, opting for the boots to replace the boots I destroyed when I got Djinn form, which were nondescript black leather boots. And like all the Champion's Raiment, they had a magical effect, one that maybe wouldn't be as useful to me as some of the others... but I really, *really* needed the boots. The boots had an effect called *Feather Light*, which did three things; they let me walk on water, they allowed me to fall any distance and land without taking damage, and they let me jump long distances, as if I weighed no more than a feather. Testing it showed me that I could jump about three meters forward, two meters up, and about two meters backwards from a stand. With a running start, I could jump about six meters forward and four meters up. That was enough to let me jump up onto the roof of a one-story building, or up onto the second-floor balcony of about any building. There were effects on other boots that were more powerful, like one that let a person run very fast...but I have my Djinn form for running fast.

The Kanlon were a naval power. I suspected I might have to do more naval combat and having a piece of gear that lets me walk on water, well, that might be useful if I couldn't use Djinn form. And hey, at least now, I'd never have to worry about falling damage again.

There was something else I got from the quest line, though, that had me even more excited. I got the *Teleport* spell! Teleport spells are extremely rare, like *insanely* rare, to the point where lucky players that get them are more or less set for life in this game by hiring out their services to other players, or scribing copies of the spell to sell in the major markets on the server. The Teleport spell allows the caster and everyone in his party to teleport to a scion, which would save me tons and tons of time. Instead of traveling to a scion, I could just teleport to it, and then use it. Using a Teleport spell on a scion allows the caster to activate the scion without having to use a scion crystal, which saves the player even more gold. And what was best, the spell could be used to *find* scions. If a player goes out in the middle of the boondocks and uses the spell without having a destination scion in mind, it will teleport him to the nearest scion, even if he's never been to it before. The spell allows players to *mark* scions, which allows them to teleport to that scion instead of the closest one. And as the caster's Translocation skill increases, it allows the teleporting player to mark additional scions. Extremely high skill casters can mark dozens of scions, giving them the greatest mobility in the game, able to get almost anywhere in a matter of hours.

But, for now, the spell was going to be in my item storage. It requires a minimum skill of 1,250 to learn, and my Translocation school skill is only 1,063. Teleport is a spell more or less meant for mage archetypes, since it requires such a high skill to learn it. But now that I had that rare and treasured spell, I was damn well going to raise my skill so I could learn it. For a player like me, having the ability to use Teleport could be *game changing*.

But I was back on land for now. The third chain in the quest, from what I could tell, was to break the alliance between the Kanlon and the Salamanders and ensure that the Salamanders didn't attack while we were dealing with the Kanlon. That was part of their plan; when the Kanlon landed on the west coast of Arcavia to invade the western factions, the Salamanders were going to boil out from the Underdark and attack the eastern factions, to keep them from sending reinforcements to repel the Kanlon invasion.

That was why I was preparing for another expedition into the Underdark, moving through the Market District and restocking on supplies I

would need. I would be going in alone, and my mission was to do something rather drastic...I was tasked to collapse the tunnels leading to and from the Salamander's main city, built on a large lava lake in central Arcavia. The mission would be dangerous, but I decided it would be even more dangerous if I had NPCs along to help. I would be carrying magical "bombs" made by the high elven mages that would cave in the tunnels, enough to collapse all seven tunnels large enough for the Salamanders to move large numbers of troops through them. What would make it dangerous was that I'd have to cave in the tunnels in a specific pattern that would put me on the *inside* of the perimeter, and then collapse the last tunnel with me on the *outside*, allowing me to get away. I'd have to dodge Salamander patrols, then work along the edges of the lava lake to get to the last three tunnels.

Because of that, I'd come here to visit, to a twisting alley well off the beaten path in the marketplace, a place that sold more mystical wares. I'd need a way to protect myself from the heat of the lava, and that way could be found among the narrow doors along that alleyway. Merchants who sold magical goods didn't like to be too visible, and because their goods were very valuable, they set up shop in places that were hard for thieves to get into. That was why you'd never find a merchant selling potions from a stall in the marketplace.

I wasn't here for a potion or a totem, I was here for a charm. Charms are temporary magical items, like potions, totems, and crystals, but they last longer. I was here to find a charm of protection from heat and fire, and I'd need it to last at least three weeks. And that would *not* be cheap. I was expecting to spend well over five thousand gold pieces for the charm, because they were very expensive for enchanters to make.

Much as I'd love to have permanent protection from heat and fire, an item like that wasn't something you'd ever find for sale, even in a town like Freeport.

There were several charm makers in Freeport, both players and NPCs, and my merchant of choice was an NPC. She was a bit hard to find, and it wasn't easy to get her to sell you things. But if you could manage it, she sold potions, totems, crystals, and charms for *very* reasonable prices. The reason she was hard to find was because she was one of the most exotic

residents of Freeport, and almost never ventured out into the city. Her name was Lucilia, and she was an Arachnaut. Arachnauts were half spider, half elf creatures most known for being a hostile NPC faction in the Skittering Marsh, with the head and torso of an elf set on a spider-like body. Lucilia wouldn't sell to players unless they had sufficient rep with the Arachnauts to be allowed into their villages...and what do you know, I raised my rep with the Arachnauts a couple of years ago. I did it *because* of Lucilia, I stumbled across her exploring the city, and eventually got her to tell me what I had to do to be allowed to patronize her shop. So I went to the Skittering Marsh and did quests to raise my standing with the Arachnauts.

One of the things that made this game so cool was that you could befriend initially hostile NPC races and factions, if you worked hard enough. I was not considered an enemy by *tons* of races and factions that would kill most other players on sight, because I went out there and worked my butt off to earn their trust. And there were rewards for doing it. NPCs in the towns and villages of NPC factions would offer quests once they trusted you, and some of them had some lucrative rewards or rare magical items and treasures. Many of them could *only* be acquired by befriendng the faction. That's why I never just mindlessly attack anything that moves when I start exploring a new area. I very well might accidentally kill a monster or NPC in a faction and killing members of the faction make it bloody hard to raise your reputation with the dearly departed's allies.

The three weeks of work I put in to befriend the Arachnauts had paid off just in getting on Lucilia's good side, because she was the exclusive supplier of all of my important consumables. My bow was the other reward. It's called the Spider's Fang, and it's a very, *very* good bow. It requires an archery skill of 1,550 to use, which means it's a top tier weapon for people who don't raid or do dungeons, it has one of the longest ranges I've ever seen on a bow, and any arrow the bow fires is poisoned. The bow magically envenoms the arrowheads when I nock the arrows, and the poison reduces the victim's agility and movement speed, crippling it so it can't run away or so I can run away from it. Effects like that are called *snare*s by players, magical spells and effects that reduce the movement speed of the victim, and the Spider's Fang is prized by archer archetypes because it allows a tactic called *kiting*, which is to move away from a snared enemy, shoot some arrows at them, and then retreat again, which keeps the archer out of

the reach of an enemy. The tactic doesn't work very well against players, since many players have their own ranged attacks, but it's a very effective tactic against monsters. As for me, the bow is super-useful when I use my Hunting skill, hunting for food, because it snares my quarry and lets me catch up to it easily if I don't kill it with the first arrow. And since the poison is magical and temporary, it doesn't poison the meat, making it safe to eat.

I got the bow as a reward for finishing a very long and involved quest line with the Arachnauts in the marsh, which ended with me rescuing the daughter of the village leader from a swamp troll encampment.

Many of the game's quest chains were like that. The rewards for completing a long, difficult quest chain were items and equipment of about the same quality as you'd find in loot from boss monsters in dungeons. It allowed people to get good pieces of gear through hard work and effort and served as an incentive to do those long quest chains. What was best was that while boss monster loot drops were random, you knew what the quest reward for the chain was if you did a little research, and it allowed you to go after specific pieces of gear or weapons that you needed. I didn't know about the bow when I started raising my reputation with the Arachnauts, I was doing it to gain access to Lucilia's shop...but if I'd have known about the bow, I would have done it just for the bow. I've had the bow for over a year, and I still haven't found anything better. And even if I do, I'll keep the Spider's Fang for hunting, because the snare effect is just too useful.

I can't use the bow in Djinn form, and boy I wish I could. I use a loot drop bow in Djinn form, a rather crappy one that I use only so I can use Imbue Arrow while in Djinn form. Since I could potentially lose it to a player if I get killed as a Djinn, I don't equip anything valuable or powerful in that form.

I don't really use bows in human form, even though I have a very good bow and can use Imbue Arrow in human form...but that's just me being a perfectionist. I've used my bow in combat maybe five times over the last few months. And when I'm out in the world exploring, I'm usually in Djinn form and use the bow I equipped for that form. But if I ever do need it, I have a damn good bow and a high bow skill to make it do respectable damage, along with Imbue Arrow to pump up that damage even further.

I opened the door to Lucilia's shop, which was a small, ragged door that led to a set of old, worn spiral stairs going down. The Faerune on my headband let me see in the darkness, going down the spiral staircase to a deep cellar well under the buildings. Within the large cellar were tables and stands holding her wares, and one wall was covered in thick webs, which she used to get up to her private apartment. "Lucy!" I shouted as I came into the main area, speaking her language. "Lucy, it's Xen!"

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?" she complained as she appeared in the passageway at the top of the webs, then started down. Lucilia is nearly twice as tall as me, her spider body large, and her elf-like upper half was graced with ample breasts and a lovely face. Her hair was bone white and long, held back away from her face by a tiara-like headpiece, and her pale skin was complemented by the silk tunic she wore on her torso. The thorax of her spider body had a pack saddle of a sort over the top, giving her places to carry her things...usually the materials she needed to make her wares. She always smelled of spices and acrid powders.

"I'll keep doing it until the day you bite me," I replied lightly, which made her smile. That revealed her very long, very poisonous fangs. "I need your help, my friend. I need a very, very special charm."

"A custom order? I do love a challenge," she replied with an earnest smile, stepping up to me and looking down at me. She was a good three quarters of a meter taller than me. "Exactly what do you need?"

"I need a charm that will completely protect me and my equipment from heat and fire, and it has to last at least three weeks. If you can make it last longer than that, that's excellent, but it has to last a minimum of three weeks."

"Hmm," she mused, scratching her chin as she took on a thoughtful expression. "I can make such a charm for you, Xen, but I will warn you now. It will be *dreadfully* expensive."

"I'm fully expecting it to turn my hair white when I hear your price, Lucilia."

She gave me an amused look. "I can make you one that will last an entire lunar cycle, Xen, but it will cost nearly eight thousand gold pieces to make. Add in my fee, and it will be eighty-five hundred. The problem is,

it's dependent on the phase of the greater moon, so I have to make it so that it's finished on the day of the full moon or the day of the new moon. It will then last for the full cycle."

A cycle of the greater moon was 36 days long, a little over five weeks...perfect. But there was one tiny catch.

"The new moon isn't for nine days," I said with a bit of a frown.

"I know, but it's the best I can do, friend. It's the only way I can make one that will last as long as you need it to last."

"If that's the only way we can do it, then that's what we'll do," I told her. "I absolutely need that charm, Lucilia. I have something important to do that will occupy my time while we wait for the new moon, so I won't be bored. Do you need me to pay in advance?"

She nodded. "I'll be honest, friend. I don't have the gold to buy the supplies I need to make the charm."

"Then I'll have the money here later today," I promised. "Is there anything I can do to help you? Any supplies or ingredients I can gather so you don't have to buy them?"

"I fear not," she replied. "It's going to take me four days to make the charm, and you wouldn't have time to go get the rare and expensive ones and have them back here by the time I need them."

"Alright," I said. "Thank you, Lucilia. I knew you'd be up to the task. You *are* the best enchanter in Freeport."

She smiled down at me. "Your compliments are the only reason you remain unbitten, human," she teased.

"I do love to live on the edge," I said in a playful voice. "I'll be back this afternoon with the money. There are some errands I have to run that I can't put off. Is that alright with you?"

"Fine."

"I'll see you then."

She nodded. "I'll be waiting."

I left the shop, went back home, and logged out. I had some errands to run, but they were in the real world, and I wanted to get them done on my day off. So, I went from rugged, competent explorer to just another guy in the elevator as I went down to the concourse to do my shopping for the week. This was Saturday, and I do my shopping on Saturday for the entire week, which mainly involves quick, easy to make meals. I'm not really much of a cook, so most of my meals are made by someone else, be them at a restaurant or in a factory.

The concourse is the literal reason I live in this building. It doesn't just have a market, it has several stores in it that cater to the building residents, and I can buy almost everything I need without leaving the building. And what I can't buy in the concourse, I can order over CivNet and have delivered. Since I don't have a car or a hovercar, the market in the concourse makes it very easy for me to get my groceries and get them home. I don't have to lug bags of groceries on the tram or take a cab.

It often hits me when I do this how...well, how divided my life has become. I live in two worlds, one real and one fantasy, and sometimes I'm not sure which world is the one I feel is more real to me. In this world, I'm a wage slave, an unassuming, timid introvert that wouldn't so much as raise his fist to someone and does everything he can to avoid confrontation. In the other world, I'm a rugged survivalist with the courage to explore where nobody else has ever been, to face the dangers of the unknown. Here, you'd never look twice at me. There, you'll never see me because I'm out doing something, always doing something. Here, I'm a glorified data entry clerk looking at never getting out of the cubicle farm. There, I'm a *champion*. Here, I'm afraid of almost everything. There, I'm afraid of almost nothing.

I sometimes can't fathom how I can be both Kevin Ball and Xen, how two diametrically different people can be the same me.

I know, I know, it's because it's a game...but it's a game that's so realistic that it's like an alternate reality. In the game, you laugh, you cry, you get scared out of your wits, you feel awe and wonder, you establish deep and meaningful relationships, you make friends and enemies, you experience everything you can in the real world except pain.

And maybe that's why it feels so much more like where I belong than the real world.

I guess the scars in me that built up during my time in that Trillane work camp may never go away.

I was honestly surprised to see Mrima heading towards the elevator, carrying a bag of groceries nearly as big as she was. The little Pai had to be careful that other people didn't kick her by accident. Mrima usually spent her weekends up in Norfolk with her kids. "Mri, why aren't you up at the Academy?" I asked as she stopped in front of me.

"The cubs are home on Paian right now, and I couldn't afford a transport ticket to go with them. They're visiting my family," she answered.

"You should have said something, Mri. I would have lent you the money," I told her honestly.

"Your money is your money, Kev," she said firmly. "Besides, I'll see them next week, and so will you. They're going to come here and spend the last week of their summer break with me," she said eagerly.

"All three of you in that little apartment?"

"It's only little to you," she grinned. "For me, that apartment is huge. There's more than enough room for all three of us."

"Oh. I didn't think of that," I admitted, which made her chuckle.

"What are you doing down here, Kev? I thought you'd be logged in. Don't you have the next quest in the Grand Crusade?"

"Yeah, but I can't start on it for nine days," I said sourly. "One of the lessons you learn in CO is that things take even longer in there than they do out here. I was going to go do some intensive skill training while I wait."

"Why do you have to wait?"

"I have to go stop the Salamanders from invading the eastern faction territories," I replied. "They live in the deep underground tunnels called the Underdark. I have to collapse the tunnels they're going to use to travel there. I can't start it until I get something that will protect me from heat, because Salamanders live in tunnels so hot that it'll kill anything that's not immune to fire. That item won't be ready for nine days, so I have to wait for it to be made."

"And you're doing it alone?"

“It’ll be easier for me to do alone,” I told her. “You’ve never been to the Underdark, Mri. Down there, a lone person can move around much more easily than a group. To be honest, anyone that goes with me will just slow me down and put me in danger.”

“Well, thank you for not just calling me a dead weight,” she grinned.

“You’re too small to be a weight.”

“Not in there I’m not. I like being big. It’s a refreshing change of place after living here on this planet where nobody will build a counter I can see over. Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta get these back to the apartment. I know I’ll see you in game in a little bit.”

“You know me too well, Mri,” I agreed with a chuckle. “Soon as I do the shopping for the week.”

“Well, swing over by the Bloody Kobold, I’m still there.”

“You’re gonna be the only newb on Methrian with an alcohol tolerance skill over one thousand.”

She laughed. “Ale tankards don’t fight back,” she said impishly. “And since you’re the one paying, I can train that skill the way you say I should. So we’re not getting drunk, Kev, we’re using our game time efficiently by working on a very, very important skill.”

I had to laugh. “You are impossible.”

“I’m a Pai, Kevin,” she said impishly.

I decided to do just that, at least after I brought the money for Lucilia. We met at the Bloody Kobold, drank a lot of ale and elven wine, and chatted about things both in and out of the game. I told her some of the better places to hunt monsters to gain XP, and explaining the NPC faction system to her, which would come in handy when she started questing in the Shadowfang Woods. There was an NPC faction of lizard men there—a different tribe than the lizard men that Jagaara had to fight in the starting zone just outside Twinfang that was also enemies with that tribe—that gave some pretty good quests for starting players, and like many of those factions, the lizard men started out as hostile. I told her where to start a quest to make them not hostile anymore, where she would save a group of lizard men hatchlings from gnoll hunters. That would trigger a quest chain

that would end with the lizard men accepting her as a member of their tribe, and then she could do quests for the lizard men, helping them fight the gnolls. Eventually, though, I managed to talk her out of the tavern. There was something I wanted her to see.

I was going to show her one of the best kept secrets in the Golden Stands, which was the starting area for human players just outside Freeport. It was filled with farms cut from the surrounding forest, a forest of trees with golden leaves instead of green, and the woods were filled with hostile animals and small, roving bands of kobolds, which were the main focus of the quests in the area. Kobolds were small semi-reptilian humanoids, only about a meter tall, and they were a major problem for farmers. They were weak and cowardly by themselves, but in large groups, they became a threat. The small bands lurking in the woods around the farms killed farm animals and stole crops, so farmers gave out quests to protect their farms and deal with the kobolds, and the overall questing experience for the area was for players to prevent the small bands from assembling into a large one, which would then become a major threat to every farm in the Stand. It culminated with the players finding and killing the lead kobold trying to organize the bands—whose identity changed often since players hunted him down with such regularity—which would keep them from joining together.

The Stand was much different when I first started playing. Over the two years the game had been online, almost all the NPCs from when I quested through here had been killed in kobold attacks, so the farms all had NPCs with different names now. The game's overall governing AI kept the farms populated by having the old family sell the farm and move out if too many family members died, and new families move in to replace them, who would offer many of the same quests as the old family. That kept the overall feel of the zone the same, kept it populated and seeming to be a living, breathing society, but also bowed to the realities that this was a game and ensured that there were NPCs to give out the same types of quests that I did when I first began.

It was almost sad, in a way, to know that the NPCs I got to know as I first started the game were all gone. They may be just computer-generated characters, but they had *personality*, and in a way, it was almost like real people had died. And now those unique characters were gone, killed in the game and deleted off the servers in real life...so they were actually dead

when you think about it. Every farm had a family on it, but I didn't know any of them, because they weren't the same people. They didn't act the same as the NPCs they replaced.

I said before that this game could make you cry...and that was one way it could do it. If an NPC I'd known for years died, like Lucilia or Makrathaz the Black, it would feel like I lost a friend in real life. Because in this game, NPCs don't just respawn, unless there are exceptionally rare circumstances or unless a player or NPC uses powerful magic to resurrect them from the dead. When they die, they *die*. But that did put a real urgency into the game's play you didn't find in any other game. When you took a quest to defend a farmer and his family from a kobold band, if you failed, there were *consequences*. The player might respawn, but he'd return to the farm to find the bodies of the NPCs he was hired to protect...and they *wouldn't* respawn.

Maybe I take it too seriously. In the big picture, it just meant that you couldn't complete the quest, and if you waited a little while, new NPCs would replace the old ones and offer a quest nearly identical to the original one. But given that the NPCs were distinct, unique, had personalities, it was easy—too easy—to become emotionally invested in them.

“So, what's this big secret?” she asked.

“It's best just to show you,” I replied as we started down the hill towards Lion's Watch, the small village that served as the quest hub for starting players. “It's a good example of how many secrets there are in this game. You can always find something new, Mri, if you look hard enough.”

We traveled about fifteen minutes, to one of the more distant farmsteads, which was in ruins. It had been like this since the game started, the family that built this homestead died years ago and nobody had claimed the land due to the mysterious circumstances. All the farmers around thought the house and land were cursed, and they steered clear of it. We entered the half-ruined house, and she stopped and watched as I advanced up to the fireplace, knelt down, and then reached up into the flue. I found the small, nondescript metal lever that most people would think was to close the flue shutter and pulled it. Mri gasped and took a step back when the bottom of the fireplace sank into the floor, revealing a small, cramped, steep stairway. “A secret passage in a place like this?” she said, then she laughed.

“It gets better,” I told her as the sound of grinding stone stopped. I pulled out a light crystal and started down the steps, and she came down behind me. We went down a ways, then entered a passage that opened to a natural cave tunnel whose bottom had been carved out to make it flat. We walked several minutes, and as we neared our destination, light started to appear in the distance ahead of us. When it was bright enough, I put the crystal away and took her the rest of the way in. We entered a fairly large natural cavern, our tunnel halfway up from the floor of the chamber, with a small ledge upon which we stood. And on the floor of the cavern, there was a large form.

It was a dragon. It was curled up and sleeping, its golden scales moving as it breathed, and a soft radiance was emanating from those scales, illuminating the cavern. “Woooooow,” Mrima whispered, advancing up to the edge of the ledge and looking down at the sleeping creature. It wasn’t very large, would only be about ten meters long from nose to tail, and around it was collected coins of gold and silver and copper, a few valuable items like silver platters, candlesticks, and whatnot...and several skeletons, some of them still wearing gear and equipment. “Is it alive? Will it attack us?”

“Only if we attack him,” I answered, kneeling down on the edge of the ledge, putting a hand on the stone to steady myself. “Meet the best kept secret in the Golden Stand, Mri. This is Selvaron, he protects a node in the ley line that runs through here. *This* is where the area gets its name from, not the gold leaves on the trees. The leaves are gold because this dragon sleeps here. If he were to leave the area, the trees would go back to normal.”

“What’s a ley line?”

“It’s a natural current of magic that runs through the world,” I answered. “A node is a point where mortal magicians can directly access the ley line. Long ago, the six races of the Ancients used the ley lines to do serious magic. But they overloaded the ley lines and caused a cataclysm that destroyed their societies. Thousands of years ago, Mri, there was a huge city where we’re standing now,” I told her. “But when the ley lines collapsed, the entire city was destroyed, and all its inhabitants died. To prevent that from happening again, the Powers enlisted the aid of the

dragons. At every node in the ley lines, you'll find a dragon protector, there to make sure us silly mortals never do something like that ever again. Selvaron is the protector of this node. He's defended it for thousands of years and will continue to defend it for thousands more. The family that lived in the farm where we came in were agents of Selvaron, keeping an eye on things and making sure nobody found this cave. They were killed by the Order of the Black Hand, a secret society of powerful archmages that wants to access the nodes the way the Ancients did and reproduce their glory."

"Seriously? All this in a starting zone?"

"This game holds many secrets, Mri," I told her in a calm voice. "I think I don't have to tell you this, but don't tell anyone about this place. Or your skeleton will join the collection down there," I said dryly. "Selvaron will wake up and attack you if you try to steal his stuff, because it's nothing but a trap. It's there to see what people will do if they find this place. And if enough people find out about this place, they may try to raid it, and that would create a huge mess. He may not look it, but Selvaron is one of the most powerful creatures in this world. He could wipe out entire armies. And he'd be very cross with us if he has to hide the entrance to this chamber again."

"I very much would be," A deep, sonorous voice called. The dragon opened his eyes and raised his head, making Mri gasp and take a few steps back. "It's been a while, Xen. What brings you here?"

"Lord Selvaron," I said, standing up and giving him a respectful bow. "This is Mrija, a friend of mine. I wanted to show this place to her, so she might understand the true nature of things. I would have thought that you would have found new agents to assist you."

"In time, when the memory of what happened fades from the minds of the mortals that live here," he replied, blinking and looking at me. "If I have desperate need of aid, I can always call on you."

I glanced at Mrija—well, Mrija, that was the name of her character here. "Or my friend," I added. "I'll explain what she has to do to earn the trust of the Seven Stands. I know you could always use more dependable mortals to assist you."

“We shall see if her heart is worthy of the Seven Stands,” Selvaron said in his sonorous voice. “We will give her the chance...in time. She is not ready.”

“I’m working on that, Lord Selvaron,” I told the dragon. “But I’m sure that when the time comes, she won’t disappoint you.”

The dragon nodded, then put his head back on the stone and closed his eyes.

I turned and nodded my head towards the tunnel, and she took the hint and started back for the stairs. I came up behind her, holding my light crystal in my hand. “I can’t believe there’s a raid boss under a starting zone,” she said quietly.

“He’s not a raid boss. He’s one of the Seven Sentinels of the Stands,” I told her. “Yes, he’d *be* a raid boss if you fought him, but he’s one of the good guys.”

“That wouldn’t matter to a lot of players. If it drops loot, they’ll kill it.”

“And those are the stupid players,” I said.

“I take it he’s on a faction?”

I nodded. “It’s called the Seven Stands. It’s the network of mortals, dragons, and agents of the Powers that protect the ley line nodes from misuse. It’s one of several secret societies in the game, much like the Order of the Black Hand, who are the sworn enemies of the Seven Stands faction.”

“And I take it him saying I’m not ready means I’m too new to try to raise my rep with his faction?”

“Yes,” I affirmed. “I’m not sure what the exact requirements are, I already met them when I came across the faction. But I know that they won’t allow anyone to raise their rep with them unless they’ve got a high skill average. And that’s one reason why I told you to never buy a skill unless you intend to raise it. All those ones in skills you buy and don’t use bring down your skill average, and that can lock you out from parts of the game.”

“I see,” she nodded. “So, they give out some tough quests?”

“I’m not sure, they’ve never offered me one beyond the reputation quests I did. I don’t think I meet the requirements to do quests with them,” I chuckled as the stairs appeared in the gloom. “I raised my rep with them because I wanted to know who they were and what they did, and they wouldn’t talk to me until I proved myself to them. Maybe I’ll never do a quest for them, maybe I will when I meet the requirements, maybe there aren’t even any quests for them in the game yet, and they’ll be added in the future. Nobody really knows, not even on the game forum sites. About all anyone knows about the Seven Stands is their backstory and that only high skill players can earn rep with them. And once you do...that’s kinda it.”

“So, you want me to raise rep with a faction that doesn’t reward anything?”

“The rep *is* the reward,” I told her as we started up the stairs. “I think you underestimate how useful it is in this game to raise as many faction reputations as you can as high as you can. It goes beyond just getting access to quests and whatnot. When you befriend a faction, Mri, they will *talk to you*. You learn things, learn more about the game world. And it can be as simple as being able to ask NPCs about potential dangers around their village. When I move into a new area, the first thing I do is try to identify any NPC factions in the area, and to try to raise my rep with them if there are. They teach me things about the places I’m exploring, help me avoid the death traps and dangerous spots, and help me understand the way things work in that area. Knowledge is power, Mri, and NPC factions are absolute treasure troves of knowledge.”

“There’s your bias showing, Kev,” she said teasingly as we exited the stairs, and I closed the secret entrance. “For someone like me, who’s never been out of faction territory, about the only value an NPC faction has is in the quests and rewards it offers for raising it.”

“That’s true,” I admitted with a chuckle. “But when the time comes that you put on your big girl pants, you’ll know that NPC factions are good sources of information.”

She looked back at me. “Do you put the things you learn up on the forums?”

“Not all of it,” I replied. “I’ll answer questions people ask in open threads and correct others who get things wrong, but outside of that, not really. I don’t write guides or anything.”

“You should. I bet you know more about this game than about anyone.”

“Nowhere near. I know a lot, but only about certain parts of it.” I chuckled. “I’ve never set foot in a raid, and I’ve never gone into any dungeon I can’t solo, so that’s nothing that’s current content. I can’t do the quests in the faction territory of other player factions, so I don’t know very much about them outside of where things are. But if you wanna know about the overworld and the Underdark, yeah, I know a lot. That’s because I go out and explore them.” I chuckled. “Besides, there are some things in this game I *don’t* want players to know about, because they’d ruin them. Selvaron is one of those things.”

Mrima started saying something, but it didn’t register. What did was a distant, faint voice speaking the words of power of a spell, a voice that raised my hackles almost immediately. I realized what the spell was after a second, and Mrima gave a shout of alarm when I bodily pushed her forward, making her stagger several steps, and chanted the three words of power for the Bubble Shield spell. Almost the instant it went up, I chanted the words to the Resist Magic spell to raise my MR to fighting level, and quickly swapped gear as the caster canceled her spell in mid-cast and started a different one, one that would get around the protection of the spell. I expected that, so I used another spell that casts even faster, the Dark Cloud spell—I’d raised Illusion enough to cast it—creating a billowing cloud of dark shadows centered upon myself (it can still blind you if you cast it on yourself, but my Faerune headband renders me immune to being blinded), concealing us from view. I then ran through the bubble in the opposite direction that I pushed Mrima and darted into the forest.

“Kev, what the hell!” Mrima barked, and then I heard her scream when a series of lightning bolts lashed out from the heavens and slammed into the cloud of shadows.

“Come out, you damn coward!” I heard Emelda scream, overhead, over the treetops. She must be using a Hovering Disc spell, a common trick mage archetypes use to stay out of reach of melee types like me.

“Hey, you can’t cast spells at us! We’re on the same faction!” Mrima shouted at Emelda.

“Shut up, you stupid cow!” she snapped in reply. “Is that your name in the real world, Xen? Kev? Or Kevin? Does she know you in real life?” Emelda said in a savage voice. “I think revealing your in real life name to everyone is just desserts for destroying my guild!”

“Calm the hell down, lady! This is just a game!” Mrima told her.

“*Not to me,*” she replied in a savage voice, then began chanting the words of power for a spell. She was going to set fire to the Golden Stand! She was going to lay waste to the entire starting zone just to force me out into the open!

I had to move fast. I retrieved the Spider’s Fang and a quiver of arrows from item storage, then nocked and drew even as I raised the bow. I could see her through a void in the branches, a small hole, but she couldn’t move while she was casting, even on the Hovering Disc. I set the fletching against my cheek, exhaled, and loosed, and the arrow flew true.

Not at her. At her Hovering Disc.

Here’s an amusing little tip for you; the snare effect of the Spider’s Fang may be poison-based, but it affects *anything that has a health bar*. Hovering Discs can be attacked and destroyed by inflicting enough damage on them to disrupt the spell, “killing” the disc, and the fact that the disc had a health bar and could take damage meant that it was susceptible to the debuff effects of attacks. That was the weakness of the spell, the balance to keep it from being as ridiculously overpowered as Sylphs and Drakkins. No way could I do enough damage to destroy the disc with a bow, not with me not specced for archery, but my bow would snare her disc and significantly slow her down.

Why do that? Rule number one when fighting mage archetypes: whoever can move the fastest wins.

She did what I expected her to do. She chanted the words of power to erect a barrier that stopped arrows and other physical missiles, which gave me time to use abjuration magic to raise my resistance to fire, cold, and electricity, which on top of my magic resistance buff would give me powerful resistance to the most commonly used attack spells. And most

importantly, it raised my resistance over the threshold to protect me from Soul Rend.

I'd been expecting this day to come, the day Emelda tried to get her revenge on me. And because I was expecting this, I had a plan for it. I put the bow back in item storage and retrieved something I almost never use, a large circular shield made of frosty white crystal rather than wood or metal and affixed it to my left arm.

"Is that all you can do, *Kevin*? Shoot little arrows at me?" she taunted, turning on her disc to look around, looking for me. I shifted into Djinn form and flew well around her close to the ground, keeping out of sight using the trees, then shifted back and retrieved an item from my item storage. It was a crystal, faintly glowing with a soft pink radiance, and I crushed it in my hand. That activated the effect, and I ran out into the meadow on the far side of it from Mrima as it started to work.

As I started to grow.

Lucilia had made this for me. It would grow me to the size of a giant, and I would stay that size for a good five minutes. It had cost me three hundred gold, but it was about to be *worth it*. I drew one sword and rushed forward, and every step I took made me grow bigger, and bigger and bigger. Emelda started high overhead, but she got closer and closer with every step. Her eyes widened when she saw me coming, growing bigger and bigger by the second, and chanted the words of power to a spell. I just kept coming, and when she finished the spell and motioned at me, I raised the shield. A white-hot ball of fire blasted from her hand and raged at me, but when it hit the shield, the shield shattered and caused the ball to rebound, going right back at her...except now there were *two* of them.

Shield of Duplicitous Counterspell. Single use item, causes any spell that strikes the shield to be duplicated, and both spells then rebound on the caster. They're extremely rare, and in the right town, they can sell for upwards of five thousand gold pieces.

The shocked look on her face was *most* satisfying just before her own spells hit her. A thunderous explosion was followed up by a second one, and I saw her health bar drop by nearly one third. She was at my eye level

now, and as soon as I knew I was in range, I executed Sword Blitz, even as I drew my offhand sword.

Understand one thing about using growth spells; they increase your strength by a proportion of how much you grow, which in turn increases your base damage. So, when Sword Blitz hit, it dealt a visible amount of damage to her health bar despite the effect not hitting very hard. And once again, I followed up Sword Blitz with Blade Dance, and *that* hit fairly hard. She reacted by speaking a single word of power, which caused her to disappear...the Blink spell, a staple defensive spell of mage archetypes.

She just forgot one little thing...the Hovering Disc did *not* go with her. She didn't reappear in midair, she appeared on the ground, which was an aspect of the spell. She turned to face me, and I could see her eyes widen when she realized that I was *right on top of her*, almost literally, thanks to the double boost of the growth spell and the haste effect of Blade Dance. I scored three more hits in rapid succession, each one staggering her from the size and weight of my weapons, and the third sent her flying through the air like a rag doll hit by a golf club. I had her down to half health, but then it rebounded up two thirds as she used a defensive spell called Reverse Time, which cancelled out the damage done in the last two seconds. She rolled back to her feet effortlessly and started chanting the words of power to a new spell, one I didn't know...that meant it had to be *extremely* powerful. I again chased her down using my massive speed advantage, striking her before she could finish the spell, which has a chance to make the spell fizzle. But she had an insanely high spellcasting skill, because she kept chanting flawlessly in her strong voice despite being damaged...I admit, I was impressed. She may be a bitch, but she's a very good mage archetype. She trained all the right skills to all the right levels. I stopped Blade Dance to let it refresh and fell back to a staple spell I use when fighting mages, a single word of power. This spell is called Dampen, and it reduces the amount of damage I take from the next spell by a percentage based on my Abjuration skill. And I think I mentioned that my Abjuration skill is the second highest of my magical skills.

I'm glad I used Dampen. A blast of absolute cold lashed at my legs—I was now about eight meters tall, towering over Emelda like a giant—dealing nearly a quarter of my health despite Dampen and also applying a snare effect, the cold slowing my reaction and reflexes and making it hard

for me to move. I'd never seen that spell before, it had to be one of those spells that exclusively drops from the kinds of high-progression raids that only Emelda's guild can clear on our server. Her snare did slow me down, but I was still a giant, and that meant that I moved much faster. When she blinked away again with a single word, I started after her...and realized that the snare effect from that spell was *hardcore*. I could barely move at my normal move speed when at normal size! It was like my legs had turned to lead, making me struggle to take every step.

She had me. At giant size, I couldn't break her line of sight, which would make every spell hit. She could use blink to stay at spellcasting range, and the only spell defense spells I know, Bubble and Dampen, weren't going to counter the sheer power of her magic. She'd keep me at range and wear me down with spells she could cast fast enough to get off before I got close enough to use Sword Blitz to close the distance immediately.

Wait, we were at the Cursed Farmstead. That was right beside—God, I'm such an idiot!

Speaking the single word of power, I raised another Bubble spell, and almost smiled when it covered me even at my giant size. I canceled the giant effect of the consumable with another consumable that dispels consumable effects (you have no control over the duration of a consumable), then I then used one of my regular tactics, shifting into Djinn form, turning, and flying away, using the giant-sized Bubble spell to break her line of sight, keep her from seeing that I was retreating. Flying partially countered her snare effect, which gave me enough speed to get away from her; and I had trouble moving through the trees once I reached them, breaking some branches as I tried to snake my way through the branches and around trunks with my three meter tall body, heading for the shoreline just on the other side of a stand of trees and feeling all kinds of vulnerable since I only had 190 hit points in Djinn form. She could sneeze on me and kill me with her magic skills being so high. In a matter of brief moments, I wriggled my naked Djinn butt out the other side and found myself just a dozen or so meters from the White Cliff. I didn't hesitate, I swooped right over the edge and shifted back to human form, which caused me to fall.

As I was falling, the snare effect dropped off. That was very timely.

Instead of plunging into the ocean, I instead landed on the surface, thanks to the Feather Light effect on my boots. I ran out to sea as fast as I could, and behind me, I heard Emelda's scornful laugh. She was at the edge of the shore and was conjuring a new Hovering Disc to chase me.

Yeah, you do that, bitch. You have no idea what's under the water barely half a kilometer from here, do you?

By the time she was on her disc and coming after me, I was at my destination. I dove through the surface and started swimming down, Faerune both allowing me to see perfectly underwater and allowing me to breathe, and I was swimming at full speed for ruins that spread across the sea floor about twenty meters down. These were ruins from the Ancients, and unlike the ruins of Ancient cities on land, the ones underwater still had their magical protections. They were drowned and abandoned *before* the ley line cataclysm that destroyed the six Ancient races.

And this particular ruin had a fairly nasty magical protection that made it tricky to explore for most players. I took several deep breaths before crossing the tumbled city wall that marked the border of the city, and the instant I did, all my magical resistance buffs dropped off, and Faerune stopped working for a few seconds. The ocean went from clear as a sunny day to dark and murky back to clear as a summer day once I cleared the edge of the inside of the wall.

The city wall of this ruin was the edge of a powerful defensive measure that canceled all magic that passed through it. That meant that all buffs and debuffs were removed, the effects of any spell or item with a duration were removed, and magical items with continual effects, like my headband's Faerune, would not work within the canceling effect.

And the last little effect it had; no spells could be cast within or across the effect.

I swam into the ruins and turned to see where Emelda was. She was coming after me, still on her disc and with a bubble of air around her. She didn't know about this place, she was charging right at me. I had to make her advance into the antimagic effect, if she stopped short and tried to cast a spell at me, it would fizzle at the border and she'd find out about my little trick. So, I got behind the eroded top of a ziggurat, breaking her line of

sight. That would force her to come in after me, to get back in line of sight of me to use a spell.

I watched intently as she approached, making sure she could see my head, see that I was going to keep the pillar between us. And like any over-eager hunter that could smell the kill, incited into rashness by a fleeing opponent, she didn't stop to think about *why* I was doing what I was doing. I sheathed my swords, retrieved a spear from my item storage—slashing and bludgeoning weapons have significantly reduced damage underwater, but piercing and thrusting weapons don't—took it in both hands, and watched intently.

She fell for it. Her disc vanished and air bubble popped when she crossed the edge of the wall. She didn't panic, she immediately started swimming for the surface—one of the major disadvantages of being underwater for mage archetypes is they can't speak clearly underwater, so they can't cast anything but the most simple spells. I came out from behind the ziggurat and started after her but was honestly surprised when she suddenly rocketed towards the surface. She must have used some kind of spell or item to get her to the surface in a matter of seconds. I slowed to a stop still on the other side of the protection sphere, inside the effect, and she came back under with a new bubble and disc after a few seconds. She descended to within spellcasting range, and I didn't bother to hide as she spoke the words of power. A beam of intense light lashed out from her hand and raged at me through the water...then vanished about five meters before it reached me. She slowed to a stop, her eyes narrowed and a frown on her face, then she glared at me as I ghosted up to the edge of the effect on my side.

She understood her predicament. Her bubble would pop if she came in after me, and she couldn't cast a new one without surfacing, which would keep her from getting in here with the ability to use her high-power spells. She most likely wasn't carrying any item that would have an effect that would get around that problem, or she'd be pulling it out to use it right about now. She hadn't been prepared for the possibility that this fight might go underwater.

“You have to come out eventually,” she said in a hot voice, her voice sounding a little funny because I was in the water and she was in that air

bubble.

I made quite a show out of yawning, then taking a reclining posture in the water with my hands and spear behind my head, just floating there as if I were laying in a hammock. That caused me to start slowly sinking back towards the ruins below. I took a hand out and waved goodbye to her tauntingly as I slowly sank out of her reach.

As I expected...she either hadn't gotten the head piece of her Champion's Raiment yet, or she did, and she didn't select the item that has Faerune on it.

So, this little encounter was a draw. I wasn't going to fight her, and she wasn't equipped to come in after me. But as far as I was concerned, a draw was a win in my column, because I didn't want to kill her, I only wanted to ensure she didn't get credit for killing me towards the mount quest. So long as just *one* champion slipped through her fingers, she would be denied the mount. And I would do my damndest to make sure she never got it. She was not going to be rewarded for her treachery.

All I had to do now was wait for dark, then swim back to Freeport while staying as close to the bottom as I could, where I'd be nearly impossible to see. But until then, I think I needed to make it clear to her that I was prepared to wait her out. I swam down to a courtyard by the wall and cast my Create Shelter spell—Faerune lets me cast spells underwater—and when the cabin appeared, I looked up at her, gave a mocking salute, and opened the door. The interior was dry, the water magically stopped at the door, so I stepped into dry air, dripping water all over the stone floor. Now she knew that even if she did get past the antimagic barrier, she couldn't touch me inside my cabin. I could log out and just wait her out, logging in from time to time to see if she was still there. And since the spell duration timer for the cabin disappearing reset every time I logged out, I could theoretically stay in the cabin *forever*.

I sent a message to Mrima explaining what happened, then after eating a quick dinner both in game and in real life, I logged back on. I was very careful about making sure that Emelda hadn't come through the effect and was lurking nearby, then I came out of the cabin, dismissed it, and swam deeper into the ruins. I'd explored them before, but not nearly as thoroughly as I could now, so I decided to take care of that. I explored every building,

every part of the drowned city, taking my time as I waited for nightfall, and even found a couple of pretty interesting things I hadn't found the first time. That time I'd been relying on water breathing charms, so I'd been restricted by the number of them I could afford to bring.

When the sun set, I prepared for my risky trip. I knew Detect Player would track me, and that I couldn't use Djinn form; remember, I get no benefits from my gear in Djinn form, and that includes the Faerune preventing me from drowning. Or, I couldn't use Djinn form *all the time*. I explored the northern edge of the city and found an open space that would serve me well for my trick. I cast Create Shelter on the spot, then entered the cabin, shifted into Djinn form, which made it suddenly very cramped in the cabin, then *logged out*. I can do that so long as I'm in the cabin. I then spent an hour or so dicking around CivNet, making anyone who might be using Detect Player to keep tabs on me think I logged off for the night. I then logged back in, and since I logged back in *still in Djinn form*, it hid me from Detect Player spells. Then it was a simple matter of hyperventilating to maximize the amount of time I can hold my breath, and getting out a door not built for someone three meters tall, and then swimming out of the cabin and towards the wall.

I can't use flying underwater in Djinn form. It requires me to be in the air. So, I had to swim for it.

I was pleasantly surprised by how far I got. I managed to get nearly 60 meters from the outer wall by the time I was forced to switch back to human form or drown, and I only stayed in human form long enough to get my breath back. Then I shifted into Djinn form again and swam a little longer, got my breath back, and repeated it over and over again for about ten minutes. I then settled into a small kelp bed to conceal me and stayed in human form, not moving for nearly half an hour as I watched to see if anyone was tracking me. When I was fairly certain I wasn't, I swam out around Hook's Point in human form. Hook's Point was one of the rocky outcroppings that formed the narrow, deep cove that held the harbor of Freeport

I made it. I surprised quite a few NPC sailors on a trading coster as I broached the surface of the water and climbed up onto the surface, using the Feather Light effect, then used that to vault up to the top of the pier. I then

walked towards the harbor dripping wet, acting as if I'd done nothing unusual whatsoever.

And now I was safe. Emelda couldn't attack me in Freeport, not without every guard in town trying to ram his sword down her throat. Human guards would defend the human champion within a human city.

And it reminded me that until I finished the Grand Crusade, I'd better *stay* in Freeport. Emelda had just proved that she was going to stalk me, attack me any time she thought she could get away with it, and that meant that I was stuck in Freeport until Lucilia finished making the charm.

Eh, I don't spend nearly enough time in my house in town anyway. It was my chance to get some work done on it, maybe conjure some new furniture, and help Mrima get started on blacksmithing in the smithy I made on the ground floor.

And if that bitch wanted to try me in the Underdark, she was more than welcome to. I'd be even more ready for her next time. This fight gave me experience against her, and that would allow me to better prepare for our next little confrontation.

When that time came, I'd be ready.

Emelda proved that she was as petty as she was vengeful.

She carried through on her threat. She'd recorded her A/V feeds from our fight, and she posted them on the server forums, including Mrima calling my name...just editing out her threat to expose it. The caption of the stream was *watch a coward in action*, and included nearly the entire fight from her point of view.

But I don't think she was expecting the reaction her video got. Quite a few people on the forums remembered that she tried to cheese me out of my title, and she not only got blasted for that, but she also got massively trolled over me getting away. Quite a few snarky replies along the lines of *so the mighty ubergeared raider couldn't kill a solo scrub, even from an ambush* filled the thread, and revealed the fact that she got outplayed. I used my knowledge of the area against her and got away when she had the clear advantage.

Good enough for me. I decided not to justify her thread with a response, mainly because nobody seemed to care about Mrima using something that sounded like my real name.

I avoided the forums for the rest of the week, and Mrima felt kinda bad that she nearly got me killed, so she adventured out in the starter zones while I decided what to do. I could stay in Freeport and work on Translocation, working to raise it high enough to learn Teleport. It was going to take me weeks to get it that high. I could work on the house or work on blacksmithing. Or, I could take a risk and go out and grind XP to buy skill points.

And perhaps leaving Freeport for a while would be a good idea. I could do some scouting in the Underdark and grind some XP at the same time, and as long as I stayed close to the Free City, I could get back to Freeport in about four or five hours. There were some excellent hunting spots in the tunnels leading in and out of the Free City for XP grinding, and there was always the opportunity to find new tunnels to explore to further complete my maps. Now that I had Faerune, it would give me a much better chance to see what I didn't see before.

And that was exactly what I did. I stocked up for a possible twenty days in the Underdark (always overprepare in case you get held up) and headed out, going the hidden way. Most players didn't know it, but there was a way into the Underdark through Freeport. A tunnel connecting to the sewers in the Trades District led to a tunnel that connected to a passage that opened into what was considered the Underdark, which would confound Emelda or any other players that were trying to keep track of me. Unless they knew where that tunnel was, their Detect Player spells would only tell them that I was in a specific direction underground. And there were ways into the sewers much less obvious than climbing down a storm drain.

The trip was good for me. I'd been working on the Grand Crusade for weeks, and it was nice to return to my roots, to go back to doing what I do best. Explore the unknown using my own skills and my own wits. Moving through the Underdark was much easier now that I had Faerune, making no light that gave me away as a visitor in the deep tunnels—light attracted predators—and allowing me to see with much more clarity. Using a light source, you could miss the small tunnels and little details because of the

shadows they cast on the walls. Faerune would let me explore the flooded passages and chambers since I couldn't drown, and Feather Light could also be handy down here, letting me jump to passages high off the floor or move safely across underground lakes and pools.

My eight days in the Underdark were *highly* successful. I managed to get enough XP to buy a whopping thirty points in Translocation, got a fair amount of gold, and picked up a few useful items and a piece of equipment that I was going to give to Mrima. But what was more important to me, I found several dozen new tunnels and chambers, and I even found a new NPC faction that had never had contact with a player. They were called the Ferro, and they were cousins of dwarves that lived as close to lava as they could, just like the Salamanders. They had ashen skin and red hair, and like Salamanders, they needed to live where it was very hot, the hotter the better. And what was most useful, they were at war with the Salamanders (everyone was at war with the Salamanders in the Underdark), the two factions fighting over the lava lakes east of the Free City. Since I was there to stick it to the Salamanders, they gave me some very handy information about the large lava lakes that they claimed as their home territory. When I left the Ferro village, I'd maxed out their language skill, I had fairly good standing with them thanks to a few quests I did for them that involved killing Salamander scouts on their eastern border and helping the Ferro take control of a small lava river from the Salamanders, and I had a new axe I was going to give to Mrima, made by the Ferro and of exceptional quality. It was a very rare weapon because it was usable by low skill players, yet had fairly good stats, and even had a proc. Its proc dealt a random amount of extra fire damage to what it hit.

Any weapon usable by new players yet had a proc was extremely valuable.

I checked in with Lucilia when I got back and found she was on schedule, so I met with Mrima in the Bloody Kobold. She'd done some more questing, including grouping with a few people to tackle the quests in the western Dark Thicket. But naturally, she was still using the axe I made for her.

Her eyes just lit up when I pulled the axe from my item storage, a double headed axe with a black metal head, etched with Ferro runes, the

haft made out of the bone of some creature that had been charred for some reason, the handle wrapped in rough grayish-black leather...Salamander skin. "Mriki's tail, Xen!" she blurted, taking it from me. "Where did you get this?"

"From a people called the Ferro in the Underdark, they awarded it to me for helping them take back some territory from the Salamanders," I told her. "This is why you raise NPC faction reps, Mri. You get things like this, which are valuable even if you can't use them yourself."

"This is incredible!"

"It's yours," I told her. I confirmed it by offering it to her as a player trade, which she accepted so fast I think the trade window never fully appeared in her field of vision.

She gasped and gave me a surprised look, then bounced up off her seat and nearly tackled me giving me a fierce hug. She then equipped the weapon, which caused the axe to grant her its stat bonuses. "You're the best, Kev!" she blurted. "I can't wait to try it out!"

"I have some things to do before I go out again, so go for it. I'm sure you can message your new friends and get them to go back out to the Dark Thicket with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. I have some things to do, and you'd be bored just sitting around in here."

She all but rushed from the tavern with the axe in her hand, and I just had to chuckle. I remembered when I could get that excited over something. Actually, it was when I found that hidden tunnel that led me to the Ferro village, finding something no one else on the server had found.

I got everything set up for tomorrow, then logged out. I went from a small yet well-appointed bedroom in my house in Freeport to my tiny apartment on the 16th floor, and again, I wondered at why I was so different in the game. And again, I realized because the game was just that, a game. This was reality...even though sometimes I wonder which reality is the one I prefer.

I guess I really am just a coward in some respects. I never stick up for myself, I'm afraid of anyone with blue skin, I'm stuck in a dead-end job with no hope for advancement. I love to explore, but I rarely leave my apartment, when it's so easy to get around Earth now...even get to other planets. I only have one friend, and she's not afraid to go out and experience life, she just doesn't have the money to do what she wants. I never go out. I never *do things*. I just lay in my bed in my apartment and spend all my time playing a game. If not for the gym in the building, I'd probably weigh 170 kilograms by now.

But...when I'm playing that game, I *do* feel like I'm doing things. I go all over the Twin Worlds. I explore what no one else has explored, I test my limits to see how far I can go as a solo player. I have goals, and I work towards them. I have more friends than I can count...at least if you count the NPCs. I've accomplished so much, and I have a sense of real pride about what I've done.

And in the game, I'm not afraid to stand up for myself. I stared down Emelda, when in real life, I'd wither under the hostile stare of anyone else.

I thought about it until I went to bed, but in the end, I didn't see anything changing. The game was the game and real life was real life, and those two separate worlds required two separate *me*'s to handle them.

The entire world shook when the last of the magical bombs went off.

I barely registered the quest completing in my log, because I was neck deep in angry Salamanders. The small passage prevented more than two of them from coming at me at a time, and there were over a dozen behind the two trying to kill me. The patrol had intercepted me as I retreated from the final tunnel that had to be collapsed to cut off the Salamanders from the tunnels that would let them get to the eastern side of the continent, at least easily. There were other ways they could go, but to go in those directions, they'd have to fight a running war with about ten other NPC factions in the Underdark, including having to conquer the Free City, to get there underground. What I'd done was basically collapsed every tunnel leading to Salamander territory, trapping them in their caverns. I couldn't collapse every single one, but the only ones remaining would be *exceptionally*

difficult for the legless Salamanders to travel. Salamanders had the lower body of serpents and the upper body of reptile-men, and a species without legs was going to have a lot of fun getting to tunnel entrances in the roofs or high walls of chambers and passages.

That was where I was trying to get now. I'd been forced to collapse the last tunnel with me *inside* Salamander territory due to a Salamander patrol that found me just as I set the last bomb, and now I had to reach a narrow, twisting tunnel that opened into the roof of this tunnel in order to get out. This was a different patrol, the other patrol had no doubt been killed by the cave in, which saved me from being surrounded. The escape tunnel I had to use was so small and constricting that I couldn't get through several parts of it at my normal size, which would make it absolutely impossible for Salamanders to navigate. The average Salamander was larger than I was. What it meant was that in order to reach the escape tunnel, I had to go through the Salamanders in front of me. I had to fight my way out...unless I was clever.

The cloud of dust I was expecting reached us, and after cutting down the Salamander on the left, I took advantage of the wind and the dust and shifted into Djinn form and went up and over the Salamanders, taking a huge risk. I don't have any gear bonuses in Djinn form, and I'm naked, so I only have like 200 hit points. A high skill monster like a Salamander could kill me with a single blow. The dust in the air would hide my heat from their infravision, and I moved fast enough to be nothing but a blur that ghosted through them. I could barely see myself—Djinn form meant no Faerune—but lucky for me Salamanders use weapons that glow with heat, and that glow gave me just enough light to see in the dusty haze.

Well, if I was *really* smart, I could just let them kill me in Djinn form. That would make me respawn at the graveyard next to the Free City with all my gear, removing my need to return to my corpse to reclaim my gear. But I had too much XP to want to lose it, I had enough to buy 14 points in Translocation. And I couldn't buy those points until I reached a safe zone.

The last of the rush of wind and dust went by, *just* as I got past the last pair of Salamanders. By the time the dust cleared enough for them to see my heat, I was too far ahead for them to catch me...and I'm not afraid to let monsters or NPCs see my Djinn form. The Salamanders chasing me saw me

slow down and then wriggle through a narrow crack up into the ceiling, getting myself out of their reach. I heard them screaming curses at me after I returned to human form, then I started down the small tunnel, too low for me to walk down it without hunching over, which ascended and curved away from the main tunnel holding the Salamanders.

Mission accomplished. It had taken me nearly a week and a half to get the job done. I started at the main tunnel leading to the eastern throughways that they could use, then I systematically collapsed the tunnels in a ring around their lava lakes. The going had been slow and cautious, and several times I had to move through chambers holding lava, which made getting Lucilia's charm worth it. At one point I had to cross a lava pool, which would have been much harder if I didn't have Feather Light on my boots. The effect let me move across the surface of the lava as if it were water.

Okay, maybe Feather Light was more useful than I first thought it would be.

The mission had been fairly hairy. I'd been caught by patrols several times on the way in, and once I collapsed the first tunnel, the Salamanders started actively hunting for me. I'd been fighting skirmishes against patrols for days, since the more tunnels I collapsed, the more soldiers they sent out into the tunnels to hunt down the saboteur. The last two days I'd basically been going from one fight to another, barely had time to recover, and it had tested my resourcefulness and my experience.

I knew one thing. The human champions of the other servers may not be able to pull off a mission like this by themselves. I specialize in exactly this kind of playstyle, pitting myself against a superior force with nothing but my own skills and wits.

But it was done. The quest was showing as complete in my log, so that meant that I had to return to Freeport and get the reward and get the next one. And since I'd been out of contact for nearly two weeks, I needed to catch up with what was going on. Mrima hadn't been on the game lately, because her cubs were here to visit before they went back to the Academy. Without her to friend chat with me to keep me apprised of what was going on up on the surface, I'd been cut off from the recent activity. Before Mrima left to spend time with her kids, she told me that Kanlon raids along the coast had dramatically increased. I was right, they were testing our

defenses, trying to find the weak point where they could land an invasion force. I could only guess that those attacks had increased, had spread further north and went around the point on the south side and started moving east... or perhaps the coastal attacks in the west had been a *diversion*.

I slowed to a stop and knelt down. If the Kanlon and the Salamanders were cooperating, why would they attack in two places so far apart? Yes, it would split the Arcavia factions trying to defend against both of them, but they would each have to march halfway across the continent to meet. It was best if they could join up closer than that, to form a singular army to face what by then would be a large and organized response.

The Kanlon weren't going to invade the *west* coast of Arca, they were going to invade the *south*.

It fit. The raiding parties were just keeping the western navies busy, holding them close to the coastline. The main bulk of the Kanlon invasion fleet was going to sail well south of the continent and then turn north and come up, staying out of sight until they were in sight of land. I pulled out one of my maps and studied it, a map of the southern section of Arcavia. There were three factions that held the southern coast, but there was *tons* of neutral territory between them. The Golden Lion faction held the southwest corner of the continent, and there was hundreds of kilometers of neutral territory until you reached the Amber Shire faction, which was made up of the halflings, the Joradim, which were Ogravian-like creatures akin to Minotaurs from mythology, The Savasa, which were another cat-like race, this one based on cheetahs, and the Vissanu, which were a reptilian race based roughly on snake-men. They lived on the eastern edge of their faction's territory, bordering the Kaldian Desert.

There. I tapped my finger on the map, between Amber Shire and Golden Lion territory. If I were the Kanlon, I'd land my invasion force there. It was a place called the Sea of Grass, a vast plain abutting halfling territory. No forests to slow them down, a straight shot right at the Amber Shire faction's territory, easy access to the interior of the continent, and also an easy march on Golden Lion territory. The Amber Shire and Golden Lion had powerful navies, which would also reduce the threat to their ships as they operated in the waters off Arca. The Vissanu had a mighty navy, strong enough to rival Freeport's, which was a bit odd given they were desert-

dwelling reptiles. And what was more, if the Salamanders attacked the eastern factions from the south, it would allow them to join up with the Kanlon within Amber Shire territory. The Salamanders would erupt from this place here, the Smoking Mountains, which were well known for having lots of volcanoes in the range. The Smoking Mountains ran from the edge of the Luran Forest all the way to the Kaldion Desert, so depending on where the Salamanders emerged, it would put them in prime position to burn down the most ancient woodland on the continent, the Luran Forest. Ironically, the Smoking Mountains were right beside the Nazgar Hills, they separated the Nazgar Hills from the Luran Forest along its northwestern edge. The two armies would march towards each other and meet somewhere inside Amber Shire territory. The Salamanders would cross the Kaldion Desert, something they could do easily because they were fire-based creatures and hit Amber Shire territory from the one direction the Amber Shire believed they didn't have to defend. Only the Vissanu could easily travel through that desert, because they were adapted to living in desert conditions.

It was fairly brilliant. The Vissanu would be forced to fight the Salamanders without help from their faction allies, who couldn't survive long in the desert, which would allow the Salamanders to steamroll over them and get all the way into Amber Shire territory virtually unopposed. By then, the Amber Shire would be pincerred, with the Kanlon invading from the west and the Salamanders from the east, and they'd get swarmed over and conquered very quickly.

I needed confirmation. The one thing I *didn't* do while I was here was find out what route the Salamanders were going to take. I could find that out in the military headquarters of the Salamanders. Or, if I could find a Salamander officer that knew their invasion route, I would know if I was right. I had a good two weeks left on my charm, so I had plenty of time.

I couldn't leave yet.

But there was one thing I could do. I took out the communication crystal Prince Aldion gave me and activated it. A moment later, King Gerin's face appeared as a magical image in front of me. "What have you to report, Champion?" he asked.

“I’ve completed my mission to cut off the Salamanders,” I replied. “But I’m not done yet. I have a suspicion about where the Kanlon invasion fleet is going to land, and I need some information from the Salamanders to confirm it. My King, I have the suspicion that the Kanlons are going to land on the coast at the Sea of Grass,” I told him. “If you look at the maps of the area, you’ll find that it’s perfect. It allows the Kanlon to move their invasion ships well south of the continent, and with their rakers raiding our coast, it pulls our ships in close to the coast so we don’t see those ships coming. The Sea of Grass gives them immediate access to the Amber Shire lands, an easy march on our lands, and easy access to the interior of the continent. We already know that the Salamanders are going to invade the eastern side of Arca to pin down the factions on the east coast. If they exit the Underdark in the Smoking Mountains, it gives them immediate access to Silver Blade lands and allows them to attack the Amber Shire by crossing the Kaldion desert, something the Salamanders could easily do. That allows them and the Kanlons to pincer the Amber Shire forces, splitting them and making them easier to conquer. If they get control of the Vissanu port of Vistara, they’ll have a major seaport that’s defended on its eastern side by the Kaldion Desert. The Salamanders will have *no* problem crossing that desert, but it forces any defending armies to go around the desert and attack from the north or west, making it easier for them to defend the land they conquer. I think that’s their plan, my King. Their main objective is the Amber Shire alliance and the port city of Vistara, which they need to establish a foothold on our continent.”

He looked down, looking at a map no doubt, and was quiet for a long moment. “That’s a very logical analysis, Champion,” he agreed. “It does make sense. But we can’t act on your advice until we know more.”

“Exactly why I’m not done here, my King. I’m going to try to find out exactly where the Salamanders are supposed to exit the Underdark. If they plan to come out in or very close to the Smoking Mountains, it lends weight to my theory.”

“That it does. Very well, Champion, do as you see fit,” he said. “Find that information and bring it back for Merria to analyze. In the meantime, I’ll send messenger falcons to the Amber Shire leaders and inform them of our suspicions.”

Much to my delight, a bonus quest popped up in my field of vision, which then immediately completed and awarded me a *nice* chunk of XP. That was a hopeful sign that I was on the right track! A new quest also appeared, the objective of which was to locate information regarding the Salamander invasion plans and bring it back to Merria the Spymaster in Freeport. The quest had a different icon on it from a usual quest. That icon told me that the quest was what we call a *pop-up quest* in the game. The game can instantly generate quests going on the actions and behavior of players, and my conversation with King Gerin had caused the game's AI to decide that my plan was worthy of becoming an official quest. So it made up a quest for it on the spot. The game's AI marks pop-up quests so people don't think they're pre-programmed, or "scripted" quests. Pop-up quests were bonus quests people get for being clever or doing some good role-playing, and the game's AI had decided I'd done one or the other.

Sometimes pop-up quests were far more fun than pre-generated quests, because they were tailor made for the player whose actions caused the quest to generate.

So, I now had a new quest to do. I had to track down information about the Salamanders' invasion plans, which I could find either by capturing and interrogating a Salamander military officer or invading their military HQ and stealing maps and plans. It would be easier to catch an officer, but it wasn't as reliable as taking the plans from their HQ. However, that would be *very* hard for me to do, I didn't prepare for the possibility of sneaking into their city. If I had, I'd have brought a couple of illusion charms so I could take the appearance of a Salamander and just slither into the city.

Or....

From what I remember, the military HQ was built over the lava lake that fills the bottom of the massive gallery holding the city. I could come across the lava and fly up the outer wall, get into the HQ, and find the papers. I'm fluent in Salamander, so I'll know what I'm looking for. Once I have it, I can just jump out the nearest window and either fly away or land on the surface of the lava and run like hell. The only possible danger I'd have is that Salamanders sometimes take dips in the lava and they might spot me, but I don't think they do it around the HQ building. It's fairly far from the

residential districts of the city. There would be more guards in the HQ because of my operating around the city, but I could work around that.

I had several shrinking charms in my item storage. Those would make me more than small enough to get around their building in Djinn form.

It was worth the risk. They already knew I was here, and since the patrol saw me get into that tunnel, they may think I was done and leaving.

And it was best to do it now, while they were chasing me out in these outlying tunnels. I could get to the main gallery holding the Salamander city from this tunnel, at least after taking a few side tunnels. I'd have to work my way there using several smaller side tunnels, but a few of them were used by the Salamanders to move around. I'd have to be careful moving through those areas. It would take me about an hour to reach the main gallery, then I could fly out over the city along the roof to reach the military HQ, which was on the other side of the city and enter through a window. The windows in the city had no glass in them.

How do I know where the HQ is? I've been in the Salamander city before, using an illusion charm. I couldn't make maps of the city without going into it, and I'll do almost anything to complete a map. I'm kinda silly that way.

I managed to get to the gallery without incident or encounter and found myself standing at the entrance. The tunnel had no ledge opening out to the gallery, it was just a narrow crack in the wall about 16 meters over the lava, a crack too small for me to get through in Djinn form. The wall of the gallery here sloped inward, so there was lava directly under me and extending a good 50 meters back. I wouldn't be able to leave using this tunnel without using Djinn form, I can't climb an inverted wall without climbing gear and it was too high to jump up to, even with Feather Light. So, to get out of the tunnel, I had to be in human form...but that wouldn't be much of a problem

After making sure no guards were looking out over the lava lake, I dove out of the crack and changed form in midair, then immediately ascended along the gallery wall to get as high up as possible, so high the Salamanders couldn't see me with their infravision. When I was up high enough, I took the time to equip my Djinn gear to raise my stats and hit points, given I

might have to fight in Djinn form, and that included a pair of slender two-handed swords that I use as one-handed swords while a Djinn. They fit my hands perfectly because I made them using blacksmithing, but I didn't make anything super-expensive or awesome because of the possibility that I might lose them if I was killed by a player while in Djinn form. But when I was up against monsters or NPCs, I wasn't afraid to gear up. And this would be one of those times.

Once I was ready, including casting several buff spells on myself, I flew out over the city. It was built on a rock island in the center of the lava lake, like a plug or plume of basalt jutting out of the lava, and the Salamanders had built their entire city atop it. The military HQ was on the far side of the city, sitting on a spar of sorts all by itself, and once I was directly over it, I pulled a shrink charm from my bag and used it, going from three meters tall to only about half a meter tall. I then cast Invisibility on myself, which would hide me from infravision, and descended down to look for a good place to enter through a window, looking for a room that had no Salamanders in it as high up as I could. I knew the commander's office would be at the top of the building, so I needed to enter as close to the top as possible.

That wasn't easy. I had to go down two floors from the top windows to find a room that wasn't occupied, which looked to be a storage room of sorts holding boxes of supplies. The room had no door, Salamanders didn't believe in doors so few of their buildings had them, and I heard the clanking of metal armor outside the open passageway. There was a guard stationed at just on the other side of the wall.

This was a job for a consumable.

I pulled it from my item storage, canceled my Invisibility spell, and activated the charm. This was a staple consumable in the game, one of the biggest sellers. It was an Improved Invisibility charm. I turned invisible to all nonmagical forms of vision, *including* infravision, and was also protected from magical detection. I buy the good charms, and the way these work is that I'll stay invisible for a full game day, which is 30 hours, until I attack a monster, use a skill or spell, or use another consumable. As long as I don't do any of those things, I'll stay invisible for a full day. I have *plenty* of these charms, I never leave carrying less than twenty of them in my item

storage, and I had seven left. I used the other thirteen while I collapsed the tunnels. Well, six now.

I have an invisibility spell, two actually, but the consumable is actually better. The duration of both my spells depends on my Illusion skill, and the longest one, Improved Invisibility, lasts about 36 minutes at my current skill level, where the consumable's effect is permanent until I break the effect. And for what I was about to do, I couldn't afford to stop every half hour and reapply invisibility.

There was an important reason I used the shrink charm. Salamanders are big, they're wide, and the ceilings in a Salamander building aren't high enough for me to slip over and past them with them carrying pikes and polearms, the weapons would snag on me. The smaller I am as I move through the hallways of the building, the better chance I have to avoid coming into contact with a guard, which will alert them that an invisible spy is inside the building. The fact that Salamander buildings don't usually have doors is another important reason. In Djinn form, I can slip between two guards standing vigil from above and get through the doorway much more easily.

Once I was sure of my invisibility, I rose up to the top of the arch leading out into the passage and advanced out into the hallway. I've never been in this building before, so I slowly and carefully explored the hallways while staying as close to the ceiling as possible, making note of where every static guard station was located, as well as making note of where the ramps were; Salamanders had no legs, so they used ramps instead of stairs. I then moved steadily up the building, exploring each floor to get an idea of what was there, having to dodge quite a few roaming patrols and move carefully past guards stationed at nearly every intersection. When I moved up to the fourth floor, there were guards about every ten meters along the hallways, and the rooms here had doors.

This was it. They wouldn't put doors on these rooms unless what was in the rooms was either very valuable or the domain of someone with a lot of clout.

The problem, naturally, is that the rooms had doors. I can't easily open doors while shrunk, especially very large and heavy stone doors, so I was restricted to going up the lone passage on the floor and listening carefully at

each door, trying to discern which ones were occupied and which ones were not. I very nearly got hit by a guard as he moved the polearm he was holding, which spurred me to move on to the next door before I got exposed in a hallway holding enough guards to kill me in a matter of seconds.

But the entire thing turned out to be moot. I found a ramp at the end of the passage with six guards stacked in front of it, wearing the livery of the Salamanders, which meant these were elite guards. I carefully slipped past them from above and went up along the ceiling of the ramp, and found ten more guards at the top, barely visible in the ruddy light from the lava outside filtering in through a single tiny window at the top of the ramp. There was a giant room beyond, visible through the *open door*. It held a large table with pieces representing military units on the side, and in the center against the back wall, there was a large basalt desk behind which rested a Salamander wearing a highly ornate breastplate and pauldrons.

This was the office of the general of the Salamander armies!

If I was going to find information about the invasion of the eastern factions, I would find it in this room. I couldn't easily find it with the general of the armies right there in the room with me, but I could at least look around, so long as I was very careful. I got right up against the ceiling and got directly over the table and found a large map of the Underdark there, encompassing most of Salamander and Ferro territory, with icons representing both Salamander and Ferro military units and positions. I recognized it almost immediately and saw that there were tunnels and lava chambers on this map I didn't have on mine. I was glad I was recording my A/V feed, it was going to come in handy. I had to carefully move along the ceiling to get around a hanging chandelier of sorts holding a bunch of glowing orange crystals, which provided visible light in the room—you can't read a map or a report with infravision—to avoid hitting the chain, then I dared to descend and flit along a rack holding rolled up pieces of leather which no doubt held the general's other maps. After counting them and looking for any labels on them that might tell me what each map was, and striking out, I again got up near the ceiling and floated over to the other side of the room. The general had an armor stand there holding extra armor pieces and a weapon rack holding a typical Salamander's pike, a bow, and a two-handed sword. Beside it was a tall cabinet of sorts, like an armoire, but I doubted it held clothes. Salamanders don't wear much in the way of

clothes. I'd bet that it held equipment. I then carefully floated around and behind the Salamander's desk, where two flags holding the standard of the Salamanders flanked a carved stone slab holding the likeness of the Salamander King. I didn't see anything interesting back there, so I settled behind the bust of the king and hunkered down. I was safest there, since it was elevated, out of the way, and I was behind something so I wouldn't accidentally get hit.

All I had to do now was wait.

Patience may be a virtue, but it takes practice and willpower to be patient while staying absolutely silent and moving as little as humanly possible. This was something that submariners did before the subjugation, training themselves to remain quiet and motionless when their sub was running silent, and it was a technique that I'd learned after many a stakeout like this during my time in this game. For hours I remained quiet and unmoving—movement means sound—listening as the general remained quiet himself, reading a long series of reports. I could get glimpses of them from time to time from my perch, when the general moved the right way and his body was no longer blocking my line of sight. The guards outside the room made no sound, and since the general had no visitors, there was no conversation. But then, finally, he moved. I watched his serpent lower body shift to the side and move towards the map table, go past it, and pull a map out of the rack and bring it back to his desk. He didn't open it, he just put it aside and went back to reading his reports.

And then it was another hour of silence.

But finally, *finally*, something happened. A Salamander that looked to be an officer slithered into the room, and since the guards let him in, he was obviously allowed to be here. "A report, General," he said in Salamander after he saluted.

"Speak, Captain."

"The work parties have reached the cave-in site and have begun work to clear the debris. They estimate it will take fifteen to twenty days to complete the clearing operation."

"Put our soldiers on the details with them," the general ordered. "We are on a timetable, Captain. That tunnel has to be clear in eight days."

“I will inform the Major,” he replied.

“What news on the search for the saboteur?”

“Our agents in the Free City report that no human has entered in the last eight days. The saboteur is either still on his way there, he is in a disguise, or he avoided the Free City and is taking another route back to Freeport.”

“Order our master of spies to stack as many of our mercenaries as he can into every tunnel leading back to human territory,” he ordered. “And inform them that the reward for his death will be the equal weight of his head in adamantite.”

“Yes, General,” he acknowledged.

“Relay my orders, Captain.”

“At once, General,” he said. He saluted again, then turned and slithered out of the room, going back down the ramp.

Well, it sounded like it was a good thing I didn’t go straight back to Freeport. They were going to try to stop me from reaching the city. And since I’d fought several skirmishes with Salamander patrols, they knew it was a human that had sabotaged their tunnels. That meant I had to go a different way to get out of the Underdark...northeast. I could exit the Underdark in the Erudian Forest, then travel to the scion at the edge of Lake Salaborne. From there, it would be about nine hours of travel back to Freeport through a combination of overland travel and using scions.

I waited to make sure the Captain wouldn’t return, then I slowly and carefully rose up from behind the bust and went back to the map on the table. I descended enough to get a very good look at it and studied it again, studied it very carefully, because I wanted to make sure of my escape route without having to stop to refer to my own maps. I identified the tunnels I would have to take to reach the Erudian Forest, the exact route I would need to take that was on this map, and then I moved to return to my hiding spot behind the bust.

That slow flit turned into a dash when the general moved out from behind the desk and went over to the other side of the room and picked up his pike. He then moved towards the entrance to the room, and I watched him carefully. But instead of leaving the room, he came to a stop squarely

in front of the entrance and slid around to face the room. “Guards,” he said in a loud voice, “do not let anything or anyone leave this room. There is an invisible spy somewhere within it. Verass, Zarga, search the room,” he ordered. “Everyone else, block the door, tightly enough that he can’t slip by us.”

Two of the guards entered without answering, brandishing their pikes. The rest got shoulder to shoulder behind the general, forming a veritable wall.

Well...*crap*. I looked around quickly, looking for somewhere very small to hide, but that wouldn’t work here. They’d stick their pikes into any hole in the room, and if it did damage, it would break my invisibility spell. I had to get myself to the last place they would be rough, the last place they would think to check—the top of the general’s desk! No way was he going to swipe all the general’s papers and reports onto the floor!

I moved from over the bust to the top of the desk, hovering with my feet just over the stone at the far left corner—Djinn never put their feet on a solid surface—and watched as the two guards split up and started their work. One started at the map table and the other at the weapon rack. I watched the closer one, then glanced down—

This was it! The report I was here to find! It was a report on the conditions of the tunnels in the Underdark along their planned route to the *Smoking Mountains*!

I’d been right!

But just seeing it wasn’t enough to complete the pop-up quest. I had to retrieve it and take it back to Freeport to get the reward. There was no window in this room, but there was one just outside the room on the left. I just had to find some way to get the report and get to that window without losing my head.

I thought furiously as the two guards continued to search the room, jabbing or slashing their pikes into every conceivable hiding place I might be, trying to come up with some plan to filch the report and not die trying to get out. But I came up with nothing by the time the guard reached the desk. I was almost stunned when he took hold of the edge of the desk, then toppled it over backwards! I barely reacted in time, forced to fly backwards

to prevent the desk from hitting me, then I dropped down behind the desk as the guard jabbed and slashed his pike along the floor where the desk had been, but my eyes were scanning quickly along the leather pages. The page on top would most likely be at the bottom of the pile now, closest to the desk. I got right up against the top of the desk, now on its side, and almost felt my heart skip a beat when I saw the report! And was I ever lucky, the tipped desk hid me from the view of everyone but the guard that tipped over the desk!

This was my chance!

I quickly sent all my gear back to item storage, shifted back to human form, canceling my invisibility, dispelled the shrink charm's effect, then snatched up the report and stuffed it into my Bag of Carrying so fast it was nearly a blur. I then grabbed as many of the other leather pages as I could, held them under my arm, and then put my hand on the top of the heavy stone desk. I then surged forward pushing the desk, causing a shout of alarm from the Salamanders, and barely avoided getting my leg chopped off by the pike of the guard that overturned the desk. I leaned down just as the pike of the general burst through the desk, barely centimeters from my ear, then used Feather Light on my boots to vault up and over the desk. I knew where the general was standing and where the archway of the opening into the room was, so I carefully measured my jump so I'd go *just under* that archway.

I landed with my feet on the upper chest of one of the guards behind the general, who had a startled expression on his face. I gave him a mocking salute as I shifted my weight, and then vaulted off his chest and right through that tiny window. I saw a Salamander poke his head out the window as I plummeted towards the lava below, and he gave a shout when I landed on the surface, losing a couple of the leather pages that incinerated when they hit the lava—the pages in my arms were under the protection of Lucilia's charm—then turned and dashed across the surface towards the closest tunnel I could reach to get out of the main gallery, to get out of sight of the Salamanders so they wouldn't know which way I was going. I wasn't stupid enough to go straight for the tunnel leading in the direction I wanted to go. Several alarm gongs started sounding in the city behind me, and a heavy missile hit the lava about three meters behind me and to the right, fired from a ballista. I started a gentle zigzagging pattern so I wasn't an

easy target as missiles all but rained down on me, one very nearly hitting me. I managed to get to the far wall of the gallery, then vaulted without breaking stride and dove into a small crack in the gallery wall, which was a tunnel leading away from the gallery chamber.

I paused only long enough to stuff the other materials I'd taken from the general's desk into my Bag of Carrying, then dashed away. I'd taken the time to memorize the map in the general's office, so I moved with confident certainty, vaulting up onto a ledge along the tunnel and turning into a new one, then sliding to a stop at a chimney and jumping up into it, climbing upwards. I stopped and crawled into a small opening coming off the chimney and had to resort to another shrink charm to navigate the tiny passage. That got me to a wide tunnel that sloped upwards, which held a Salamander patrol that shouted in alarm from downslope and started after me. I only had to run up about two hundred meters before I turned into a narrow, jagged opening that looked like a crack in the rock, having to wriggle through it and losing some skin in the process, and getting into a curve just as the pike heads started driving into the opening. I followed that tunnel for nearly a kilometer, nearly losing more skin in a few places, and I struggled out of it in a wide, upward sloping lava tube.

This was the passage that would take me to the Erudian Forest. And what was more important, I was now outside the perimeter of the collapsed tunnels.

I'd gotten away. The vast majority of the Salamander forces were trapped inside the cave-in area. I might run into an isolated patrol that was cut off from the city, but they wouldn't know who I was or what I was carrying. I'd done it. I took a deep, cleansing breath and started up the tunnel, relaxing just a tiny bit...but not enough for me to not be keenly aware of everything around me. I had to get these reports to Merria as soon as possible, so King Gerin would have the hard evidence he'd need to present to the Amber Shire faction leaders to convince them that they were being targeted for invasion. Now, I had to get as far away from Salamander territory as possible before I logged out, because the Salamanders would be moving while I wasn't in the game, and they'd know that I was heading for the surface by using this tunnel; it was the shortest direct route to the surface from their territory. I very well may log back in to find them

completely surrounding my cabin. So, the objective now was to get as close to the surface as possible before logging out.

It was a risk, but one I'd have to take. I took out a light crystal, set it on the ground, then shifted into Djinn form and picked it up after equipping the gear I had for the form. I'd need as much health as possible in case I was ambushed by a monster on the way out. I then flew up the tunnel, going as fast as I dared, understanding that the light was a beacon for every predator in the tunnel and every side tunnel, and my reduced range of vision would let them get very close to me before I'd see them. I was much more vulnerable like this, but I needed it for the increased movement speed flying granted me. Right now, getting out of the Underdark was far more important, for one simple reason. The Underdark was a place where all routes were predictable. With me being in this tunnel, the Salamanders knew exactly where I was going. On the surface, I could go in *any* direction, which would allow me to much more easily escape Salamander pursuers.

But I did spare a moment of prideful satisfaction. I'd managed to steal the report and did it without getting myself killed.

Chapter 4

I'd hit a threshold of some sort.

I pondered it as I finished up the last of my queue, a hand propping up my head as I looked at my holoviewer. I could do all this internally the way most of the guys in the office did, but I didn't like being merged at work. It made me much less aware of what was going on around me...and I don't feel comfortable being unaware of my surroundings when surrounded by people I don't entirely trust, especially since there were Faey the building.

I know everyone in my office. But I don't *trust* them.

Naturally, I was thinking about CO, because what else do I think about? On the way back to Freeport, I hit 1,500 in Djinn Form. That was a threshold level for the skill. And given I only got the skill about six months ago, to get it that high that fast is truly *impressive*. That shows how much I use it. I use it almost constantly when I'm out in the world, I shift back and forth dozens of times a play session, which gives the skill ample opportunities to increase without me having to dedicate myself to training it. I'd taken note of it without thinking about it on the way back, more concerned with getting back to Freeport so I could turn in the pop-up quest and get the XP for both it and the main quest. But my character was there now, logged out in my house, and I had a *massive* amount of XP to spend when I logged back on. The pop-up quest netted me a truly ridiculous amount of XP for some odd reason, and that added to the XP of the other quest and the XP I already had accrued, and I had enough to buy enough points in Translocation to get within 27 of the target number I needed to learn Teleport.

But Djinn Form had my attention much more. When I crossed over 1,500, something felt...*different* about Djinn form. I think I mentioned that sometimes a skill unlocks additional bonuses or new child skills related to the main skill, or changes the way the skill works when you get it to a very high level, and I think that was what happened with Djinn Form. I hadn't

used Djinn form again since getting it to 1,500, I flew all the way to Auger's Ford, returning to human form and arranging for a gryphon to fly me the rest of the way. I do that because I don't like flying over territory in Djinn form with a large number of players around for fear they'll try to kill me for the loot they think I drop, even if I do it while invisible.

I'd experiment with it when I got home tonight. I was waiting for King Gerin to give me the next quest, because he was waiting for Merria go over the intel I brought back. But I had the feeling that the Grand Crusade was getting close to being finished, at least for me. I had the feeling that the quest was building up to a major battle between the players and the Kanlon/Salamander alliance, and the time and place of that battle was starting to take shape.

The other thing I'd been contemplating was the Champion's Raiment gear. I had the feeling that we weren't going to be allowed to get a full set of it. I figured we'd get four or five pieces maximum.

I received my third piece when I handed in the quests, and I took the time to cycle through the various rewards and carefully study each of them. And I came to the conclusion that the Champion's Raiment gear was *ridiculously* overpowered. Even if only 40 players on a server would have it, I realized that if those 40 people were in just two or three raiding guilds, they could dramatically unbalance the raid encounters and make them much easier for the raid groups to win. I had the feeling that we wouldn't get the chance to complete the entire set, but even still, that was half our gear at Goku from *Dragonball Z* levels of insanely overpowered...at least for our server. I had the feeling that Champion's Raiment wasn't nearly so powerful on servers like Azjar, who were doing the raids on Citadel.

But it was still extremely powerful gear. For one, every piece had a powerful additional effect, and the third piece I'd selected was just as powerful as the headband and boots I already had. Faerune and Feather Light had shown just how powerful they are when I went into the Underdark, and now, added to those, was the effect Iron Skin. I'd selected a new pair of leather bracers to replace my magical ones, bracers designed for a mage archetype, not a melee archetype, and they were like my bracers on steroids. Iron Skin gave the equivalent armor rating as a player wearing full plate armor, but it also reduced the damage I took from slashing and

piercing weapons by an additional 25%...and most melee types in this game used bladed weapons. The bonus represented how difficult it was to cut or pierce my skin. Iron Skin wasn't exclusive to Champion's Raiment gear—none of the effects were—it was a very powerful defensive effect found on cutting edge raid gear, meant mainly to give top-tier mage archetype raiders some considerable physical protection and tank archetypes additional damage reduction against weapons they commonly faced, but it worked for me just the same because I don't wear armor. I don't want the noise of it or the weight causing me problems when I'm deep in the unexplored wilds alone. For me, Iron Skin was the perfect defensive ability, and it was about time I added to my defense with these Champion gear pieces.

If I was right, I'd get one or possibly two more pieces of gear with effects like *that*. If I had the full set of eight pieces plus my Champion's weapons, I'd become a death machine. So, I'd have to be very careful about which piece I picked next...it may be my last.

I managed to make it to lunchtime, and I went down to eat lunch with Mrima. Her kids were back in the Academy, so she was back to brown-bagging her lunch. I got the chance to meet her kids a few days ago, and I have to admit, they're both adorable. They're adults themselves, but they're still adorable. Both of them are in the plasma engineering program, learning Confederation-standard technology so they can take it back to their home planet with them. Paian had been barely into their space age when they joined the Confederation, so they went from like we were just before the subjugation to having access to jump engines and plasma power technology. Their home planet was still using their original technology, and Mrima's kids would be part of the vanguard of engineers and newly trained specialists that would overhaul Paian's infrastructure to make it modern by Confederation standards. Both the Pai and Muri, who lived in the same star system and joined at the same time, had been smart about not rushing into it, making careful plans about when and how they'd upgrade so they could do it right. And Mrima showed how quickly they'd integrated themselves into the Confederation. Mrima wasn't the only Pai living and working on Earth. She was here to support her children as much as she could, who were two of the very lucky ones chosen to come here to learn Confederation technology to take back to Paian with them. And since math was math just about everywhere and accounting was a universal principle, she was able to

bring her accounting skills to Earth and land a job in MM's accounting department with only a little bit of training. The Pai used the decimal system the same as the Faey and Earth did, so the math she knew was the same math we used.

She jumped up onto the table and grinned at me, pointing at her brand-new interface. Because her ears were more on the top of her head than the sides like ours, she had an interface that curled around the back of her left ear, where mine rested on and around my left ear and extended forward to my cheek...at least when I wear it. I'm not allowed to jack into my workstation through an interface because of internal security rules, prevents people from downloading proprietary company data into their interfaces. I have to take mine off and jack directly into my work computer, and I'm not so obsessed with mine that I put it on just to come down to lunch. In that respect, I am definitely in the minority around here. "Did you buy that, Mri?"

"My cubs did!" she said, looking both happy and emotional. "They saved some of the money I sent them and bought me this interface when I told them I got a jack. And they have jacks now too, they can play the game with us!"

"They do?"

"That's what they've been doing with the money I send them. Academy students can get jacks at a discount through the Faey Imperium's Medical Service annex there on campus, and they'd be silly not to take advantage of that. They saved up to get jacks and got a package deal on three interfaces."

"What kind did you get?"

"They bought me a top line model!" she said, nearly sniffling. "KI 300 with twenty gigastrings of internal memory, and four expansion slots!" she burbled gleefully. "And they included a language library module with every language used in the Confederation, so I can get real-time translation so I can talk to anyone! My cubs are so good to me."

"That's because you're good to them," I told her with a smile. "How heavy are their schedules this semester?"

"Four classes each," she replied. "They both have advanced plasma systems one this semester, and everyone says that's the hardest class for

their major. If they can pass this semester, they'll graduate. So, to give themselves extra time to study, they reduced their class load."

"Smart," I nodded in agreement. "Now just make sure they don't get so involved in merge games like CO to not study."

"They *better* not," she said adamantly, which made me chuckle. "I mean, I'm happy to have them play on our server, it gives me a chance to see them on more than the vidlink during the week, but if their grades suffer because they're playing instead of studying, well, they're not too old to claw up."

"Crack that whip, Mri," I told her with a smile.

"I already told them to roll their characters on Methrian."

"Methrian?" Tom Jacobs said from behind Mri, stopping on his way to the lunch line and leaning over Mri, looking down at her. "That's a CO server, Mri. Did you start playing?"

"Uh-huh," she replied. "I thought it would be a fun game to play once I had a jack. My cubs in the Academy have jacks too, so they're going to play the game with me, so we can see each other more than on the weekends."

"That's pretty smart, but Methrian's a kinda blah server," he said. "They don't have much of a raiding community there. It's really small. We decided to go where the action is, so me and the guys from the office rolled on Azjar."

"That's kinda why I like it," she said, glancing at me. "I feel like I have space to myself, and there are enough other people around to group with."

"Though, that means you're on the server where they've advanced the Grand Crusade the most," he said. "Have you seen anything happen yet?"

"Well, yeah, but not to *me*," she said. "I just started playing not too long ago. I'm not ready to do stuff like that yet. I haven't even made it out of my faction territory."

"It won't take long," he told her. "Which faction you go with?"

"Golden Lion. I rolled a Jagaara. I like being a bigger version of me," she laughed. "I looked at the Savasa and the Kerians, but they weren't as

handsome as a Jagaara.”

“I shoulda known,” Tom grinned at her. “I play Black Fang myself. I’ve always wanted to fly since I was a little kid and didn’t want to be a fairy-looking wussy Sylph, so I went Drakkin.”

Mrima gave me a fleeting, amused look. She remembered what I said about the Drakkin. “I haven’t seen any of those yet. The Netherim races don’t come into our faction territory.”

“They’d be attacked if they did, unless they’re careful,” Tom nodded, then looked at me. “You should play, Kevin. I think you’d like it. Me and the guys could help get you set up with some pretty cool stuff,” he said enticingly.

“No thanks,” I said quietly.

“The line’s getting long, better get in it so I have enough time to eat. Have fun playing with your kids, Mrima. See ya later.”

“Thanks, Tom! See ya!” Mrima gave me an impish look, then burst into a fit of Pai giggling, which was a cross between hissing and laughing. “If he only knew,” she grinned up at me.

“Thanks,” I said simply.

“What kind of friend would I be?” she said with a wink. I understood what she meant.

I was nearly impatient to get home, watching the clock for the last two hours of work, and moved much faster than usual to get onto the tram. I looked out the window as the tram followed the sky tracks through a city that was barely the same as it was when I arrived here a little under three years ago. The city had some skyscrapers before, but now there were 200 story megabuildings in downtown and the outlying suburbs had buildings upwards of 100 stories, turning Jacksonville’s skyline into a true metropolis. The MM building itself was 139 stories, and it was one of the smaller Makati-built skyscrapers in the city. Jacksonville was the biggest city in Florida because so many off-planet corporations had set up offices here, and it was a fairly cosmopolitan city as well. Humans were the most common sight, but there were tons of other races in the Confederation here, since you could *always* find a job if you came to Earth. The planet had a

policy that allowed anyone in the Confederation to come here to work, and the truth was, we desperately needed them because we didn't have enough people to fill all the jobs. Earth's economy was booming since the Imperium turned the planet into a neutral system, because corporations from almost every member of the Confederation had come to Earth to set up shop. The planet's neutral status made it perfect for the megacorps to do business with each other.

I was logged in within minutes of getting home, and almost immediately I opened my skill window and checked Djinn Form. When a normal or Ancient skill unlocks new abilities, it says so in the skill description. But Legendary skills, I've come to learn, are very different. Touched by the Djinn's skill description had virtually no explanation of what it was and how it worked when I first got it, leaving me to figure out how it worked on my own.

I checked Djinn Form in my skill window and saw no new child skill under it, meaning that if it changed, the change dealt with Djinn form itself. So I had only one real option...I took a step back from the furniture, hunched down so I didn't bang my head on the ceiling, and shifted into Djinn form.

How it was different made itself apparent after I did a few experiments, and I did nearly bash my head on the ceiling of my bedroom when I realized what changed.

My gear would now *swap* when I changed forms! I could equip gear in Djinn form, and it would vanish and be replaced by my gear in human form!

A little testing in the city showed that everything else about Djinn Form worked the same. I was still not considered a player in Djinn form and NPC behavior towards me was the same as towards the Djinn in the game. In Freeport, that meant that the guards wouldn't attack me, because Djinn weren't unknown in the city. Djinn NPCs had visited the city before and had been gracious guests, so they were allowed into the city. Most NPC merchants in Freeport considered Djinn to be very welcome because they had a lot of gold to spend in their shops, so they were more than welcome.

The threshold didn't change the skill much, but it was very welcome in how it did. My vulnerability in Djinn form had cost me hours of travel time, more gold than I cared to lose, and a hefty chunk of XP over the two months since I had it, given I could be one-shotted by most medium-skill players and monsters. The risk of being easily killed and losing unspent XP, gold, and all the gear I had equipped was the balance for the ability to fly, but now that danger had been removed. My Djinn form could now have its own gear, and after I did a test by finding a player and more or less allowing him to kill me while I was wearing some trash gear, I found out that while he could still loot my gold, he *could not* loot my equipment.

I could now equip my Djinn form with some good gear!

That mystery solved, I attended to my other task, and that was spending my XP. I brought up the XP menu and dumped every point into Translocation, and to my delight, it raised it to within 26 of the target level I needed to learn Teleport. Another couple of successful missions like the last one, and I'd have it.

Not long after that, I was summoned back to the palace, and found myself in a very strange conference. King Gerin was receiving the kings of the Savasa and the halflings, and in addition to the usual retinues a king would have with him, both of the Champions of those races were with them. The halfling champion looked to be a mage archetype, wearing cloth and leather much like me but without melee weapons, and the Savasa champion was wearing leather armor and had her Champion weapon slung over her back, a bow. She was an archer archetype, she had to be to take a bow as her Champion weapon. None of us would be crazy enough to select a weapon that didn't match our skill builds.

They were certainly a study in opposites. Halflings were one of the smaller races in the game, only about a meter tall, and they tended to be a bit portly and young-looking. They looked very *non-threatening*, a fact they used to their advantage, because halflings were the race in their faction with the strongest racial bonuses geared towards magic. The halfling champion had taken that path. The Savasa, on the other hand, were a fairly tall, slender, highly athletic race, patterned after cheetahs. That meant that the king, his bodyguards, and his champion were all very lean, long-legged, and had very long tails. Savasa had some pretty powerful racial abilities and

bonuses that made them a popular race among players, the most powerful of which was Sprint. It was the ability to run at very high speed for a short period of time, like a real life cheetah chasing down an antelope, and that was coupled to another racial bonus that gave the Savasa the fastest base movement speed for players in the game, making the Savasa the fastest player race in the game on the ground. And for a highly mobile race, playing an archer archetype was a good choice, because that speed allowed the champion to stay out of reach of her enemies. Most Savasa were mage archetypes, archer archetypes, or had skills mixing the two...much as my skillset mixed both melee combat and magic.

The fact that she took a bow as her weapon meant she considered herself an archer, but I'd bet she has some high Spellcasting skills to back up those arrows.

They also dressed very differently. Halflings tended to wear well-made clothing that made them look smart and dapper, where Savasa wore ragged, minimalist leathers that left most of their bodies uncovered, a very African tribal theme. But that in no way meant that the Savasa were uncivilized, they just preferred a more tribal mode of dress. The Savasa champion only wore a pair of leather straps that crossed between her slightly smaller than average, pert breasts, leaving them bare, and a loincloth-like wrap around her hips that covered her crotch, which gave her tail free rein to move about. She had a few leather bands tied to her arms and legs, a leather choker of sorts around her neck, and wore three fairly large black feathers behind her left ear. Like a real cheetah, she had a light tan coat with black spots, a white belly, a very long tail with black bands near the tip, and her face had those black lines that ran from the corners of her eyes down to her mouth, along the sides of her nose. Her face was far more cat than human, so she had a short muzzle, fangs, and a cat's nose, but she had hair, long blond hair with spots in it similar to her fur. Hair like that on a female Savasa was what many players called *the Cheetara wannabes*, at least those that remembered that old human cartoon.

The fact that she was bare-breasted meant very little in this game. This game could only be played by adults, since it could only be played using a jack, so nudity was more than allowed here. Hell, sex was allowed here, a player's avatar was anatomically correct, and everything worked exactly the

way it was supposed to. Players could hook up with each other or with NPCs...if they could talk them into it.

That was the dirty, depraved side of this game. Some NPCs were programmed to be horny little sluts.

And besides that, not only humans played this game. Other races did too, and every race had its own ideas about how much they were allowed to show the world. Races like the Kirri and Sha'i-ree wore no clothes at all, some races like the Pai and the Faey only wore clothes as a fashion accessory and had no laws about what they were and were not allowed to show, and races like the Prakarikai, Shio, and humans considered it a major social taboo to show certain parts of their bodies in public. One of the things a lot of us humans had to learn to handle was the influx of races coming here that didn't think nudity was a big deal at all.

There were no indecent exposure laws in Jacksonville, or much of anywhere on Earth anymore, so it wasn't illegal for people to go about anywhere in town naked. Not that I'd ever do it, but if I really wanted to, I could.

The Savasa champion padded over to me on her digitigrade legs—one reason she had a much higher base movement speed than other races—and stood beside me as our rulers exchanged pleasantries in the throne room. Her bow was still out, slung over her shoulder, which was nearly a violation of protocols. To satisfy the long-standing custom of not bearing weapons before a king, however, she had no quiver or arrows on her person. That rendered the bow more or less useless. “I know what Emelda and the others tried,” she whispered. “Not all of us were in on that. Hell, I quit the Dragon Knights over it,” she told me.

“You were in the guild?”

She nodded. “Not anymore. I'm in a new guild now that I like a whole lot better,” she answered. “And since I already have my bow, you don't have to worry about me. What use does a Savasa have for a mount? I move nearly as fast without one.”

“Win traded for it?”

She glanced over at me and winked. “Emelda let me kill her to get it.”

“That makes me feel a whole lot better.”

She had to suppress a chuckle, else she'd ruin King Gerin's welcoming speech.

The meeting didn't just introduce me to two other champions, the Savasa champion Savar and the halfling champion Meldo, it triggered new quests for all of us. My own was what I was fairly sure was the beginning of the final chain in the quest, because I was being sent to the Sea of Grass to investigate sightings of sea giants and Sahaugin along the coast to determine if they were also allied with the Kanlon, which was where Merria's intelligence said that the Kanlon were planning to land their invasion force. Both were aquatic races, with sea giants being fairly self-explanatory and Sahaugin being kinda like reptile-fish-man kinda things. They were an intelligent NPC race like the razormaws or the Arachnauts, but the Sahaugin were hostile to all non-ocean dwelling races. The faction was permanently hostile, there was no way to earn reputation with them. But, if the Kanlon had managed to enlist their aid...that said something bigger was going on. The Sahaugin attacked and killed all landwalkers, and naval powers particularly hated them because they attacked ships at sea. Had the Kanlon and the Sahaugin come to some kind of agreement?

And as I suspected, the final stages of the Grand Crusade would be group oriented. While Meldo was being sent off to deliver an urgent message to the Silver Blade faction leaders to try to enlist their aid, Savar's quest was the same as mine. Savar's king ordered her to go with me to the Sea of Grass and assess the possible threat to Amber Shire territory from the sea giants and Sahaugin. But, while we had more or less the same objectives to our quests, they weren't the *same* quest. It was not a group quest. We could complete our quests alone, or we had the option to group up and do it together.

Much to my surprise, Savar seemed to know the answer to that question before she asked it. As we left the palace, she looked over at me without stopping. “I know you work alone,” she said. “So I'm not even gonna ask if you wanna group. But what I'd like to do is for us to meet in a week at Dewdrop Village so we can trade intel on what we've learned. It's a safe zone, the only one in the Sea of Grass.”

“That’s alright with me,” I told her. “It’s only going to take me about four hours to get to the Sea of Grass, so I’ll have plenty of time to look around before we meet.”

“That fast? You must know where a scion is.”

I nodded. “There’s one in a cave on the edge of the Sea of Grass, close to the border with the Amber Fields,” I told her. the Amber Fields was the border of Amber Shire faction territory, which was controlled by the halflings. It was a large area of farms and villages.

“Seriously? I thought I’d explored that whole area.”

“It’s not easy to find. It’s on the side of a cliff face on one of the mesas there in the northern edge of the Sea of Grass, and the cave entrance is very hard to see from the ground. The only way to get up there is to fly or use spider climb or having Climbing skill.”

She raised her hand, which had short, curved claws on it. Like a real cheetah, they weren’t retractable. “These do help if you buy it,” she said lightly.

“That’ll get you down,” I said professionally. “The scion that connects to it is in the Midnight Glade, which is in neutral territory not far from Jagaara lands. It’s about a hundred and twenty kilometers from here. That’s how I know about it.”

“It sounds like you’re gonna show me where it is.”

“I guess I can,” I shrugged. “Can you ride a gryphon?”

“Nope.”

“Well, we can take a horse to Long Shadow’s Rest, a Jagaara village only about an hour’s walk from the scion. Only problem is, that’s gonna be about six hours to the village on horseback.”

“I can keep up with a horse,” she said confidently.

And she did. In addition to Sprint, Savasa had a racial ability called *Striding* that allowed them to run at the speed of a cantering horse, and the higher they raised the skill, the longer they could do it and the faster they could go. Savar had clearly raised hers super high, because she loped alongside my horse with no effort at all, even had the breath to carry on a

full conversation. That was one of the racial bonuses that made them such a popular choice for players; Savasa didn't need mounts, so they could travel long distances much faster than most other player races.

To be honest, if I knew then what I know now, I probably would have rolled a Savasa. They're well suited for a solo playstyle, and their racial movement bonuses make them killer explorers.

It took us about six hours to get to Long Shadow's Rest, and the hours I spent talking to Savar had inclined me towards her. She was a raider, but she didn't act like an arrogant jackwagon like most of the players in her old guild. She'd used permanent illusion magic to alter the appearance of her gear to make her look more like a true Savasa, embracing the role-playing aspect of the game much as I did, and I had to admit, she found a pretty wicked-looking model of bow that complemented her preferred appearance. Champion weapons could not have their appearance altered by that spell, and if her quest rewards were the same as mine, she had the option to select Champion's Raiment items that matched the style of dress of her race, so the Raiment gear didn't need to be altered to make it fit in with her appearance.

Many bows in this game looked far too outlandish to actually work the way a bow was supposed to work, but she'd selected a bow that both looked like a true Champion's weapon but also looked realistic enough to be a real bow.

We reached the village, I handed in the horse at the stable there, and we walked for nearly half an hour out away from the village. We finally reached the Midnight Glade, and I took her down a rarely used path that ran up a shallow valley between two hills. "It's neutral territory at the top of the valley," I told her.

"Okay. Anything dangerous along the way I should know about?"

"The Midnight Glade is meant for players just leaving faction territory, so nothing there should be particularly dangerous. You have night vision, so that won't be a problem either. It's usually pretty dark in there. That's how it got its name."

"Why is that?"

“There’s a kind of magical tree there called shadeleaf trees, enough of them to swallow up most of the light and leave it dark as night in there in the middle of the day,” I explained. “There’s one of them right there, a smaller one,” I added, pointing. “See how the shadow under it is much darker than the other trees?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve seen those trees before, over in the Ancient Forest.”

“They’re there too, but the Midnight Glade is full of them, so it’s always dark there,” I nodded. “At night, not even people with night vision can see. You have to have magical sight. But I should warn you, the place is something of a haven for undead. Shadeleaf trees attract ghouls, since the trees protect them from being burned by the sun. Most of the quests there revolve around thinning out the number of undead so they don’t overrun Jagaara lands.”

“Sounds like you did most of them.”

“I did,” I nodded.

After cresting the hill at the top of the valley, we looked down at the Midnight Glade. The tops of the trees were easily visible, but the space between them and the leaves was much darker, creating an ominous vibe for the woods. “The scion is in the center of the glade,” I told her. “It’s in a cave concealed within the roots of the largest tree. That one,” I said, pointing at the tallest tree in the woods, which was a good twenty meters higher than the surrounding trees. “Do you have some kind of magical sight? The area around the main tree is completely dark all the time. Not even night vision is enough to see.”

“I can manage,” she told me.

“Then let’s go.”

It took us about 45 minutes to reach the center of the glade, and it was uneventful. The undead that lurked within the woods weren’t very active in the middle of the day (it was about noon in the game, remember it works on a 30 hour day so the time in here doesn’t sync with the time in the real world), and all we saw were a few skeletons from a distance that didn’t see us and attack. And I don’t go picking unnecessary fights. We reached the roots of the tree, and I led her to the entrance, which was barely a crack between two roots near the tree’s trunk. I slipped through and waited for

her, then we started down the narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel. There were points where both of us had to stoop over, and one where we had to crawl, but the tunnel eventually opened into a large chamber holding the curved spires of the scion. “Here it is,” I told her, taking an activation crystal out of my Bag of Carrying. These things needed a crystal to activate, and those crystals aren’t free. Players with an Enchanting skill of at least 500 can make them, and NPC enchanters sell them. I have a high enough skill to make my own, but it’s usually easier to just buy them from Lucilia, because the process to make them is rather involved, requires access to an enchanter’s lab, and takes nearly 12 hours to complete. I’m usually moving around too much to stop for 12 hours to make scion crystals, and I don’t exactly carry an enchanter’s lab around in my pants.

Yet another strong hint that I should buy a larger house. I only have room in mine for my smithy. I have the ability to make a lot of other stuff, but I have nowhere to set up to do it unless I rent space in an NPC’s shop.

Really, I needed someplace permanent, but someplace *mobile*. I’m almost never *at* my house in Freeport. There were a few things like that out there, like Molevena’s Wondrous Extradimensional Mansion, but things like that were *insanely* rare. Like Legendary-level rare. The mansion was the most ingenious thing in the game, in my opinion. It was just a tuning fork, and what you did was you struck it on a door, and it turned that door into an entrance to the extradimensional pocket holding the mansion. Only the owner could enter the mansion through the door, anyone else that used the door just went through the door. That allowed the owner to access his home from anywhere there was a door...and what do you know, there was another item called Molevena’s Folding Door. Those two items used in tandem let the owner set up a door and access his mansion from anywhere, any time. Another option was an item known as Strevla’s Miniature Mansion, it was a large permanent house that magically shrunk down to the size of a marble, as did everything one put in it. The owner set the house down and used a command to make it return to its full size, allowing the owner to carry his house around with him.

The last item was the one I felt I had the most reasonable chance of getting. It was a spell called Succor, and what it did was it allowed the caster to teleport back to a pre-determined location, but using the spell again returned the caster back to where he originally cast the spell. That

spell would allow me to set the destination of my Succor to the house, then go out and explore. If I needed to return to my house, I would use Succor, do what I needed to do, then use Succor again and return to the exact spot I was at when I cast the first Succor.

What made it feasible was that while Succor only dropped from boss monsters in dungeons and raids, the spell itself was not bound. That meant that it could be sold to another player by the lucky player that got it. And naturally, anyone lucky enough to get it charged *ridiculous* amounts of money for them if they decided to sell it...which wasn't very often. I've been keeping my eye out for Succor in all the usual high-traffic player markets, and I haven't seen it for sale. But when I do, I'll buy it. I have *lots* of gold, and I can afford to blow half a million gold on a spell that would be that useful to me.

Funny thing is, even if I did have it, I don't have a Translocation skill high enough to cast the spell. I'd need 76 more points in Translocation to cast the spell, and that's a *long* way away.

It does make sense. Succor is a more advanced version of Teleport, so naturally it would have a higher skill requirement.

I don't think I've ever mentioned the fact that I have a *lot* of money. I've had conjuring high enough to sell expensive materials to tailors, fletchers, and enchanters for a long time, and that's given me time to amass a *huge* fortune. Outside of my conjuring profits, when you don't have to share the loot with anyone else, you can collect a lot of it if you're capable of taking down monsters and bosses that drop it, and I can do just that. I have a little over five million gold saved up, and I'm holding onto it for one reason.

When someone finds the Citadel and unlocks it for the server, I'm going to buy the nicest house I can afford up there. Citadel is the main hub of all players on servers where it's open, and there, I could open a proper shop that would see a lot of traffic that would make me even more money, without me having to constantly travel between Alder's Bluff and Serrethar to sell my stuff.

Savar stepped into the scion and turned to face me, and I touched the crystal to the spire and got in myself. The spires glowed with soft blue light,

and then in a flash of swirling blue magic, we went from a dank underground chamber filled with moss to a dry sandstone cave filled with light. The sun was shining almost directly into the opening of the cave, which was very close to the spires of the scion. “And here we are, the mesas of the northern Sea of Grass,” I announced mildly as I stepped towards the cave mouth. Savar looked around, took in a deep breath, then gave a rueful chuckle.

“I can’t believe I never found this!”

“You’ll see why in a minute. I hope your climbing skill is good, or you’re gonna have problems.”

She stepped up beside me, at the edge of the ledge, and looked down. “I know this place! This is Suntouched Mesa!” she said in surprise. “And whoa are we high up,” she added as she looked down. It was a good 40 meters to the ground, which was a raised hill around the base of the mesa.

“Can you get down?”

“Easily,” she said dryly, then without another word, she took a step back and then lurched forward, jumping off the ledge. I watched as she plummeted to the ground, and she landed at the base of the mesa as if she jumped off nothing higher than a log.

I had to chuckle. If she was smart, she took Feather Light on one of her pieces of gear. That or she already had it, she *is* a raider.

I followed suit, jumping out enough to not hit anything on the way down, and she watched as I came down and landed on the slope barely two meters from her. “Feather Light, eh?”

“I’m no fool,” I replied, which made her chuckle.

“Damn right,” she agreed. “First thing I got from the Champion’s Raiment.”

“Second for me,” I told her. “I felt Faerune was more important.”

“I already have that on another piece of gear, or it woulda been first,” she grinned. “But it shows we think alike when it comes to gear.”

“Common sense reaches across races,” I said dryly, which made her chuckle and nod. “As to why you’ve never found the cave, look up,” I

added, turning and pointing.

“I see. You can’t see the cave entrance at all from the ground, and Blocktop Mesa would hide the cave from view if you’re looking this way from a distance,” she nodded. “How did you find it?”

“I found the other scion first,” I answered. “So I never really found this one.”

“Ah.”

It was nearly an hour’s walk to Dewdrop Village, and instead of parting ways, she walked with me as we wound our way through the mesas prevalent in this area. They got smaller and smaller as we moved south, then became low, gentle hills. There were a ton of animals out here, grazing animals, herd animals, and some predators, so we kept alert as we continued to talk...and the more we talked, the more I liked her.

We crested a hill, and the village of Dewdrop came into view. It was a fairly large village built on the bank of a small river, and since it was a halfling village, that meant that most of it was built into the hillsides of the small, gentle river valley. Halflings built most of their buildings underground, which was easy for them given their small size and made a lot of sense from a practical point of view. Underground dwellings were much harder for the weather to damage, they were warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, and since many halflings knew magic, they could dig out the burrows very easily. Dewdrop Village was a vital hub of halfling commerce, because a critical ingredient of their main export, ale, grew best here. Beyond the river valley to the south were a large number of farms that raised dewdrop barley, which was a critical ingredient in halfling ale. Since this was wild territory, however, the halflings fought an endless battle against the wildlife—both the herbivores eating their barley and the carnivores trying to eat the halflings—and kept a sizable garrison here to defend against a large number of goblin tribes that had settled into the western side of the Sea of Grass, who tried to raid the village and farms for plunder and halfling prisoners to torture and kill for fun. Halflings were one of the few races even smaller than they were, so they went out of their way to try to prey on what they saw was a smaller, weaker race.

Goblins were nasty customers. Unfortunately for them, halflings were far more formidable than their small size suggested, something that the dull-witted goblins just could not seem to fathom. In this game, halflings personified the expression *size isn't everything*.

As we entered Dewdrop, I saw that it hadn't changed since the last time I was here. Most of the doors in the hillsides were sized for halflings, but there were a few doors sized for larger people, and those were the "common areas" of the village. The merchants used larger doors to sell to visitors, and the inn was built to accommodate the taller races. The inn was the center point of the village, as was usual in a halfling village, with tables sized for both halflings and other races sitting outside the main door on a patio of sorts paved with cobblestones and covered over with a canvas awning attached to the hillside over the door and windows into the inn and stretched over the patio in front of it, held up on the other side by stout metal poles. That too was quite normal for halfling architecture, they liked to eat, drink, and socialize sitting outside because inn common rooms usually weren't all that large.

"Wanna grab something to eat before we go?" Savar suggested. "I've always liked halfling food."

"Sure," I answered, so we detoured to the inn and sat down at the closest available table sized for us. A halfling barmaid scurried over after serving some drinks to a couple of farmers; here, farmers and those who worked outside didn't work in the midday because of the heat, they had a tradition here similar to a Spanish siesta. But craftsmen and people who worked indoors did work during the midday, because it was much cooler in their underground burrows than it was out in the sun.

"Have any starhorn beast?" Savar asked the tiny waitress. She wasn't even a meter tall; she was so short that she reminded me of Mrima in some ways.

"We have some roasted just this morning," she answered.

"Then I'll take a full plate of starhorn, some firedrop soup, and a tankard."

"And you sir?"

"Starhorn roast, spiced potatoes, whipvine chutes, and a tankard."

She gave me a bright smile, since those were popular vegetables among halfling NPCs. “It won’t be but a few minutes,” she promised, then she turned and rushed back inside.

“You know your halfling cuisine,” she chuckled.

“I’ve been here before, I know what’s good,” I replied. “I’ve never tried firedrop soup, though.”

“It’s really spicy, so don’t buy it if you can’t handle hot,” she smiled, almost challengingly. “I think by now I can ask you what your name is. Nobody ever calls you by it, they all just call you Champion.”

“I asked the NPCs to do that to keep my identity as secret as possible, though it’s a moot point anymore. Like *everyone* knows I’m the human Champion now,” I said sourly. “And my name is Xen.”

“Nice to meet you, Xen. I’m Savar,” she grinned, holding out her clawed hand in the Terran offer to shake hands.

I had to chuckle as I did so.

The food was as good as I remember, the roast being perfectly cooked and seasoned to give it some zing, the whipvine chutes tender and succulent—they looked like celery but tasted more like squash—and the spiced potatoes perfectly seasoned. And the ale was rich, had a nutty flavor, and was quite delicious. It was why halfling ale was a favorite in just about every inn across the entire continent of Arcavia.

Hell, there were thousands of players that would rush here to defend halfling territory from an outside threat to protect the steady flow of halfling ale into their favorite inns.

She paid for the meal, and we lingered at the table for a little while, drinking a couple more tankards and talking some more. And again, I took notice of how easy it was for me to talk with her. Most other players put me off, make me nervous, but she didn’t do that. She was smart, witty, funny, and very observant, and what was most important, she didn’t make a single mention of real life. She was able to hold an entire engaging conversation using in-game topics and general conversation, which was easy for her because it was clear that she *knew* this game. She knew more about this game than about any other player I’d talked to. That wasn’t surprising for a

raider, but she knew a whole lot about the zones in the game, as if she was an avid explorer.

But finally, I decided it was time for me to go, if only because I was feeling almost scared by how much I was liking Savar. She was from the Dragon Knights, and the specter of Emelda just seemed to creep into the back of my mind. Emelda was nice to me too...then she tried to cheat me out of my title. I didn't want to come this far and then fall into the trap of a friendly smile and lose everything, not when I was *so close* to finishing the Grand Crusade. I stood up and looked down at her, pointedly not looking at her bare breasts. Though they were covered in short white fur—tan on the outside edges—her small, pert nipples were entirely visible. “Afraid I have to get going so I can get to where I intend to log out,” I told her. “That way I’m very close to where I’m going to start looking around when I log back in tomorrow.”

“You’re not doing it here? But there’s no other safe zone in the area,” she protested.

“Above ground,” I said mildly...which was true enough. There was a place in the Underdark within this zone that had an inn, but the catch was, you had to be friendly with the Outcast faction to use it. The Outcasts were a splinter group of NPC dark elves that were thrown out of the player faction over a century ago. There were small villages of Outcasts scattered through the Underdark, working and plotting to take back their home from the PC faction. That made them the enemies of the player character dark elves, but anyone not in the Moonshadow player faction, of which the dark elves were part, could raise their rep with the Outcasts. And I’d done it over a year ago. “There’s an Outcast settlement under the southern side of the zone, not far from the coast. I’m going to log out there.”

“I had no idea it was there,” she said in surprise. “But then again, I haven’t gone into the Underdark much.”

“If you haven’t raised your rep with them, I don’t suggest trying to go into the village,” I warned. “The Outcasts are a very high skill NPC faction. They can wipe the floor with most any player on the server.”

“Duly noted,” she said with a quirky smile. “How long did it take you to befriend them?”

“About ten days, but the rep quests are in the Whispering Woods,” I told her. “The village here offers no rep quests.”

“That might be handy, I wouldn’t mind having a place to log out on the other side of the zone.”

“They’re not easy,” I warned. “But yes, it’s worth it. So, seven days from today, right here?”

“Sounds good to me,” she replied. “I’ll be here.”

“So will I. Be careful out there, Savar.”

“You too.”

I turned and walked away, nearly feeling an itching between my shoulder blades...and I would have if this wasn’t a safe zone. I made sure to get well away from Dewdrop Village, and once I was sure I wasn’t visible anymore, I shifted to Djinn form and ascended more than high enough that no bow could hit me, then accelerated to a speed that would get me to the coast in about an hour. I actually felt a little bad I’d lied to Savar about going to the Outcast village, but I don’t tell people what I can do, and even her knowing that I have the Create Shelter spell was information that could be used against me.

I liked her. For the first time in this game, I found another player I *like*. And part of me was very much looking forward to seeing her again in seven days.

With the calmness of experience, I sidestepped the earth-shaking crash of a wooden club made from a mast just centimeters from me and stepped inside, getting within touching distance of the sea giant’s leg. Both my blades slashed into the seven meter tall creature’s leg, making it roar in pain and stagger back, and I vaulted up and did a lazy backflip as I avoided its club as it made a furious golf-like swing to try to hit me.

I’d been investigating the coast for four days and had found quite a bit of troubling news. It turned out that the Kanlon *were* in league with the sea giants and the Sahaugin, but they were in direct contact with the sea giants, and the sea giants had recruited the Sahaugin into the plan on their own. As I suspected, the Sahaugin wouldn’t deal directly with the Kanlon, but they

were willing to go along with the plan, as long as they got to loot and pillage the coastlines at whim.

To the Sahaugin, there was no delicacy more desired than the meat of the landwalking races.

This was the final step. I was fighting Prince Glerburub, youngest son of King Gobbolderdob, because he had the proof on him that the sea giants and the Kanlon were in league. I needed that evidence to take back to Freeport, but I would have killed the Prince anyway because he was flagged as a boss mob. And boss mob meant guaranteed loot drop.

I vaulted forward the instant my feet touched the ground and lanced right at the Prince's chest, and when I was in range, I used Flurry, which was a sword skill that caused me to make several strikes in quick succession. I felt warmth and strength flow into me with one of the hits as the lifesteal effect of my swords activated, healing back some of the damage I'd taken during the fight. The Prince had me down to about 22%, but I had him down to around 17%. And I still had my most powerful sword skill attacks in reserve, I was just biding my time until I had him low enough to unload on him and burst him down quickly.

This was something that few other players could do. I trained my skills and honed my strategies specifically to do this, and in a way, this was my specialty in this game; fighting overworld boss mobs solo.

After Flurry ended, I put both feet on the sea giant's chest and pushed off, sailing in a high arc away from him before he tried to knock me out of the park baseball style, and his mast-club did take a vast swing at me, creating a powerful gust as he hit nothing but air. I hit the ground and rolled through, back to my feet, and took one more step back and set my stance as the Prince charged at me, club raised and ready to smash me into the sand. I carefully measured the distance, and just as he would have started to swing through, I used Sword Blitz to close the distance, get under his feet so he couldn't hit me. The instant it connected, I used my most powerful sword skill attack against a single target, Doom Blade. Doom Blade hits very, very hard, but it had a very long cooldown, which made it most useful to dealing a killing blow to a weakened enemy, thus its name. I rarely had the chance to use Doom Blade more than once in a fight, even against a boss mob.

I was using it much earlier than usual, but I also had a plan for this. My Doom Blade wasn't aimed at the giant's thighs or lower body, the only parts of him I could reach, it was aimed at his *ankle*. I was betting that the vorpal effect of my sword combined with the sheer power of Doom Blade would give me a good chance to cut off the Prince's foot.

And I was right. My blade went all the way through his ankle, nearly surprising me and putting me out of position, and the Prince screamed in pain and fell to the side, sending up a spray of sand when his massive body hit the beach. I'd hobbled him, on top of dealing another 5% of his health bar in one attack. I was about to charge in to deal as much damage as possible before he could struggle back to his remaining foot, but a shout caught my attention. "Don't kill him yet!"

It was Savar!

I looked back to see her coming down the dune of the beach, running as fast as she could even as she unshouldered her bow. "I need to kill him for my quest! Don't kill him yet!"

"Tag him now!" I shouted back.

She slid to a stop and went for the quiver over her shoulder, then nocked an arrow in a fast, smooth motion. Mob tagging in this game was allowed, it would give her credit for killing the Prince for her quest, but since we weren't grouped, she wouldn't get any loot from the kill unless I gave it to her. Whoever did damage to the mob first owned the mob's loot. She loosed her arrow and struck the Prince in the upper chest, and that damage would allow her to finish her quest.

The Prince was crippled, but he wasn't done. He struggled up to a kneeling position, the knee of his leg with the missing foot on the sand, and he tried to bash me with his club several times as I tried to get inside to take him out. But the entire time, Savar was pelting him with arrows, slowly whittling down his health bar. The Prince threw his club at Savar, which she evaded with smooth, graceful movements, sliding to the side even as she drew her bow for another shot, then he pulled what was for him was a small dagger from his belt, which for me was the size of a bastard sword. He tried to stab me several times, keeping me away from his vulnerable torso. I heard Savar chanting words of power, and when I glanced back, I saw the

head of her arrow glowing with an intense magical light. She then loosed it, which created a bar of blazing radiance through the air as the arrow streaked away from her bow, and then it hit the Prince squarely in the forehead. The impact of the arrow was like a cannonball, snapping the Prince's head back and making him fall backwards onto his butt. The arrow did a respectable 2% damage to his health bar and reducing him to 9%, meaning it was a pretty powerful attack, but the fact that it knocked him down was what was much more important. "Now!" Savar shouted, drawing another arrow from her quiver.

That was the end for Prince Glerburub. Between me and Savar, we wiped out the rest of his health bar before he could get up. My quest updated when the Prince collapsed onto the beach on his stomach, face down in the sand, and his icon changed to *Dead*. The Prince's belt pouch started to glow, indicating that I had earned loot from the battle. Savar walked over to me, then tossed something in my direction. It was a full healing totem, which wasn't cheap. "You're in the red," she said. "Better heal up before you do anything else."

"You're giving me this?"

"You paid for the scion, fair's fair," she replied with a smile as she shouldered her bow, then started untying his belt pouch, which for us was the size of a sack. That said a lot to me. At my health, she could have gotten a pretty easy kill on me for the Champion of Champions quest, but she didn't do it. "He's supposed to be carrying papers I have to take back to the King."

"Same for me," I told her.

She rooted through his bag and pulled out a roll of several pieces of leather-like pages tied together. The only problem was, they were sized for a giant, so it was like she was holding a roll of posters. "This is mine," she said, then she tossed me the bag. I upended the bag to see what fell out, which was gold, a few gems, another rolled set of very large papers made of some kind of animal skin, a golden scroll, which was either a spell or an Ancient Skill, and what surprised me most, a *glowing scroll*. It was a *legendary* skill!

“Holy hairballs, it’s a Legendary Skill! Awesome!” she gushed, looking down at it.

I was very careful not to touch it. If I did, then it would become bound to me. I brought up the loot window of the stuff the giant dropped, highlighted the scroll by mental command, and released my claim on it as loot. That made it lootable by *anyone*. “I already have a legendary skill, and you can only have one,” I told her. “So it does me no good. I released my claim on it. Take it.”

“I can’t take that!” she gasped. “It’s a legendary skill!”

“I told you, I already have one,” I told her firmly. “It’s literally useless to me, Savar. I’d rather you get it than have it rot.”

She gave me a surprised look. “You’re serious?”

“I already released my claim. Pick it up.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes I’m sure, you silly kitty. Take it.”

She gave me a radiant smile, then reached down and picked up the scroll. When she did so, it became bound to her, meaning that nobody could take it from her, and she couldn’t trade it. she unrolled it with trembling hands and started to read it. “Well, what is it?” I asked.

“It says *Time Lord*,” she said, giving me a surprised look. “Let me read the description.” She was quiet a moment, then she gasped. “Medora’s Mitre!” she gasped. “I can give myself a haste buff on command, and I don’t get the fatigue debuff! And I can cast a slow spell on a hostile target!”

“Holy cow, seriously?” I asked. “Skill dependent?”

“Yes. It says the power and duration of both the buff and the slow spell depend on my skill level,” she replied. “That means it’ll be fairly useless until I skill it up. But when I do...wow. It’s gonna be *soooo* useful!”

“Well, that’s definitely a legendary skill,” I chuckled. “Mine is nearly game-breaking.”

“What’s yours?”

“I...don’t tell people about mine. I use it to stay hidden from players like Emelda.”

“I can respect that. Thank you, Xen, thank you thank you thank you!” she bubbled, giving me a sudden hug. “I can’t believe I have a legendary skill! And it’s a really awesome one!”

“I’m happy you got it. Like I said, it would have rotted otherwise, and it would a total freakin’ *crime* for a legendary skill to rot.”

“Too right,” she laughed.

“Now that the exciting stuff is out of the way,” I said lightly, then I reached down and picked up the other scroll. It was an Ancient Skill from the type of parchment and its color. I unrolled it, and I was both a bit disappointed and strangely happy. It was a *bow* Ancient Skill. “It’s for a bow. Reclaim Arrows,” I told her. “Well, that means it’s yours too,” I said, offering it to her.

“Reclaim! That’s an awesome skill! You could sell it for major gold!”

“I already have it. You’re an archer, you can use it,” I said, pushing it towards her. “So here. Take it If you don’t need it, take it for your guild, I’m sure someone in it can use it,” I said, pushing it into her hands.

“I have it too, but still, you should keep it, Xen. If anything, sell it. It’s worth a good five thousand gold in the right town.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive,” she smiled, pushing it back into my hands. “I have no right to take anything else after you gave me a *legendary skill*. But if you don’t mind, I’ll buy that ruby from you. I need it for my fletching skill. I can use the ruby dust for some killer magic arrows.”

“Then it’s all yours, free. I’ll sell the skill, you take the ruby, that way we both get something out of it,” I told her. She reached down and picked up the ruby. “Is your quest completed?”

“Yup, I have to report back to the King in Savalda,” she nodded, her voice almost quivering with excitement. “You?”

“Back to Freeport,” I told her, picking up the papers I had to take back to Freeport. “Well, *now* back to Freeport.”

“That’s kinda disappointing. I was looking forward to meeting you in Dewdrop in a couple of days,” she said with an earnest smile.

That surprised me, because I was feeling the same way. “Well, we have to go in the same direction for a while,” I said. “If you don’t mind slowing down so I can keep up, we can travel back to Dewdrop. We can have dinner at the inn, then you can head to Savalda from there and I’ll head for the scion.”

“Perfect,” she said eagerly.

I decided to split the gold earned from the kill with her evenly, kept a couple of the gems and the Ancient Skill, and we started for Dewdrop Village. We told each other everything we’d done and what we’d learned on our individual quests, then we just talked for the two hours it took for us to walk back to Dewdrop. We spent the rest of my playtime sitting at the outside table in the warm, breezy evening and night, enjoying a meal, then downing several tankards of fine halfling ale and talking. We stayed long enough to make the NPC innkeepers a bit short, since they wanted to close up, and it was only the demands of real life that ended our conversation. I had work in the morning. “Afraid I have to log out,” I told her regretfully. “I have work in the morning, and it’s getting pretty late.”

“Same, but it’s not very late here. Well, too late to start back for Savasa territory, but not late enough to get a few chores done. Guess I can grind down this ruby for dust, I have a travelling jeweler’s kit.”

“Then maybe I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon when I log back in.”

“I hope so,” she smiled. “But we can’t dawdle too long, we both have to turn in our quests.” She stood up, then offered her hand. “Good luck figuring out your skill,” she said. “If I don’t see you tomorrow, good luck. I hope we get to work together again real soon.”

“I do too,” I said honestly, taking her clawed hand and standing.

“And thanks for doing most of the work on the Prince. I doubt I could have killed him by myself. You saved me a few days of going back home and bringing some NPCs from the Royal Guard to help.”

I had to laugh. “It’s kind of my specialty,” I told her. “Killing overworld boss mobs, that is.”

“I noticed. I saw a little bit of your fight with him as I was trying to get into range. You really know what you’re doing. No way could anyone in my guild have pulled that off by themselves.”

“Well, thanks,” I chuckled. “See you later.”

“See you soon I hope,” she smiled.

She went inside, and I followed after her. I saw her go down the hallway past the common room to her room—I had to avoid looking at her toned, furry butt, barely covered by the hanging leather strips of her loincloth and with her tail parting them—and paid for a room for myself. She was already in her room by the time I came down the same hallway, then entered my room. I immediately laid down in the bed, but before I logged out, I found I didn’t really want to. I wanted to sit at the table outside and talk with Savar some more, but I had to be at work in six hours. As it was, I was going to be half asleep and dragging ass all day tomorrow.

It was a strange feeling, finding someone I wanted to talk to in the game. I’m usually as much an introvert in here as I am out in the real world, never comfortable talking to people, always keeping my distance...but Savar was so different. She was a joy to talk to, and she never pushed me to talk about things I was uncomfortable discussing. She’d passed up on an obvious and easy chance to kill me to get a step closer to her mount, which made me trust her a little more...well, trust her a whole lot more.

Savar was on my mind so much, I barely thought at all about the upgrade to my legendary skill, right up until the minute I logged out.

The next day was a slog.

I knew I’d be sleepy, and I had to struggle to stay awake all morning, until I got enough caffeine into me to finally jump start my engine. But I did have a lot to talk about with Mrima, and the entire topic was Savar. I’d told her about our first meeting over lunch a few days ago, and she was quite eager to hear all the details about our brief cooperation against the sea giant and our long talk on the way back to Dewdrop. “Wow, Kev, sounds like you really like her.”

I had to laugh. “I’m not even sure she’s a she. There are tons of males who play female characters in CO,” I told her. “And besides that, she might be a species that can’t even survive here without enviro suits, which would make a relationship kinda hard. But yes, I do like her. I like her a *lot*. She’s the first player I’ve met in the game that I didn’t already know in real life that I feel like I can really talk to,” I told her. “I dunno, Mri, it’s like she’s kinda like *you*,” I told her, smiling down at her. “You’re the only person in the company I really feel like I can talk to, and now she’s like the only person in the game that makes me feel that way. Even if it turns out she’s actually a male Jakkan, I wouldn’t really care. I could be friends with whoever it is behind that avatar.”

“You can talk to me because I’m so small, you don’t find me intimidating,” she said with a serious look. “And I’m not a telepath.”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, then I looked around nervously. If it got out that I have issues with telepaths, it might cause me some problems. This *is* a Faey-owned company, even if there are only a few Faey executives that work here. 95% of the company’s staff in this office is non-Faey. “The only Faey that really bugs me is Maila, and I think she does it because she thinks it’s funny that I’m afraid of her. But if she knew what the Trillane guards did to us at that work camp—” I cut off, looking away and resisting the urge to shudder. Just thinking about it sent a wave of dread through me, and suddenly, everyone in the cafeteria took on a threatening presence.

Mrima put a comforting hand over mine, and her small, furry hand did banish some of that feeling. “I’ve never said this before, but maybe you should think about talking to a psychiatrist, Kev,” she said calmly, but with concern rippling in her voice. “Maybe they can help you get over it.”

“They gave us counseling after they freed us from the work farms, but it wasn’t worth it,” I told her bluntly. “Their answer to everything the telepaths did to us was to send us to *another* telepath. I went to one session then never went back. I felt even more violated from the therapy than I did from the abuse.”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“Well, it happened,” I told her, then I took a deep, cleansing breath. “But that’s in the past,” I said in a tone that made it clear I was done talking

about it. And Mrima was ever sensitive to those little clues, which was one reason she was such a good conversationalist. “So, you going up to see the kids this weekend, or staying here and seeing them in game?”

“In game, it saves me money on the transport,” she smiled. “I’ll be going up every other week instead of every week. “But I won’t be seeing them long when I do go up. They spend a lot more time studying now,” she told me. “And I don’t want to distract them too much.”

“And when you’re with them in game, you can browbeat them into logging off to study,” I noted, which made her laugh.

“I think they regret letting me put them on my friends list,” she winked. “They both really love the gear you made for them, by the way. Mrijin said it doesn’t make him feel like a complete moron.”

I had to laugh. “When you first start, gear can cover for bad skills. When you get up to where I am, though, skills trump everything.”

And skills were on my mind when I got home and logged in. Much to my bitter disappointment, Savar wasn’t in the village when I logged in, so she was either already on her way to Savalda or she wasn’t logged in. So I left the village and headed for the scion, and as soon as I was out of sight, I took Djinn form and found the crappy gear I’d equipped earlier still on me, which reminded me that I had a lot to do over the next few days.

I’ve never practiced fighting as a Djinn because the risk of losing my gear was just too great, but now that was gone. So, I had to gear myself up, get myself a very good bow, and making myself a pair of kickass swords was also on the itinerary. I could partially gear up on my own, since I could craft cloth and leather armor and a couple of swords, and I was fairly sure I could size them for my new form (I had all of my usual skills in Djinn form, including Dual Wield), but I’d need to hit the markets in Alder’s Bluff and Serrethar for some of the equipment I’d need for Djinn form. My Leatherworking skill is the highest of my crafting skills because that’s the armor I prefer to use, so I can craft some pretty high-quality gear for this new form. My Tailoring isn’t all that high, but it was high enough to put some stat bonuses on cloth gear that would enhance my magical damage. I needed it because the lightning damage I deal using Imbue Arrow depends on my *spellcasting* stats, so I’d need to boost my spellcasting stats to make

it hit hard. I'd need both leather and cloth, because having too much heavy armor reduced the damage a spellcaster could deal with magic. A mage archetype can equip three pieces of leather armor (only bracers, boots, and a belt) without it interfering with the damage his magic did, but only so long as that leather armor was specially made to allow spellcasting. That made it more expensive. I'd equip the three allowable pieces of leather armor and use cloth for the remaining slots. And most importantly, I had to practice fighting as a Djinn, where the fact that my feet never touched the ground would alter my basic fighting style with both swords and a bow.

But there were some other things I'd need from others. I don't have fletching skill at all, so I'd need to buy a bow and some arrows sized for a Djinn, so I could use Imbue Arrow in Djinn form and make it hit hard. I'd need a very unique bow, with stat bonuses geared towards both archery and magic and sized for someone three meters tall, so it would have to be player made.

Savar had fletching, and if she was using ruby dust to make arrows, then her skill was pretty damn high. Maybe I'd ask her to do it. Besides, I really wanted to see her again, and it gave me a perfect excuse to track her down.

Actually...what if I equipped my Djinn form as a *caster*? I'd need to add some physical stats so I could hit hard using my swords, but my magic skills are pretty high. And my usual gear isn't focused around spellcasting, so the spells I use don't hit nearly as hard as they could. Since I could now equip gear as a Djinn and have that gear swap with my human gear, and Djinn could fly to stay out of reach of other melee types, this was an opportunity. I could set up my Djinn form as a war mage archetype, focusing on spellcasting stats but with just enough physical stats to make my swords bite deep, relying on my super-high sword skill to deal the majority of the damage. My skill would let me get away with that.

I liked it. I really liked the idea of it. It was almost like I was getting to roll a second character on the server if I set up each of my forms as a different archetype. I'd be a magic swordsman archetype as a human, but a war mage as a Djinn, swapping the priority of the two roles. And once I got a really good bow made for my Djinn form, I'd be able to deal substantial damage from range without using magic by using the bow and Imbue Arrow. That would give me a fallback once I used up all my mana.

Well, not *all* of it. Imbue Arrow used mana as well, but it used only a fraction of the mana that a combat spell did.

It had real possibilities. It played to the strength of my Djinn form, and that was flight. I'd be more or less going over to the Dark Side with the Sylphs and the Drakkin, cheesing ground bound players by staying out of reach while I rain hell down on them with magic or arrows. But hey, the tactic does work.

I was going to do it.

But I couldn't get started until I got home. I needed to gear up Djinn form, and while I had a couple of boss loot drop pieces of the gear I'd set aside for the form, that gear was more or less useless now that I'd decided to focus the stats of the form on spellcasting. They were just random loot drops, so they weren't anything super-rare or impressive, and thank God two of the pieces have some spellcasting stats on them, so they'd be marginally usable until I got dedicated casting gear.

But it also meant that I could finally make a pair of good swords for Djinn form. I could set them up with the proper stats—the maker can focus on specific stats during the crafting process by what materials he uses—and I wasn't going to hold back. I'd spend a buttload of gold on the best materials so I could make the most kickass swords possible. They'd have the highest stats I could put on them but also have a high damage rating, meaning they'd hit *hard* when backed up by someone with a sword skill as high as mine.

But...I'd have to learn to *fight* as a Djinn. Sure, I have a monster sword skill, but Djinn never, ever put their feet on the ground. I'd never really practiced fighting in Djinn form because I couldn't equip any decent gear. The fact I wouldn't be constrained by gravity would mean I could pull off some pretty crafty tricks, but it also meant that I wouldn't be able to set my feet for leverage. Parrying a blow would have no anchor, meaning I'd be pushed back if I didn't use flying to hold myself in position.

Yeah, I had some work to do.

But I had the time. After returning to Freeport and handing in the intel I gathered to Merria, I was given another of those *hurry up and wait* quests. Near as I can figure, I get those when my next step in the questline depends

on one of the other champions finishing a quest. I was tasked to wait until the missive that King Gerin sent to the Silver Blade faction was answered. That could take up to a week, so I had plenty of time to work on gearing up my Djinn form and practicing fighting in it.

I returned home and made a few plans in the minutes before logging out. I'd be waiting for the next quest, and for once, I was hoping it was going to take a while for the next quest to come available. Because I had a lot of work to do.

Chapter 5

I really, really, *really* did not regret my decision to use that Augment Skill now.

Hovering as close to the ground as I could get back away from three Jagaara, I peppered the monster they were fighting with arrows, working on my bow skill. When I emptied my quiver of the arrows the NPC fletcher made for me, I used Conjuring skill to create new arrows, one at a time, one appearing about every ten seconds. The arrows weren't permanent, they would only last about two minutes, but that was more than enough for me to nock and fire them. Conjuring each new arrow slowed down my rate of fire, but that gave me time to get into position to aim my shots so I didn't shoot Mrima or her kids, Mrijin and Mralla.

They were the only players on the server that knew my secret...at least for now. I'd told them about getting a cool new skill that turned me into a Djinn, and they graciously allowed me to tag along as they hunted monsters, letting me practice using my skills in this alternate form by attacking their kills. I got no XP or loot from it, since I wasn't in their group and I made sure to let them get the first blow on any monster they attacked, but I wasn't here for that. I was here to learn how using a bow and swords when you don't put your feet on the ground changes how you do things, and so far, I'd made a lot of progress in both aspects of it.

I'd learned it was fairly easy to shoot a bow as a Djinn but using swords...now that was tricky. Hovering and flying significantly altered my fighting style since it removed the footwork, but it replaced it with having to use bursts of flight to emulate that footwork when I both attack and defend. I also found it surprisingly tricky to activate my sword Ancient Skills in Djinn form, because using those skills relies on you using the right movements of both sword and body to trigger the effect. With me not having my feet on the ground, I more or less had to learn how to trigger them all over again. But they still hit with the same power as they did in human form, minus the loss of stats and bonuses from my gear.

I certainly looked out of place in one way, and like I belonged there in another. I was wearing a rag-tag assembly of loot drops I bought from some player stalls in the main marketplace, none of which matched, a wool tunic, linen pants, leather shoulder wrap, a raggedy cloak, leather bracers, a cloth sash, a cloth skullcap over my dark blue hair, and soft leather boots that didn't touch the ground. I was at the leather cap, with cloth pieces covering the rest of my slots. The bow I was using was a basic loot drop type of bow, a bow without a minimum skill requirement, but currently I was doing virtually no damage because I had the healer's debuff on me...and that was on purpose. Any time it fell off, I reapplied it by healing one of the others. Doing squat for damage was giving me more opportunities work on clearing the rating tag from the skill.

I had better gear, but I didn't want to use it because it would jack up my stats and make me hit much harder...and this wasn't about doing damage. This was about getting as many opportunities as possible to adjust to using a bow while hovering. But I also didn't want to be completely naked, because if a higher skill player was in the area, he could effectively one-shot me and I'd lose the XP and gold I had on me. So, I'd found a happy medium by getting some low-tier cloth and leather drops from the player marketplace that focused on stamina to raise my hit points as high as possible, but didn't have any offensive stats or bonuses to keep my damage low. That kind of gear was very cheap in the marketplace.

With respect to my riot of mismatched gear, I looked like any other starting player who'd made a friend that loaned them some money for gear. But the fact I was a Djinn made me look entirely out of place here, and I'd run into a couple of issues with other players attacking me, thinking I was a monster. Since I wasn't considered a player, they entirely *could* attack me, even though I was technically on their faction. While I was a Djinn, I was considered an NPC in all ways, including losing the protection a player usually gets while in their own faction territory.

I didn't kill any of them. I know a couple of spells that incapacitate rather than kill, and I used those on them and just flew out of reach. Though, as a Djinn, I *could have*. I could potentially grief my own faction using my Legendary skill.

Mrima and the kids loved having me there, because if things got out of hand, I could stop shooting arrows and basically explode whatever it was

that was threatening them. My Spellcasting skills are more than high enough to melt the face of about any monster in faction territory, even in my crappy gear and with the healing debuff applied to me. Even with the debuff applied, I could do enough damage to effectively one-shot any monster in the area with an attack spell because my Spellcasting skill is that high and the monsters here have Magic Resist ratings that low. We were in the Dark Thicket, right along the border of the Umbral Plain, killing gibberlings for a quest the kids were doing. Gibberlings are very large humanoids with two heads, like Ettins from human folklore, and they got their name because one of the heads was almost always speaking nonsense words. They were big enough for me to get clear firing lanes, and they were enough of a challenge for Mrima and the kids that they were getting some good XP and money off them. Many players in the faction farmed gibberlings for the money they dropped, which was why I'd had to protect myself from other players a few times. The gibberlings were well known and popular among lower skill players, trying to raise cash to upgrade their gear so they could brave the neutral territories.

I'd been working almost nonstop for four days since returning to Freeport. I was still waiting for the next quest in the Grand Crusade, so I was using that time to master using my skills in Djinn form. I'd managed to do a lot of work. I'd fully acclimated to fighting with swords in Djinn form, and now I was working on bows. Yesterday, I'd spent ten continuous hours working on Imbue Arrow, raising the skill by a whopping 103 points and getting really comfortable with it. I got used to firing the bow without my feet on the ground and got a solid grip on the range of Imbue Arrow; it wasn't line of sight. It only had a range of about 80 meters, where if I used the bow without using Imbue Arrow, I had a range of nearly 130 meters with the crappy bow I was using now. My range would increase when I got a much better bow, but the range of Imbue Arrow would not. But still, 80 meters was some serious range, more than enough to let me blast people on the ground and stay outside of the range of most spells and about anything but a bow or crossbow.

My choice to use my Djinn form as a mage archetype was the correct one, I discovered after that marathon training session. Imbue Arrow may be a racial skill, but it used *mana* just like a spell, and the damage it did was dependent on my Imbue Arrow skill and my Intelligence stat. If I wanted to

cast effective spells, I also needed a deep mana pool to be able to practice and use them. While I do have mana in human form, my gear isn't designed around expanding my mana pool, so I have a very small mana pool. I usually have enough mana to cast four or five useful spells in rapid succession before I use it up, and then let Mana Regeneration refill it, a process that takes about three minutes. So, to practice as much as possible, I need to expand my mana pool as much as I can. I got into a rhythm yesterday of burning my entire mana pool on Imbue Arrow, then allowing my Mana Regeneration skill to refill the bar in about 45 seconds. That skill was the same in Djinn form as it was in human form, and it's high enough to refill my entire rather small mana pool in Djinn form quickly.

I'd gotten to know Mrijin and Mralla much better over the last few days, and I could see why Mrima was so proud of them. They were both very, very smart—smart enough to win coveted slots to come study at the Academy in person—friendly, witty, and nearly as charming as their mother. Mrijin was smarter than Mralla, I could tell, but Mralla was one of the Pai that had very strong telekinetic ability. All Pai were telekinetics, but most were like Mrima, only able to lift about fifteen to twenty kilograms. For a Pai living in a tall world, her ability was very useful to her, able to fetch things usually out of her reach. But Mralla was capable of picking up nearly seventy kilograms with her power, which was quite considerable among her people. She'd had the option to go to one of the schools on Paian that trained telekinetic power but had decided to come to the Academy instead to study plasma systems. She was taking a course in telekinesis here, one of the ones taught by Pai instructors at the Academy.

After the gibberling went down, the kids looted the body and I cast a healing spell on them to raise them back to full, then reclaimed my arrows, having them reappear in my quiver one by one. Mrima was using that axe I got for her from the Underdark—she was in love with that axe—and her kids had also decided for melee weapons. Mrijin was using a footman's halberd, and Mralla was using a two-handed sword, both of which I made.

Seriously, what was it about Pai playing this game that made them go for big weapons?

I was about to ask if they were done with their quests, but a mail falcon drifted down and landed on my shoulder. Mail falcons were about the only

thing in the game that knew I was a player instead of an NPC, because they were part of the game's mail system. I took the message it had in a back pouch, and it took off and flew back towards Twinfang.

This was from Savar, she was the only person who would send me mail. We hadn't friended each other, but since I knew her name, I could send her mail through the in-game mail system. I'd sent her a letter asking if she would meet me somewhere, and it had taken her nearly two days to reply.

I read it as the others prepared to move: *Hello Xen, sorry it took me a while to answer. I haven't been on for a couple of days, dealing with IRL. Work stuff, bleh. Of course I'll meet you! I'm still in Savalda, so how about the Dewdrop Inn? If you're in Freeport, it'll be about the same amount of travel time for both of us. I'll buy, since you have to use a scion crystal.*

"Sorry guys, Savar finally got back to me. We're going to meet," I told them as I slung my bow over my shoulder. "That means I have to go."

"She did, eh?" Mrima called, walking over to me. With me as a Djinn, I was taller than her. The fact that my feet were nearly half a meter off the ground just made me that much taller. "What took so long?"

"She said she had work stuff and couldn't log on," I answered. "You three gonna be okay on your own?"

"We'll be fine, Xen," Mrijin smiled. "We're done with our quest, I just got the last set of orders. So we were gonna go back to Darkspire anyway."

"That was timely," I said, returning to human form, which caused my equipment to switch to my human form leather gear and the hilts of my Soulblades of Shatra Sha over my shoulders.

"So where does the other stuff go?" Mrijin asked.

"I'm not sure, I guess it's just in limbo or something. It's not in my item storage, and I don't get the stat bonuses for it when I'm in the other form. I'll have to change back to take off that crap gear and put on the real gear I have for it. For now, this is how it works, so I have to roll with it. Gotta admit, I've been having fun with it," I chuckled. "It gives me a good reason to hang out with you guys. I get to do something productive, not just sit around and feel like you're completely wasting my time," I grinned at them.

The cubs laughed. “If that’s how you feel, don’t come back, Xen,” Mralla winked.

“Is that how it is? Give me back my stuff.”

“Oh no, it’s bound now!” Mrijin laughed.

“You’ll pay me back for it, cub, trust me,” I said in a dangerous voice, which made him laugh again.

Given I was already close to the Umbral Plain, it only took me about half an hour in Djinn form to reach the scion hidden in the Midnight Glade, and once I was in the Sea of Grass, it was only about half an hour or so to Dewdrop Village. When I got there, I headed for the post office and wrote out a letter to Savar, which vanished in a flash of magic when I put it in the box. The way it worked was that it would reappear in whichever post office Savar was closest to, then a mail falcon would carry it the rest of the way. If she was in Savalda, she’d get the message in just a couple of minutes.

And she did. I got a reply by the time I got to the Dewdrop Inn, and it said that Savar was on the way to Dewdrop and would be there in a couple of hours. I used the time waiting productively, working on Translocation, and was rewarded with three skillups before Savar arrived. That put me within 14 of being able to use Teleport.

She met me at the table we used last time, greeting me in the Savasa custom of bumping the back of her clawed hand against mine. “So, what’s up, Xen?” she asked brightly.

“Outside of just enjoying your company, I do have something of a commission for you,” I said. “How high is your fletching skill?”

“It’s around sixteen hundred, why? Want me to make you a bow?” she asked.

I nodded. “But it’s going to be a bit of an unusual bow, Savar,” I told her. I pushed back enough to access my Bag of Carrying, then I pulled the crappy bow I’d been using out of it. Her eyes widened a bit as the entire thing came free.

“That’s a witchwood bow, a loot drop,” she said. “But it’s so big.”

“I need you to make me a bow like this,” I told her, holding it out. “It has to be sized for someone who’s around three meters tall.”

“Three meters?”

I nodded. “But this is where it’s going to get a little weird, Savar. The bow needs to have as high a damage rating as you can put on it, but its stats need to be aligned for a *spellcaster*,” I stressed. “So it needs to focus on agility, intelligence, willpower, and bonus mana.”

“It’s going to need strength too, so whoever needs it can draw the bow. A bow that big is going to need some strength to draw,” she said professionally, taking the bow.

“I’m the one who needs it. And I guess I can show you why, at least if we go somewhere private.”

“Really?”

“It has to do with the *skill* I have,” I said carefully.

“Oh. Ohhh!” she said with sudden animation. “Let’s head out towards the mesas, then.”

We traveled for about fifteen minutes, well away from the village and alone. “First and foremost, you have to *promise* me that you won’t tell anyone else about this,” I said seriously when we stopped. “I told you that this skill is how I hide from players like Emelda. If she finds out about it, it’s going to put me in real danger.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” she said with a stately nod.

I believed her. I truly felt that I could trust Savar. That was why I was going to show her one of my greatest secrets.

“Alright. Now, don’t freak out.” I set the bow down, took a few steps back to get room, and changed, which caused my gear to swap to some of the gear I’d had stored for Djinn form that I’d replace with spellcasting gear, which I’d used illusion magic to pattern after the type of clothes that Djinn wore. The cloth robe I’d had was changed to look like a blue vest with gold trim that didn’t close over my chest, leaving my torso bare, and my belt and leggings were changed into a wide gold sash and a pair of flared leggings common with Djinn. But I refuse to wear pointy shoes, so

my boots were unchanged. She gasped when she looked up at me, as I picked up the bow.

“Holy hairballs, is that you, Xen?” she said, hurrying up to me.

“Yeah. This is my Legendary skill, Savar,” I said, putting my hand on my chest. “It was really only useful as a way to travel long distances until I got the skill over a threshold number a little while ago. So, now I’m gearing up this form so I can fight using it. I need the bow for this form, and I’ve decided that I’m going to set up this form as a mage archetype. So I need a bow suitable for a spellcaster, but one that still packs a punch so I can use the lightning arrows.”

“Oh yeah, Djinn have that lightning thing they use on their arrows,” she said, to which I nodded. “That explains why you want a bow instead of a staff. Anyway, if you want a good bow, it’s going to take more precision than *around three meters*, Xen. I’m going to need some precise measurements, and since you have that bow, I can use it as a guide for the one I’ll make for you. So go ahead and draw it so I can get an idea of how it fits you.”

Savar, it turned out, was quite professional about it. She measured my arms and my body using a knotted cord and asked several questions, writing it all down on a piece of parchment. “I don’t think you want anything made of metal, it might mess up that lightning thing,” she said after she measured me. “I can make a fairly good bow for you to use, it’ll hit hard and boost your spellcasting stats. The arrows, I can make you a full barrel of them sized for you. They’ll need to be imbued so they’ll accept spells, like the ones I use for my arrow skills. I’m not sure if your lightning arrow thing works on arrows that aren’t made to be imbued.”

“It will, I’ve already tried it. Besides that, arrows you make will do more damage just because you’re such a good fletcher. So I’ll take the arrows.”

“Sounds good to me. I can make a recurve bow to reduce the size a bit, and I can make it look quite fancy but still function well, or I can make it plain. Which do you prefer?”

“Fancy gear attracts attention.”

“You’ll be a Djinn, Xen. You’re going to attract attention anyway.”

I had to laugh. “True. Okay, make it a *little* fancy, but I prefer function over style.”

“Got it. You want the absolute best I can make, or what I can make on a budget?”

“I can afford your best, so don’t hold anything back when you make it,” I told her confidently. “So how much?”

“I’ll need to use specially prepared moonwood for the bow, I’ll use rattlesteel spider silk for the bowstring so it’ll never break, and the arrows will take gemstone dust, enchanted mithril, infused stonewood, and cockatrice feathers, so it’s not going to be cheap,” she said absently as she wrote more on her piece of parchment. “In materials, it’s gonna cost about twenty-three thousand gold,” she said. “It’ll take me a few days to make the bow, but that’s no biggie. I’m just waiting for the next quest. The arrows I can make when I have the time here and there. You’ll get the bow first, then some arrows for it a little later.”

“I’m waiting too,” I nodded. I opened my item storage window and brought up my bank, then I sent a trade request to her. She didn’t blink when I put 30,000 gold in my trade and offered it.

“That’s too much.”

“You deserve to be paid for your work, Savar,” I told her simply.

She gave me a look. “I don’t charge friends, Xen.”

“Then consider the extra as insurance in case the markets are high,” I told her. “And you can give back what you don’t spend.”

“Well, alright,” she said, accepting the gold. “If you have any moontouched rubies or black star sapphires, I can use them for the arrows. That will save you some money.”

“Don’t have either of those,” I told her.

“Okay, now that we’ve gotten that out of the way,” she said, putting her parchment away. “What’s it like being like that?”

“I don’t feel any different, well, except for being a whole meter taller, and this,” I said, pointing at the ground, drawing attention to the fact that I was hovering with my booted toes just above the ground. “I can fly like

this, which was really all it was good for until I got the skill over 1,500,” I said with a laugh. “So up until last week, it was really only useful for getting to high places without having to climb and traveling long distances quickly. My gear does switch, but the stats from my human gear don’t carry over to this form, I have to have an entirely different set of gear just for this form. I decided to focus on magic with this form, because I can fly to get out of range of warrior types, and the imbue arrow skill relies on spellcasting stats for its damage.”

“If you can fly, you can just get up out of reach and blast people with magic,” she said with a knowing nod. “And when you run out of mana, it’s bow time.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, then I changed back to human form. “Now then, I’m getting hungry, so let’s go get some dinner,” I offered.

We spent another very pleasant evening at the Dewdrop Inn, enjoying the excellent cooking of the halfling innkeeper and his wife and savoring some quality halfling ale. And after eating, we talked. We talked for hours, all through the afternoon and right up until the inn more or less threw us out so they could close. And as we talked, more and more, little bits and pieces of our real lives started to slip. I found out that Savar lived on Earth—which made sense since she was playing on our servers—but she wasn’t human. She was a Shio, who in my opinion are a very handsome race, and remarkably human-like in their culture and customs. That was why she was so relatable to me, our two races have similar cultural mores.

That little blurb came out when we were laughing over my modesty, after she asked why I didn’t use the form before, and I told her because I’d change to Djinn form and be naked. Shio were a modest race, like humans, and she admitted that she chose a Savasa and her bare-breasted outfit to be as different from being Shio as possible. She admitted she was almost mortified for the first couple of months playing without a top, but eventually she got used to it. Besides, since her breasts were covered in fur, she intimated that it almost felt like she was wearing something over them.

She confirmed that she was indeed a she in real life, and that she lived in Sao Paulo, Brazil, working for a Shio company that had a regional headquarters there. That put her close to my time zone, which explained why she was almost always on at the same time I was.

I reciprocated, telling her about working for Merrane Macrotechnology in Jacksonville, and told her that I was a typical wage slave without telling her exactly what I did. I told her I was a human, and that I took human in the game because I wasn't entirely sure about playing a different race. But one subject did come up that made me feel uncomfortable.

"Was it as bad as the stories say?" she asked in a compassionate voice. "When the Faey came? We have a few Terrans in the office, and they said that things were very ugly in the first days of the subjugation."

"I...I don't like to talk about that," I told her after a moment. "But yes, it was bad, Savar. It was very bad, at least for those of us who were put on farms and forced to work."

She looked at me, then sighed. "Forget I asked," she said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," I cut her off. "It's over, and I'm in a better place now. If you can call an efficiency apartment in a high rise that has at least a partial view of the ocean fifteen kilometers away a better place," I chuckled.

"Tell me about it. I live in a one bedroom up on the hillside, but my apartment faces the hillside, so all I can see is the next building over," she told me with a smile. "I was in my first year of academy when we evacuated to Terra during the war, and my dorm room wasn't much smaller, so I'm used to it. At least now I don't have an obnoxious roommate."

I had to laugh. "Do you like it here better than the Federation?"

"I do now. I was one of the refugees that was evacuated off Shio Prime before the Consortium attacked it during the war, and I just never moved back. I've been on Terra ever since. I worked odd jobs, just bouncing around without any plan or direction until I decided to make a life for myself here and got serious. I went to one of the trade schools they have here to train workers for all the new jobs, then got hired here. Sao Paolo is a gorgeous place, and it's warm enough here for me to enjoy the climate," she told me. "It took me a while to get used to being around Faey. They creep me out a little," she admitted.

"Join the crowd. Any work in your company?"

"Lots, but none in my division, thank Mellora," she answered.

“Same. The only Faey that work here are the executives from the home office. The rest of us are mostly humans they hired to do the work. Mostly. My best friend at work is a Pai.”

“A Pai? I’ve never met one.”

“She’s a sweetheart,” I chuckled. “Her kids go to the Academy, and she moved here to be closer to them. She sends almost her entire paycheck to them,” I told her. “I got them all into the game so they can see each other without traveling,” I added with a chuckle.

“I’d love to meet them,” she said with a smile.

“That’s up to them, but I can always ask,” I told her.

Her eyes turned blank a second, as she partially delinked to access something in real life, then she sighed. “And speaking of work, I just got called in,” she said with a frown on her muzzle. “I’m sorry, Xen. I’d offer to buy you dinner tomorrow too, but I have to get to work on your bow. That’s going to keep me busy for a few days.”

“I understand. I’ll just head back to Freeport. I more or less have to stay there, if Emelda catches me out in the world, she’ll take another shot. She’s still majorly pissed off at me.”

“I know,” she chuckled. “Me too, for that matter. All of us who left the guild, that is.”

“I’ll just use the time waiting for both the bow and the next quest working on the swords I’m going to make for my Djinn form, so I won’t be bored. Truth be told, it’s been kinda fun. It’s like I rerolled on another server, but I have access to all my items and gold.”

“Well, the bow I’m making won’t be a twink item. No doubt it’s gonna have a fairly high minimum skill requirement,” she warned.

“I know, that’s why I’m going to work on raising my bow skill once finish the swords,” I nodded. “Just in case.”

“What’s your bow skill normally?”

“Thirteen sixty-three.”

“I can make something really nice you can equip with a skill that high. But, to be warned, the bow I make will probably have an even higher minimum skill requirement, so work on that bow skill,” she said, standing up. She bumped the back of her hand against mine. “Alright, I’ll send you a letter when it’s done.”

“I’ll be waiting,” I told her. “Good luck with work.”

“Meh,” she said, which made me laugh.

She hurried into the inn so she could log out, and I sat there a while and thought about what we’d talked about...and felt a little guilty not offering to put her on my friend list. She’d earned my trust in that regard, to the point where I revealed my Djinn form to her, and I was convinced she wouldn’t use it to tell Emelda where I am—you can see the location of the people on your friend list—and it was a bit rude of me to not make the offer. I really didn’t think about it, I’m so used to being solo, I honestly forget about the friend list sometimes. Mine only has one name on it, and that’s Mrima’s character.

I’d see her again in a few days. I could make up for my rudeness then.

I was nearly giddy as I looked at the skill list.

I’d done it. I’d finally done it.

Translocation: 1,250.

I’d decided that since I was so close to reaching the threshold that I put everything else on hold and buckled down to get those last 14 points. Making the swords could wait, because I wasn’t really going to deck out my Djinn form until after I had the bow from Savar. It had taken me two days to do it, but I finally did it.

And now it was done. I immediately retrieved the spell scroll from my item storage and activated it, which allowed me to learn the spell.

And it was done. I now knew Teleport. I had the ability to teleport to the nearest scion if I had no marked destination scion in mind, mark scions to teleport to them (only three scions right now, but I’d be able to mark more as my skill went up), and use scions without having to use a scion crystal...

and those were *not* cheap. I waited for my mana to regen, almost dancing in place waiting in eager anticipation, then I used the spell.

It took 97% of my mana to cast, and much to my shock, it did *not* take me to the Midnight Glade. There was a scion even closer to Freeport than that one? I looked around and found myself in a what was clearly an underground chamber, a very large one that was shaped like a dome, with the scion in the center and a single passage leading out of it. Curious, I advanced up the passage, and when it ended in a blank stone wall, I searched around for a button or lever to open a secret door. I found that it was a certain flagstone on the floor, and when the wall opened by magic rather than by some mechanical contraption, I recognized the tunnel into which it opened immediately. This was a sewer tunnel underneath Freeport.

There was a scion underneath Freeport? I'd never known!

But it wasn't a complete shock. Even though Freeport was a very old city, had been here for a thousand years in game lore, it wasn't the first city in this location. Freeport was built on the foundations of one of the abandoned cities of the Ancients, the game's history said the village that would become Freeport was built from the stones of the ruins of that ancient city. The scion, it had to be part of the original Ancient city, since the scions were also a remnant of the six Ancient civilizations that had once spanned all across the planet of Arca.

The question was, where did that scion go?

I returned to the scion and stepped within the four curved tines, and then cast Teleport once again to activate the scion. And almost immediately, I was beyond glad I had Faerune, because I appeared underwater! I appeared within the boundary of a scion that was at the bottom of the ocean, deep enough for me to see no light above and feel the water pressure around me (the water pressure mechanics in this game world weren't the same as in reality, so I didn't have to worry about getting the Bends or suffering air embolisms or hypoxia), but Faerune allowed me to see. It was an ancient ruin of massive, tumbled stones, a gigantic plaza of some sort, and there were twelve scions in a ring with a thirteenth scion in the center. Near as I could tell, the scion in which I appeared was to the east of the central scion. Beyond the plaza holding the scions, there were the ghostly shapes of drowned buildings in every direction, most of them heavily damaged...

probably from the cataclysm that had sunk this place into the ocean thousands of years ago.

This was something I'd never seen before. It was a hub system for scions.

It dawned on me. That meant that this must be the ruins of Tur, the First City!

I'd found the First City!

I've read all kinds of lore about it in the materials the Ancients left behind. There were six races of Ancients, and the oldest of them, known only as the Firstcomers, had built Tur and built the scion network that connected the Twin Worlds with magical gateways that allowed fast travel between points that may be on different planets. The Firstcomers vanished before the other five races of the Ancients came to be, and the other Ancients devoted themselves to studying the advancements and magic of the race that had preceded them, much the same way modern Arcavians and Netheri study the Ancients. There are several references to Tur, the First City, in historical texts left by the other Ancients, and even they had searched for the city, for they believed that it held the greatest secrets of the Firstcomers.

Intrigued, I studied the other scions. Nine of them were "dead" scions, meaning that the sister scion on the other side had been destroyed. There was only one other scion in the ring that was operational and going through it put me somewhere on Netherim. When I went through, however, I discovered I couldn't get back. The scion was one-way!

Easily fixed. I had to use up a very, very expensive consumable called a Crystal of Recall, which teleported me back to Freeport, back to my house. That cost me 2,000 gold, but it sure beat spending days, maybe even weeks trying to find out where I was and finding a scion to get me back to Arcavia.

I returned to the Freeport scion using Teleport, and this time, I made sure to mark the scion so I could teleport back to it. I returned to the First City and investigated the last scion, the one in the middle. It was active, but I couldn't activate it using a Teleport spell. It was a locked scion, it required a specific crystal in order to activate, which was its key.

That meant that this scion had to go somewhere very dangerous, if the Firstcomers had locked it from this side to prevent silly mages from using it.

There are four types of scion crystals. The basic crystal costs about fifty gold or so, which was a crystal that allowed a single person to use a scion. It was a basic staple crystal for most players who used the scion system. There was a more powerful version that sold for about 100 gold that activated the scion and caused everyone within its boundary to be transported using it, a “group transport” crystal. However, it only worked on players in the same group. The next crystal sold for about 250 gold, and it was a more powerful version of the group crystal meant to transport raids. It teleported everyone within the boundary of the scion no matter if they were grouped or not, a “mass teleport” crystal. The final crystal cost 1,000 gold from consumables NPC merchants. It had no player recipe, it was only sold by NPC enchanters, and it behaved like the mass teleport version. However, I knew that that crystal was required to get to the Citadel, because other servers had unlocked the Citadel and had explained how to get there in their tutorials. You had to use that crystal, but you could use it at any of the major scions that were scattered across the Twin Worlds. A major scion was different from a standard scion in that they were much larger, nearly twice as large, and I know where ten of them are on Arcavia. But it didn’t work that way until someone found the Citadel Scion and went to the Citadel. That unlocked the seal on the scions and allowed any major scion to be used to get to the Citadel.

I tried all four versions of crystal on this mysterious scion, and none of them worked. That told me that crystals weren’t necessarily the only thing that could activate a scion, but I’d have to discover what the “key” was for this particular scion to find out where it went.

I studied the scion carefully, which was as clean and pristine as the day it was made, outside of having some mud and algae growing on the spires near the base of it. I managed to find an inscription under some mud very nearly at the bottom, where the mud floor of the ocean met the spire, and had to dig in order to expose the entire inscription to read it, one I could read thanks to my fluency in all six Ancient languages:

Forged from sunlight, tempered in moonlight, the key to pass beyond lies in the Celestial Temple.

I knew exactly where to go. The Firstcomers were famous for their metal implements and weapons, which were made of a metal called *starsteel*. There were still some around, many raid loot weapons were made of it, because starsteel doesn't rust or corrode, it's virtually unbreakable, and starsteel conducts magical energy the way a copper wire conducts electricity. Scion spires are made of starsteel. My own swords are made of starsteel, though mine are black, and starsteel is usually the silvery-gray color of scion spires. Tur was known for the Celestial Temple, the first church built to honor the Powers. I'd need to find something made of starsteel within the temple here in Tur, and I remembered that all temples built by the Firstcomers had the same design. I'd seen that design in books.

That sent me out into the drowned city. I swam fairly high over the ruined buildings, searching for the telltale shape of a Firstcomer's temple.

It took me nearly an hour to find it, and then I spent nearly two hours searching it. I went through all the chambers in the temple, hunting for secret rooms or passages, searching for anything made of starsteel, but found nothing.

Nothing except the bell.

There was a bell in the temple's bell tower that was made of starsteel, where the rest of the bell mount points were empty, those bells corroding away to nothing long, long ago. Now *that* was damn peculiar. Most church and temple bells are made of bronze, even the ones in the ruins of Ancient cities. But this bell was made of starsteel.

Welp, there's only one thing to do.

I drew one of my swords and did my best to ring the bell by striking starsteel with starsteel, though doing it underwater is a massive pain. To my shock, the bell rang so loudly that it hurt my ears and vibrated the water, clearly a magical response. The ruins around me suddenly got murky as mud and sand were vibrated off the walls and sea floor, clouding the water. The bell began to move on its own on its swinging mount, and a clapper I hadn't seen inside shook off mud and grime and struck the bell, creating another painful shiver of sound through the water. It tolled again, and the

water around the bell was forced back violently...including me! I was swept back with the water as it was driven back by the bell, driven out of the bell tower. I saw an air pocket forming around the bell, and the water didn't try to rush back in.

It was incredible, one of the most astounding things I'd ever witnessed. The bell of the temple drove the water back, and back, and back, and back, a dome of air forming and growing with every toll of the bell, causing the water that came into contact with it to glow with azure magical light. The magical dome wasn't just pushing back the water, it was pushing back nearly two meters of mud on the sea floor, driving it off the original stone streets of the city. I managed to get out of the water, landing on a newly cleaned street beside the temple, and I watched, absolutely awestruck, as the magic of the temple bell drove back the water and mud that covered the First City of Tur, driving it systematically all the way back to the city walls. The walls were a perfect circle, and when the water reached them, there was a blazing flash of magical light that surged from the walls and up the water's edge, the ring of light condensing down to a single blazing point when it reached the apex. That blazing point of light did not fade, and it was so bright that it cast the entire city in light as bright as the noonday sun.

The First City of Tur may not have risen from the depths back to the surface, but in a way, it had restored itself to some semblance of habitability.

Oh. My. God. I felt so incredibly lucky to have witnessed that!

And what was more, *I was recording my simsense stream when it happened!* I had video of it! Absolutely amazing!

When it was over, the First City of Tur was dry, excavated from the mud of the sea floor, and the streets were littered with the fallen stones of the ruined buildings from which they fell. The magic of the bell hadn't moved the fallen stones, I guess since they're part of the city, but they weren't just dropped down to the city streets. They'd been pushed back with the mud, caught up with it, though they were immune to the pushing effect and fell through it whenever the mud wasn't enough to push them. That created a lot of stone debris on the streets, some of it quite large, choking off streets.

Okay...that probably had nothing to do with unlocking that scion, but that was just *freakin' awesome*.

I returned to the temple and searched again, with it dry this time, and that made a difference. I found a secret panel in the floor under the altar in the main worship chamber that had previously been covered over by a thick layer of mud, and inside it was what looked like a tuning fork, made of starsteel.

This had to be it.

I returned to the plaza and advanced up to the central scion. It was a major scion, much larger than the scions around it, and my fingers almost tingled when I stepped inside its boundary. Usually to activate a scion a player touches the crystal to the inside curve of one of the spires, but I made sure to use the tuning fork on the same spire that held the inscription...just in case. I rapped the starsteel tuning fork against the scion, and was rewarded by a sweet, clear musical note. That note sustained, and then to my glee and anticipation, the spires of the scion began to reverberate with the same musical note. They started to glow with a soft radiance, and before I knew it, the scion activated, and I was transported away from the First City.

When I appeared somewhere else, I stopped dead, looking up and nearly having a heart attack and a seizure at the same time.

In the sky, on one horizon was Netherim. On the other was *Arca*. Beyond the scion, facing me, was a giant castle sitting on a gentle plain of violet colored grass, surrounded by a multitude of smaller buildings.

It...this was the *Citadel*!

Holy oh my *God*, it was the *Citadel scion*!

I couldn't believe it! I just couldn't believe it! I'd found the *Citadel*!

I nearly jumped out of my own skin when a gong boomed somewhere inside the city, and then the scion flared with intense light, making me shield my eyes. **"THE SEAL HAS BEEN BROKEN,"** a voice boomed across the plain, so loud that it almost shivered the air itself. **"MORTALS HAVE COME TO THE CITADEL."** One of the Agents of the Powers appeared high above me and then landed in front of me, then knelt so she

was closer to my face—she was four meters tall—and presented something towards me. “Thou hast found the Citadel, mortal,” she said in a rich voice, full of pride and respect. “Know that with the breaking of the seal on the scions, all major scions have gained the permanent ability to send any mortal who uses them here, should they possess a sunfire star scion crystal.” They were the crystals meant to reach the Citadel. “Except for thee. Thou hast broke the seal, and thou hast been attuned to the scions. Thou canst use the scions to bring thyself and thy companions to this place without need of a crystal. From this scion, the Nexus Scion, thou mayest travel to any scion upon the Twin worlds thou so desires, be it minor or major. But for thee, intrepid adventurer whose drive to explore the unknown hath brought thee here, receive this boon, the reward for thy perseverance,” she said, offering up what looked like a golden rod. “This rod confers upon thee the ability to use any scion to travel to any other scion thou mayest desire. So long as it remains in thy possession, the scion network is at thy command. Use the rod to activate a scion, and it will take thee to thy desired destination scion.”

I remembered reading about the rod on the forums. It was called the Rod of Scion Mastery, and it was a magical device that would allow the wielder to temporarily connect any two scions together he pleased. It was a unique item, there was only one on every server, and through a miracle of luck, it became mine.

You have no idea how powerful the rod is. It would cut hours and hours off my travel times, hours usually consumed by me traveling from scion to scion to get to the scion I needed to use to get where I wanted to go. With that rod, I could just go directly to my desired destination. In a game like this, where distances were so vast, any item or spell that cut down on travel times was coveted, as the rarity of overwhelming demand for the Teleport spell attested.

With a trembling hand, I reached out and took hold of the rod. It flared with light and I felt a magical charge rush through me, no doubt attuning me to the scion network. I inspected it, and what hit me first and immediately was that the rod *was not bound*. It could be taken from me, or stolen, or I could even sell it, so I had to be exceptionally careful with it. It would have to stay in item storage at all times, and I would never use it where anyone else could see. Others would know that the person that

unlocked the Citadel would have that rod, and that would make me even more of a target if they knew it was me.

Something like that? There would *definitely* be people out there who would devote themselves to taking it for themselves. Its value was almost beyond worth, since it was the only one of its kind on the server.

“Welcome to the Citadel, mortal. Mayest thou grow and learn during thy stay here.”

The Agent flew up into the sky, but I didn’t watch her. I was almost in shock, just standing there and looking towards Citadel City, which was at the end of the white stone road that extended from the scion platform, about half a kilometer away. An entire city to explore before anyone else could start messing with things.

A city that would become the main hub for all players on the server. I’d saved my gold to buy a shop here when the Citadel was opened, because I knew it would see far, far more traffic than my place in Freeport...what better place to open a shop than the one place most players would come?.

I just hoped I had enough gold to do it. A house here would be so ridiculously expensive that it would price virtually everyone out of the market, and when the merchant barons got up here, they’d buy all the prime property. I’d never get a chance like this again, to buy the best house in the best location before I had any competitors.

Grand Crusade...pfft. This was *much* more exciting!

But I had to move. If other players on the server kept up with the forums, then no doubt there were people running madly towards the nearest consumables NPC merchant to buy the crystals that would get them here. The people with Teleport may be here within minutes, able to grab a crystal and teleport to the nearest major scion, if they had one marked, and I didn’t want anyone to know that I was the one that unlocked the Citadel. So I jerked myself into motion and rushed the 500 meters from the scion to the edge of the city, intent on getting out of sight before the first player appeared in the scion behind me.

Everything else was forgotten. I spent hours exploring the city, learning where things were and talking to some of the NPCs. There were no mortal races here, there were the three races of the Celestial Beings: the Agents,

the Arkons, and the Demons. The Agents and the Demons were mortal enemies, but in this city, they walked the streets without attacking each other. This was neutral ground according to the game lore, where the agents of the Powers and the agents of Chaos could meet to discuss matters of celestial import without fighting one another. The Arkons were the “neutral” race, catering to both sides, and were very human-like in appearance...outside of the glowing eyes and being over two meters tall. I gathered all kinds of information about the city, its residents, and the surrounding wilderness, preparing for my first forays into what I knew was the most dangerous place in the game, a place that would be the ultimate test of my soloing skills. Out there, even the passive animals had insane stats and skill levels, allowing them to obliterate anyone that wasn’t ready for it. It was like an entire mini-planet full of boss mobs, and I honestly wasn’t sure if I was ready to try to solo here. The rest of the mini-planet or moon or whatever was wild, with extremely powerful monsters and even more powerful bosses, 62 new dungeons, and 22 raids, each one designed to be a stepping stone to get the raiding group geared up for the final raid. The final raid was the Citadel itself, but nobody on this server would be setting foot in there for a long, long time. For that matter, I was certain that nobody was going to manage to clear any of the dungeons anytime soon. I’d bet that the best geared and skilled players on the server would struggle to kill a single overworld trash mob in a group.

The monsters here were *that powerful*.

For that matter, the Citadel itself wasn’t just a raid. It was a self-contained zone that had small outdoor areas for questing and grinding XP, several dungeons within the Citadel itself meant for uber-geared and super-high skilled groups, and the Citadel raid itself, which was the “end raid,” the most dangerous and challenging raid in the game. Only endgame players dared set foot in the Citadel, where even the weakest trash mob could wipe the floor with the unprepared. Not even us Champions stood a chance in there, not with the gear and skill levels we had now.

I saw my first other player about two hours after I started exploring, and it was just bad luck that it was Emelda. She didn’t see me, thankfully, moving with a couple of her guildmates down one of the major streets. I moved more carefully after that, because more players started to show up over the hours.

My exploration culminated on one of the main streets near the center of the Trades Ward *long* after I should have logged off and went to bed. I was standing on the landing of a building sitting on a corner between two major streets. This was the optimal location for a shop, I'd decided. It was very close to the city's player marketplace—which would have stalls in it very soon, as soon as the merchant barons got up here—several very important NPC merchants, the bank, the post office, and the inn. The main boulevard was a straight shot right to the scion, and the other street led right to the largest player marketplace in the Ward, which was just a block away. This corner would see tons of traffic, and if I ever wanted to open my own shop, it would have great visibility. The building was empty, meaning I could claim it, and it was surprisingly big. It was designed to have a shop on the ground floor, a workshop behind the shop area for working on tradeskills, and an apartment above it for living, giving me a ton of living space. The stairs up to the apartment were in the workshop, but there was another stairwell in the back of the building outside that would let me get into the apartment without coming through the shop. The apartment above was *three floors*, the rooms were very large with very high ceilings—designed for Arkons—high enough for me to move around the apartment in Djinn form, with large arched passageways with no doors between them. It had a balcony that opened from the top floor master bedroom that would give someone a commanding view of the boulevard below. And to top it all off, the roof was flat and had a large garden on it, with a small stairhouse at one end leading down into the building. The entire top of the roof was covered in dirt and grass, and had flower beds, stone walkways, and even a couple of small trees resembling weeping willows, all enclosed in a waist-high wrought iron fence to keep anyone from wandering off the edge, along with a stone lip to hold in the dirt and provide drainage via pipes and gutters. It was like a courtyard of a Spanish home compound put on the roof instead.

It was perfect. This was the house I was going to buy.

I put my hand on the *For Sale* icon and almost paled when I saw the asking price. *Five million* gold!

I nearly swallowed my tongue. I'd never seen a price tag that high, on *anything*. And this wasn't even the largest building on the street for sale! My God, how much would one of the big buildings over by the craftsmen's

district cost, the kind a guild would buy for its guild headquarters? Ten million? Fifteen million?

Five million gold. I had to think very long and very hard about that. True, I'd been making tons of money for a long time, and I had the money to buy the house. But it was almost all the gold I had, and I had plans to buy some other stuff. If I bought the house, I'd be almost completely wiped out. I'd only have about 173,000 gold left, which for me was being *broke*. But, a shop in this location would allow me to earn money fairly fast, because it was in the perfect location and very soon, *thousands* of players were going to be passing by it.

This house wasn't going to be available forever...maybe not even for the rest of the week. Once the merchant barons in Alder's Bluff and Serrethar started to move up here, they'd buy a building like this to turn into a shop for their goods, because it *was* in the perfect location. If I didn't buy it now, the house would not be here when I did want it.

I had a choice. Buy the house or hold onto my money for the spells and items I'd been trying to buy for over six months.

Oh well.

I put my hand on the sign again, and when it asked me if I wanted to buy the house, I chose *yes*. The sign disappeared, a window appeared in my field of vision informing me that five million gold had been deducted from my bank, and a key appeared in midair and floated down to my hand. I took it and stepped up to the door, put it in the keyhole, and turned it. That finalized the sale, making the house officially *mine*.

The key flashed with light and vanished, and a window appeared in my field of vision informing me that I was now the owner of this property. I didn't need the physical key to open the door, it was just a means for a player to establish official ownership over a house. Any door or window in the house would open when I put my hand on it and willed it, but I could set the doors or windows so they were locked or unlocked, even open a door with a verbal command, allowing others in.

I stepped in almost reverently, into a fairly large, empty shop area, with nothing in it but a counter in the back that had a large, stout door that opened to the workshop beyond behind it, a surprisingly large workshop

more than large enough to support the crafting equipment I'd need to practice multiple tradeskills. That made the house even more valuable.

The possibilities! I could set up the workshop to work on tradeskills other than blacksmithing without having to rent space at an NPC. I could move all my tradeskill stuff from my house in Freeport, maybe even just sell that house now that I had this one and get some of my money back. I could store my money here instead of in the bank if I so wished, which might be more convenient. And when I finally got Succor, I could set its destination here, giving me access to the Nexus Scion, which was closer to this building than the scion under Freeport was to the house I owned there. Since the Nexus Scion would allow me to go to any other scion I've previously used or touched, I wouldn't need to use the Rod of Scion Mastery in a place where other players could see it.

But for now, it was nothing but an empty building. It had no furniture, no decorations, no nothing...but furnishing it was going to be cheap and easy for me. Furniture in this game is very expensive, I think the game devs use property and furniture as a means to drain gold out of the economy to keep inflation down. For me, however, it was going to be quick and painless, because I can conjure permanent furniture. It's nothing but wood and cloth, after all.

And now, I was in a new dilemma. I've wanted Succor half of forever, but Succor was a spell that could cost upwards of 500,000 gold in those rare times it showed up in a player marketplace. I now I only had about 173,000 gold left, which wasn't enough. I'd have to save more gold, cut back on my consumables, maybe do a couple of weeks of dedicated gold farming to rebuild my money, which was possible for me.

One of the benefits of being an accomplished explorer is that I know of places to make gold that most other players don't, and I keep them secret. Hell, I can earn pretty good money through reselling, by buying supplies in Freeport and selling them to NPC factions that don't have easy access to those kinds of goods. And in this game, there are things like unmined ore deposits, gems, valuable materials and supplies that players can collect. Hell, I've made good money by *mining*, mining deposits of gold, gems, and mithril in the Underdark and selling it in the markets at Alder's Bluff. I know of several places where I can make a very tidy profit, if I put some

effort into it. I never bothered before, because I had millions of gold in the bank and I didn't consider it to be worth the effort. And now I'd have to do it, because I needed the money. If I saw a Succor spell show up in a market and I didn't have the money to buy it, I'd never forgive myself.

But, the first thing I needed was a bed. Having a bed would allow me to log out completely from the house, so I wouldn't have to pay money to log out in an inn. I *could* log out in the house, but it would work the same way Create Shelter would, my body would still be here. But, since I'd be inside my own house, there was no danger. No player can get into a player-owned house unless the owner invites him in, and on top of that, the owner of a house is absolutely invulnerable while inside his house, like a safe zone on steroids. That prevents people that the owner invites in from betraying him and attacking him, though the *owner* can attack another player within the boundaries of his own house. But still, the first thing I did need was a bed, because I still didn't feel entirely comfortable with the idea of my body being visible within the house. Someone could look in through a window and see me, so I had to be able to log out completely. And for that, I'd need a bed.

There was so much to do...so much to do!

I knew that I was going to have all kinds of fun for the next couple of weeks. But for now, I absolutely had to log off. I had to be at work in five hours, and I had to get some sleep. So, I used Conjuring to whip up a comfy bed in the master bedroom, climbed into it, and logged out, my mind racing with all the things I needed to do over the next couple of days.

There was no doubt that what happened would hit the gaming site news feeds.

CO Today had the headline on the main page that summed it up, *Citadel Unlocked on Methrian Server!* followed up by a brief article about it. The article made mention that nobody knew who had done it, that the lucky player that found the scion hadn't come forward, but it did give our small server its due in noting that we unlocked it before quite a few much larger and more progressed servers. The article also dryly noted that the players on Methrian wouldn't be able to do very much there for a long time, since they

didn't have the gear or skill average ratings to handle even the weakest mobs on Citadel. It would be a major accomplishment for just about anyone on Methrian to manage to even kill a squirrel, let alone a mob that might drop loot. And the prices of stuff in Citadel City would wipe out even the merchant barons in short order if they tried to buy and resell it.

I couldn't keep the secret forever, though. During lunch, I had to spill to *someone*, and Mrima was conveniently right there, on top of not being the kind to talk if I asked her not to. As soon as she was settled on the table, munching away on her cat food, I leaned over with a big smile on my face. "I had the best day ever yesterday in the game, Mri," I told her in a low voice.

"Oooh, what happened?"

"I *found the Citadel*," I told her.

She gasped. "*You* found the Citadel?" she said in a loud voice, which made me start and hush her hastily.

"Keep it down! And yes I did," I grinned broadly. "The scion was at the bottom of the ocean. I almost had a heart attack when I used it to see where it went and found myself on the Citadel," I said ruefully. "I spent almost all night exploring the city."

"What's it like?"

"Large and open, and very clean," I answered. "The architecture isn't like anything in the Twin Worlds. Most of the buildings are made out of some kind of pristine white stone, like marble, and there's a lot of gold leaf, stained glass, and brass and bronze in with it. Most of the buildings have lawns and gardens on their roofs."

"That is so cool!" she said with a little squeal of delight.

"That's not the best part. I bought a *house* there," I said with a barely contained grin.

"No way! A house?" she gasped. "Was it expensive? You said houses are expensive."

"It cost me five million gold, but it was worth it," I told her, then explained that part of it. "But the best part of it was, I got to pick the house

I wanted. So I took my time and found a really good one, in a great location that I can turn into a shop to sell stuff I conjure in Djinn form.”

“Kev, do you know how much of a killing you could make?” she said suddenly. “If the shop is in as good a location as you say, almost every player is going to see it! And if you already have the house, you can get your shop set up now and cash in, establish a clientele before the merchant barons establish themselves in the city!”

“I know, but I’m not planning on doing it anytime soon. I want a couple of the merchant barons to get up and running first. It will help conceal the fact that I was the one that found the Citadel, and that would make some people that really don’t like me already absolutely *hate* me. Players like Emelda don’t believe I deserve to have anything nice because I don’t raid. If they found out I was the one that found the Citadel, that I have the Rod of Scion Mastery, they very well may dedicate their lives to taking it from me. That would make my game experience a living hell.”

“Kev, best friend ever, can you take me and the cubs there and let us see it?”

“Yeah, I can,” I chuckled. “The way there is in Freeport, so I can get you there. I can pick you up in Twinfang when we get home and take you there and show you around. Oh, I finally got Translocation up high enough to use Teleport. That was how I found the scion,” I told her. “I cast it from inside Freeport, certain it would take me to the scion in Midnight Glade, but it didn’t. It sent me to a scion under Freeport instead, one I had no idea was there, and that scion connects to a scion in a ruined city at the bottom of the ocean. The Citadel scion is there, in the city.”

“And since so few people play humans, you’re probably the first one to use Teleport from Freeport,” she reasoned, then she laughed. “Guess there really was a good reason to play a human after all,” she said with a fanged grin. “It let you unlock the Citadel.”

“Not arguing that,” I chuckled. “Wait. I can do it, but we’ll have to do it the other way.”

“Why?”

“Because I can only take people who are in my *group*,” I told her. “I can’t risk grouping with you guys, I may pick up a group quest. But what I

will do is use the scion crystals I already have to get you there and to get back,” I told her. “I keep plenty of them in my inventory, and I have just one of the scion crystals you need to get to the Citadel. You can use that crystal to get there, and I can use Teleport to get myself there.”

“Sounds fun!” she said eagerly.

And it was fun. As soon as I logged on, I first tended to the shop project, and I did that by returning to Freeport and using my extensive contacts with the merchants of the city to buy all the equipment I needed to run a proper shop, stuff I can’t conjure because it has metal in it. It was much cheaper in Freeport than Citadel City, and the marvels of item storage allowed me to carry around things like bookshelves, counters, and display cases without needing a wagon. I then borrowed a gryphon to get me out to where they were, at the village of Darkspire on the edge of the Umbral Plain. We then embarked on a four-hour journey to get back to Freeport by horse. I then took them down into the sewers and to the scion under the city, then I explained how the crystals work to her. She’d never used a scion before. “The small blue crystal is the one you need to use here,” I told her. “If you use it, you’ll be teleported to the other scion that’s linked to this one. That one’s in the ruins of the city of Tur, which is at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Are we going to drown?” she asked.

“No, the city is enclosed in an air bubble, so you’ll be able to breathe. When we get there, we’ll go to the scion that leads up to the Citadel, and you’ll use this crystal,” I said, holding up the sunfire star crystal, “it will teleport you to the scion on Citadel.”

“And how do we use it?” Mrijin asked.

“Just touch the crystal to the inside of one of the spires of the scion,” I told him. “The crystal will be consumed and vanish, and you will be teleported. Now, this crystal,” I said, holding up a larger amber crystal, “will teleport an entire group instead of just a single person. But I want each of you to use the single player transport crystal so you get an idea of how it works. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mrima nodded.

“Okay, make sure you’re inside the scion’s spires, then use the crystal. It won’t matter if someone else is also inside, the crystal will only teleport you. When you appear at the other scion, don’t wander around ‘til I get there,” I warned.

“Okay, let’s do this,” Mrima said as I gave each of them a crystal. “Ready, cubs?”

“Ready,” they said in unison.

Mrima stepped up to the spire and touched the crystal to it, and in a flash she was gone. Her cubs did so in rapid succession, then I used Teleport to transport myself. We were then all in the plaza, and all three of them were looking around with stunned expressions. “This is incredible!” Mrijin gasped. “It’s a city under the ocean!”

“I know. I’ll send you guys the video of when the magical dome formed. It was covered in water when I first got here, but I triggered some massive magic item that pushed the water back to make it like this.”

“I want to see that!” Mrima said eagerly.

I let them gawk a few moments more as my mana regenerated, then I took them over to the Citadel scion. We had to use that one because it was the only major scion in the plaza, and you could only reach Citadel from a major scion. I explained how the crystal worked, and as soon as Mrima touched it to the spire, all four of us were on Citadel, three Jagaara looking around in wonder.

We weren’t the only ones there. Several other players were either walking towards the city or coming back to the scion, telling me that the city was seeing traffic. Everyone knew it was unlocked because that booming voice that announced that the seal was broken had been heard by *everyone*, no matter where they were in the Twin Worlds. That was a global event announcing to the whole server that someone had discovered the Citadel’s scion. I rejoined the others and led them towards the city, and I was describing everything they were seeing as we approached. I’d explored most of the city already, so I knew where everything was, what the names of the buildings were that were most prominent in the skyline and explained what this place was about and how it worked. The most important thing I told them was to *never* leave the city or take a foot off the path leading to

the scion, because in this place, even the little baby bunny rabbits were Mack trucks that could one-shot them, *Monty Python* Vorpall Rabbit style. Once we were in the city, I showed them all the important places, like the inn closest to the scion, and then took them on a tour of all the most beautiful places I'd found. The city was truly a marvel, breathtakingly beautiful buildings and picturesque parks and glades, towering statues and thought-provoking abstract sculptures, a place where even the designs in the wrought iron on the balconies was elegant and beautiful.

After the tour, I took them into the alley behind my new house, then took them up the stairs to the door into the apartment. "I don't want to use the front door, people will see me opening it. They'll figure out I own the building," I told them in a quiet voice as I put my hand on the latch of the door and willed it to open. I then led them inside and let them look around, seeing my three-story apartment of huge rooms that were completely empty, until we all ended up on the roof, looking down at the city. The street below was filled mostly with Arkons and a smattering of Agents and Demons, but we saw a few players among them, exploring the city eagerly.

"This is a great view, Xen," Mralla breathed. "You're going to open a shop here?"

"Eventually," I affirmed. "But it'll be a while before I do, since I want the merchant barons to get theirs going first. And I'm too busy to worry much about it right now. I'm going to furnish the apartment and use it as my new base, and I think I'll outfit the workshop so I can work on my tradeskills. Houses are a big deal in the game, cubs. The house can store my items, so I have unlimited item storage. I can still only carry the usual amount of items with me, but I can store the items I don't want to carry around here in the house. I can store my gold here too. And the best part is, nobody can steal any of it," I said with a smile, leaning down on my elbows on the wrought iron rail.

"Can't someone climb up here and enter through the door?" Mralla asked.

I shook my head. "Player owned houses are very different from NPC buildings, Mralla," I answered. "Where I could break into a building owned by an NPC, I can't do that to a building owned by a player. No skill or ability or magic will let anyone get inside unless I invite them, they can't do

any damage to the building whatsoever no matter what they use, and even when they're in here, they can't steal, damage, or destroy anything. They can pick things up, but they can't leave the building with them. If they try, the item will despawn and respawn back where they picked it up. That's why nobody can steal anything I leave in the house. Houses are the safest place to store items and gold, cub, even over the bank. One of the most common tricks a lot of thief archetypes use is to lurk close to the bank entrance and try to pickpocket players who leave the bank, trying to score easy gold from people who just withdrew it from the bank. If I keep my money here, it's completely secure. The only drawback is that I have to come here to get it. I can't just go to the nearest bank."

"That sounds really useful."

"It is. Houses are the one thing most veteran players work very hard to get, cub, either on of their own or as part of a guild," I told her. "That's why you won't see a single serious guild on the server that doesn't have a guild headquarters building. They pool their money and buy a building, then convert it into a headquarters. The ability to store items and gold and have places for guild members to craft items easily makes it absolutely essential for a serious guild."

"Wait, so if you're going to open a shop, how can people get into it?"

"Because I'll convert the shop area downstairs into an official shop," I answered. "That changes the rules a tiny bit. I'll mark out a dedicated shop area, including a door to get in, and the game will allow people to enter the shop and browse so long as the shop is open. They won't be able to leave the shop and enter other parts of the building, either. Even if they get behind the counter, if they try to leave the designated shop area, they're stopped by an invisible barrier that they can't get past no matter what they do. But unlike an NPC's shop, players can't steal anything from a player-run shop. They can look at what I have out on display, they can pick it up and inspect it, but they can't do any damage to it. And if they try to leave with it without paying, the item will just respawn on the shelf."

"Cool," Mrijin said.

A mail falcon landed on the rail beside me, and I pulled the letter from its back pouch and opened it. It read *Xen: I'm done with your bow. Write me*

back so we can meet.

“From Savar?” Mrima asked.

“She finished my bow and wants to meet. Well, she wants to meet you guys, so you wanna have her come here?”

“Sure!” Mrima said brightly. “I’d love to meet her!”

“Okay then, you guys just hang out here for a bit and let me run down the post office. Just mind that if you leave the house, you can’t get back in without me,” I warned.

I left them in the roof garden and ran down to the post office, which was two blocks away, and was also populated by nearly a dozen other players. I wrote Savar a note back: *I’m up on Citadel and boy do I have something to show you, I wrote. How soon can you get to the Sea of Grass scion?*

I only had to wait a minute after posting the letter. Since I was in the post office, her reply popped out of a mail slot and flew right to me. *I’m in Dewdrop, she wrote back. I’ll have to get the crystal to get up there. Sunfire star crystal, right?*

I wrote back: *Right, but we have to go through Freeport to get up here, you can only get up here using a major scion. And I can get to one by going through Freeport.*

She wrote back quickly. *If that’s so, then I can get to a major scion in about two hours. There’s a scion about an hour away that leads to a scion that’s not far from a major scion. So, I’ll meet you on the scion platform on Citadel in about two hours.*

I wrote back to her. *Got it. Two hours at the Citadel platform. My friend from work and her kids are here, so you can meet them.*

She wrote back. *Cool! I’ll be there as soon as I find the consumables merchant here in Dewdrop and run to the scion.*

Two hours later, Savar appeared in the scion, and she rushed right over to us. She actually gave me a hug, surprising me a little bit. “Xen! Good to see you!” she said. “I’m glad you’re already up here, I was going to ask if you wanted to come up and explore!” she added with a laugh.

“I’ve been up here a couple of days,” I replied. “I got up here very fast once it was opened up. Savar, this is Mrija, and her kids Mrodi and Mrala. They’re friends from real life.”

“I’ve heard so much about you, Savar,” Mrima told her with a smile, stepping up and learning from her the Savasa greeting.

“And I’ve heard a lot about you,” she returned with a smile. “I’m not surprised you went Jagaara,” she chuckled.

“Hey, I wanted to find out what it was like to be big for a change,” she grinned.

“It’s definitely way more convenient,” Mrijin laughed. “I can see over the counters here in the game.”

Savar laughed. “I know how that feels. Ever gone to an ogre village? All the chairs are like this,” she said, holding her hand up at her chest. “Now, show me around, Xen. I’m sure you’ve already found everything.”

“Most of it,” I nodded. “But before we leave here, you have to promise me something.”

“What?”

“You’re going to learn something I *do not* want anyone else to know,” I told her, which made Mrima grin. “So promise me here and now that what you’re about to learn, you never discuss with anyone else. Not even your guildies.”

“That’s a promise,” she affirmed.

Mrima and the cubs walked with us for a half hour or so, talking with Savar as I showed her around, then they wisely gave us some space, going to explore on their own and letting me both show her around and talk to her. I took her to all the important places, all the beautiful places, then I took her up the back stairs of my house without explaining where we were going. I opened the door and let her in and closed it behind us. “What is this place, Xen?” she asked.

“It’s my new house,” I told her evenly.

She gasped and whirled around. “You bought a house? How much did it cost? Is this place as expensive as the forums say?”

“Yes, this house cost five million gold, and yes.”

“Five *million*? You had five million gold?”

“Not much more than that, but I did,” I admitted. “I’m probably poorer that you are now.”

She gave me a startled look, then laughed brightly. “I am not surprised!” she said.

“I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to buy a house up here when I had no competition and had time to pick the perfect location, one that would support a shop, when I get around to opening it. Anyway, let me show you around.”

Much like with Mrima, I showed her the house from bottom to top, ending in the garden on the roof. “I think I’m going to install a small fountain here,” I said, motioning to the small stone circle that marked the exact center of the garden. “With some flowers planted around it, make it the centerpiece of the garden. But I’m not sure about those trees. I may take that one out,” I mused, pointing to the larger tree, which looked to be an a, well, *asymmetrical* position near the stairhouse. “Put in a few benches, and this will be a great place to just sit and relax, read a book or something.”

“This place is gigantic,” she said, walking up to me. “You said you were going to open a shop downstairs. When?”

“Not anytime soon. Mri thinks I should do it now, that I could make a killing because nobody knows where anything is yet, but shops are a lot of time and work, and I’m busy with the Grand Crusade right now. Plus, I’d have to man the shop myself, so it would tie me down here. Besides, everyone would know who I am, and I don’t like the idea of that.”

“You’ve never run a shop before, have you?” she asked.

“Nope. I bought my house in Freeport intending to make it into a shop, but I gave up on the idea after a week of not seeing a single customer walk through the door. I realized that it would be pointless, since almost nobody ever goes there.”

“Player-made shops don’t *need* anyone there to mind them, Xen,” she told me. “You set the prices for the merchandise and you put a checkout stand by the door. People can come in, browse, and if they decide to buy,

they pay for the item at the stand and can leave with it. I'm shocked you didn't know that."

"I...I thought you could only do that with rented stalls in marketplaces," I admitted. "All the player run shops I've gone to, someone's always been there."

"Those were craftsmen, weren't they?" she asked.

"Well, yeah."

"That's why. Odds are, they were there working to make things to sell," she told me. "The kind of shop you want to make, where you just sell supplies and commodities, you can set it up to be autonomous."

"Huh," I said, then I laughed. "Then I think I need to take some gold and go on a trip to Freeport and stock up on supplies that people may need here," I said with a growing smile. "I can get really good prices in Freeport, and I can undercut the NPC merchants up here and still turn a profit. I'll make money off volume, which I'll use to buy more stock."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," she smiled.

"If there's anything you want to sell in the shop, bring it up here and I'll list it," I offered.

"You know, I might just do that," she said. "I have a few bows I've made that I could sell, as well as a whole ton of arrows I keep stored at the guild that are just collecting dust. And speaking of bows, I have yours done. That *is* why I'm here," she grinned.

"Then let's go downstairs so I don't show my little secret to the whole world."

She followed me downstairs, and after I changed form, she took the bow out of her item storage. It was *beautiful*. She'd made a truly exquisitely graceful weapon, not exactly a recurve but with a definite arc to its limbs. She'd engraved the bow's limbs and handle with elegant, flowing designs, and I noticed that the falcon head relief near where the arrow was nocked had small rubies for eyes, which glowed with a magical radiance. The bowstring was a reddish black due to the kind of spider silk she used to twine the bowstring, and the bow felt very light in my Djinn hands. She formally traded it to me through the trade window, and I attempted to equip

it. As I expected, I got a window in my field of vision warning me that I had insufficient Bow skill to equip the bow.

“I see we were right about the minimum requirement. How bad?” I asked.

“I was able to get it down to 1,500,” she told me.

“I’m still a ways off from 1,500,” I chuckled.

“Work on it, because this bow is the second best bow I’ve ever made. Only a bow I made for myself is better,” she told me. “It’s exactly what you wanted, Xen. I crafted it so it’s a caster’s weapon, but it does some *serious* damage on its own. And I got lucky and got *three* upgrades during the crafting process,” she said with a bright smile. Upgrades were a random chance that the item a crafter was making would get a bonus to its stats, damage rating, durability, or would gain a proc or a special ability. Those random chances to get really special weapons was what drove many craftsmen to constantly make items, trying for upgrades that drastically increased its value. If she got three upgrades, that meant that the bow was very, very high quality. And if not being made for someone three meters tall, she could have sold it for fifty thousand gold *easy*.

“What did you get?” I asked.

“A fifty-point boost to all of its stats across the board, an additional fifty-point boost to the damage rating, and its special ability is a trigger effect. When you trigger it, it casts Eagle Sight, allowing you to see long distances,” she replied proudly. “So this thing hits *very* hard, Xen. You want to get your bow skill up fast so you can use it.”

“Holy cow, a fifty point across the board upgrade? That’s awesome, Savar!” I said with a smile. “That’s a super-rare upgrade!”

“I know, that’s what makes this bow so brutal,” she said with a beaming smile. “I had to spend a lot more than I expected on the mats, so I only have twelve hundred gold to give back to you.”

“Keep it,” I shrugged.

“I told you, I don’t charge friends,” she said sternly.

“I made you spend 500 gold on a crystal to get up here, so just give me back 700,” I said in a reasonable tone.

“Well...alright.” She offered me 700 gold in a trade window, and I almost reluctantly accepted it.

“I wanted you to have that gold. But at least I can give it to you in installments once the shop’s making money,” I smiled.

“Don’t you dare.”

“How will you know what gold is yours and what’s extra I’m slipping to you?” I asked with a grin.

“I will get you back,” she warned.

I had to laugh. “I look forward to your revenge,” I smiled down at her. “But seriously, *thank you*, Savar. This bow is going to be the perfect centerpiece for the gear I have in mind for my Djinn form. At least when I can finally equip it,” I grinned.

“I know that feeling. The bow I made for myself before I got my Champion’s bow was an absolute *beast*, and I had to raise my bow skill nearly six hundred points to equip it when I made it.”

“Holy—what kind of bow is it?”

“*Five* upgrades,” she said with pride. “It has an across the board stat boost, it has a proc, *and* it has a special ability.”

“Daaamn,” I breathed, which made her laugh and nod.

“I know. I keep it in my inventory, and once in a while I take it out and use it for the nostalgia. I had that bow for a long time, and it made me the top DPS in our guild. I was so proud to make it, I almost feel sad that I don’t use it anymore.” She glanced to the side. “Oh man, I gotta go. I have to meet up with some guildies, we’re going to help one of them with a quest in his part of the Grand Crusade.”

“No problem, Savar. I won’t hold you here. Thank you again for the bow.”

“Any time, Xen. I had fun making it.”

By the time King Gerin sent me a message telling me I could start the next quest in the Grand Crusade, things were very different.

It took five more days for him to get back to me, and in that time, I had gotten a *lot* accomplished. I'd furnished the house using both conjured and bought furniture and decorations, both the shop area and the workshop and the residence upstairs, but I didn't go crazy. I prefer a spartan existence in real life, and I copied that into my in-game residence. I'd put out a couple of rugs, a few chairs, a couch for the parlor, furnished the bedrooms, set up a little reading area on the middle floor that I would eventually turn into a research library, and set up the kitchen area with the utensils I had to buy—they had metal in them—I'd need to practice cooking skill. The centerpiece of my furnishings was the viewing glass I'd bought. It was a player-made item that allowed the real world to intrude into the game, for it was really just a vidlink. It allowed me to connect the viewing glass to the vidlink that ran the game, to send viddy and messages into and out of the game. So, I could be logged in, yet sit on the couch in my parlor and watch a Jaguars game, or vidchat a friend in the real world, who would see my avatar rather than me. And I could use all my vidlink's functions from inside the game.

The workshop was all set up. It was large enough for me to divide into two halves, with one half devoted to blacksmithing and the other devoted to leatherworking and tailoring, which shared some equipment, so they were easy to combine into one shop area. The west half had a forge and anvil, quenching barrels, tables, and racks holding tools I needed for Blacksmithing. The east held the tanning racks, vats, benches, and tools I needed for Leatherworking on one side, and on the other it held the work benches, fitting dummies, pattern holders, bolt racks, and tools I needed for Tailoring.

I also have Enchanting skill, but I intended to make my enchanting workshop upstairs, beside the research library I intended to set up. Lucilia would kill me if I undercut her prices, but to be fair, what I can make with Enchanting are things she wouldn't really bother with. Such *common trinkets* were far below her skill. I just practice Enchanting because I think it's a really cool skill and it's a lot of fun to make stuff, it makes me feel like an alchemist from the medieval myths and legends. And since I can conjure up many of the rare and expensive components, it would be very easy for me to skill up if I got serious about it.

The shop area of the building was now very, very busy. I'd taken Savar's advice and set up the shop downstairs earlier than planned, because I could do it anonymously. I'd rather cheekily named my shop *The Plucky Scrub*, set up the automated shopping system I thought could only be used for rented shopping stalls in marketplaces, and started selling general merchandise and staples to visitors that undercut the NPC merchants that sold the same merchandise. I didn't gouge, I only marked up by about 10% on items that weren't available in the city and made sure to undercut the NPC merchants that sold the same merchandise. People were willing to pay slightly more—and happy to pay slightly less—to get access to things they needed without having to pay 600 gold on the two crystals they'd need to go back to a shop that would sell to them and then return to the city. It was initially stocked with a ton of stuff I bought from Freeport, a lot of my own extra supplies and stored equipment which I'd been meaning to sell but never got around to it, as well as items I felt players would buy that were bought from NPC merchants in the city and listed in my shop to be resold. I sold food, drinks, basic supplies, news sheets (like newspapers, every faction had their own news sheet, but the ones I was selling were for Citadel City), consumables that people may need if they were trying their hand at hunting on Citadel, some high quality enchanting stuff like healing totems, potions, and charms, which I was selling on consignment from Lucilia, some general equipment, some tradeskill materials, some magical trinkets I bought from NPC merchants in the city, and my old supply of single player scion crystals to get back to the Twin Worlds, since I no longer needed them. I completely sold out the shop in three hours the first day it was open, and after a very hefty supply run both around Citadel City and to Freeport—I'd vastly underestimated how much stuff I'd need to keep the shop stocked—I stocked the hell out of it, filling up or loading down every shelf, basket, barrel, box, rack, and crate in the shop. And I had to continue to stock the hell out of it every day, because I was doing *major* business. I'd sold out nearly the entire shop's inventory all three days it had been open.

And my deception worked. I restocked the shop in my Djinn form, and everyone thought that it was being run by an NPC Djinn...but that the shop itself was *owned* by a player. I told everyone that I'd been hired by the shop owner to come to Citadel City and run the shop, and most everyone bought it because they couldn't fathom that it could be any other explanation. After all, I was a *Djinn*, I was clearly an NPC because I had no player icon, and

the shop was owned by a *player*, since it had an automated check-out stand at the door. Only player-owned shops had those. When they asked who the owner was, I told them that *she* ordered me to keep *her* identity a secret, further concealing my identity.

And speaking of “hers,” some of my supplies were arrows, being sold on consignment for Savar. And did she ever have a freakin’ *ton* of arrows stockpiled. She was making a killing selling her arrows in a place where she was the only supplier, and since her arrows were very high quality, players were buying them up since they had easy access to the Citadel.

Most of the goods in the store were bought in Citadel City from NPC merchants or from Freeport and brought up, or were picked up from Lucilia and Savar to sell on consignment (they were both making massive profits, and Lucilia in particular was quite happy with the arrangement), but a few things I was selling was the result of conjuring. I was selling different qualities of food, from lower quality food, standard fare I sold to undercut the inn’s prices on their food for people who didn’t mind eating trail fare. My simple conjured breads, cheeses, and meat were now quite satisfying, bordering on delicious, and the wines, ales, juices, and ciders I was conjuring were very tasty, and all of them were very cheap I was dabbling in higher quality foods now, selling a very few select “gourmet dish” type foods that were “pre-cooked” (meaning it was conjured already cooked) and could be eaten at room temperature, and the most expensive foods were special foods and drinks that had effects like temporarily buffing stats or granting temporary abilities.

I can conjure those, but my skill isn’t high enough to conjure food with really high bonuses. I can conjure items that have magical effects, and food is a permanent object I can conjure.

I wasn’t the only shop on the block now. As I expected, the merchant barons from the other cities had rushed here and bought up all the prime property on the blocks surrounding the main marketplace, and they’d set up their shops and had started the process of moving their goods up here. The merchant cities were going to more or less be abandoned, it was a process that had happened on the other servers when the Citadel was opened. Citadel City was now the new financial hub of the server. They’d used their

millions to buy up all the real estate around the main marketplaces, which fully justified me buying the house when I did.

They weren't the only ones that threw around a lot of money up here. The other main dealers in real estate arrived just after the merchant barons, and those were the biggest guilds on the server. Having their guild headquarters in Citadel City was only logical, and already, four guilds had bought the biggest buildings they could afford to set up their new headquarters. Savar's guild was one of them, taking their guild money and their members' personal fortunes to buy a very nice compound over by the wall, one that cost them *fourteen million gold*, but it was more than large enough to support the guild in all its activities. Even guilds that couldn't afford to buy real estate here were setting up temporary headquarters here by renting or leasing buildings, using their original headquarters to store their supplies and equipment and setting up operations up here that would support their members in their adventures, from crafting areas to access to supplies and equipment they may need.

With the guilds moving here, it christened Citadel City as the official new hub of all player activity on the server.

I hadn't left Citadel City except to go on supply runs to Freeport since unlocking the city, and I spent the five days since Savar gave me my bow more or less on my own. Savar had guild responsibilities, helping her Champion guildmates with their Grand Crusade quests, but she did try to make it up at least once a day to drop off more arrows for me to sell for her and pick up the gold from her sales. Mrima and the cubs couldn't really do all that much up here but hang out with me, so I convinced them to go back to faction territory and have fun. I spent that time constructively, however. I bought a target dummy in Freeport and set it up on the roof, the kind that will allow skillups when you use it, and spent about every moment logged in not taken up with supply runs working on my Bow and Conjuring skills. I conjured every arrow I fired and moved around enough while practicing archery to get flying skillups, and my actions further convinced everyone I was an NPC hired by the shop owner to mind the store and the building, given I was out in plain sight to anyone that was high up enough to see over the rooftop.

The five days up here showed just how unprepared we were for the Citadel on our little server. The monsters just outside the city were absolutely *brutal*, I'd heard from players lamenting to me in Djinn form as I restocked the shop, and nobody had managed to even complete a single quest handed out by the city's NPCs so far. Nobody had even managed to kill a single monster so far. I heard that the Dark Riders formed a raid and tried one of the common monsters near the city, and it wiped the entire raid in a matter of minutes! The monsters here on Citadel were as nasty as I thought they'd be, and entire groups were getting utterly annihilated by lone monsters. Hell, they were getting mauled by *passive animals* the players foolishly attacked for the cooking mats they dropped. Just about everyone had already given up trying the quests, even the top guilds, realizing they didn't have the skills and the gear to do them. But despite people not being able to do the quests or kill anything up here, people continued to come here because of the Nexus Scion. And if they needed something, well, several well stocked player-owned shops, including mine, were very close by. And every day, more and more merchandise was for sale as the merchant barons moved their stuff up here from Alder's Bluff and Serrethar.

It had changed the game world and made it a little smaller. By coming here and then using the Nexus Scion, a player could cut hours, maybe even a couple of days off his travel time to get somewhere else. And while many players just stayed at the scion and went back to the Twin Worlds, some of them came into the city to explore or catch up on the news, and most importantly to me, to pick up those little things they forgot to buy before they headed out, paying my slightly higher prices for the convenience.

What that told me was that my business was going to be brisk until the newness of Citadel faded, as people went back to the Twin Worlds to go into a frenzy of activity to gear up and skill up to take on the quests up here. I'd hit a long dry spell where I'd really only be catering to the top raiding guilds as they struggled to do the quests in the city, which would prepare them for doing the dungeons up here, and then my business would very slowly increase as more and more people managed to get geared up and skilled up enough to quest on Citadel.

But that was probably months down the road. As it stood now, the top raiders on the server—Savar's guild and what was left of the Dragon

Knights—couldn't even complete a single quest, even as a group. They were planning on coming up here and doing it as a raid, which would and wouldn't work. It would work, but it would only give credit to the group in the raid that tagged the boss mob first. So they'd have to do it several times to get everyone through the quest.

There was a reason they were doing it. The quest they found was the start of a four-quest chain, and the final quest rewarded a piece of gear. That gear was better quality than anything they were going to get from any raid on Arca or Netherim. Their plan was to use Citadel to gear up to where they could clear the raids on the Twin Worlds more easily, and then come up here and start working on progression on Citadel.

A raid to complete a "simple" group quest, and there would be three more beyond it. And the fourth quest required them to kill a *boss monster*, which may take 200 players to kill with our current gear and skill levels. Virtually the entire server's upper tier players would have to band together to kill that boss, and only *six people* would get credit for the quest and complete it.

And in a way, the vast majority of the server being locked out of the Citadel by their insufficient skill ratings and gear was a good thing. The Citadel being found and unlocked had all but lit a fire under the asses of many players on the server. The Citadel was no longer this ephemeral concept that they couldn't even go to. It was unlocked, they could walk the streets of Citadel City, they could get quests, they could kill monsters out in the overworld of Citadel for a chance at some awesome loot, and that meant that they now had tons of motivation to gear up and skill up to be able to do the content here. People were hitting the dungeons in huge numbers, raiding guilds were getting new applicants, and almost everywhere on the server, people were more engaged and more focused. People wanted to do more than just walk the streets of Citadel City, unable to take a single step off the paved streets because they'd get obliterated by a baby bunny rabbit. They wanted to see what was beyond the city and gear up to where they could do the content here, to get the uber drops and the skill bonus crystals that drop from monsters here as loot.

Those were the true treasure. They were items that increased a skill by however many points the crystal held, from five all the way up to fifty. I

suspect they were put into the game to help players increase their skills once they started to flatten out. Once a skill got over 1,000, the skillup rate for it plunged through the floor. In addition to that, the amount of XP it cost to increase skills also got higher, and it got worse and worse as it got higher and higher, to where it costs hundreds, even thousands of experience points for a single skill point, and you could go *days* of constantly using a skill without seeing it increase once. So, getting those crystals for free skillups was the most coveted loot that dropped from outdoor content here on Citadel. They *only* dropped here, any monster (but not passive animals) could potentially drop them, and they *were tradeable*. A 5-point skill crystal could go for upwards of 100,000 gold on most servers in the game that had the Citadel unlocked.

Even I was eyeing the wilderness outside Citadel City. If I could get a few of those crystals, I could use XP and crystals to boost my Bow skill the 63 points I needed to be able to equip the bow.

But the vacation was over. I'd been summoned by King Gerin, and I was planning on going out to check a few marketplaces in select neutral cities frequented by many different races to see if I could find some deals to resell in my shop. Since many of the merchant barons were leaving those cities for Citadel City, they were selling off their stocks at bargain prices to avoid having to go through the laborious process of moving those items up to Citadel. That presented an opportunity for me, since I could easily transport items to Citadel City thanks to my Rod of Scion Mastery. I was going to start in Alder's Bluff, then check Serrethar, then work my way through the less popular merchant locales. Alder's Bluff was—or at least had been up to about a week ago—the commercial center of Arca on our server, it was a city almost exactly in the middle of the continent that was run by an NPC race known as the Udir, who were four meter tall giant humanoids who were rather friendly. What made it so popular was that there were six different scions within an hour's journey of the city, including a major scion inside the city itself, making it the most easily accessible neutral city on Arca for most players. Because of that, most players who were major players in the financial aspect of the game were set up in Alder's Bluff. If you needed something rare or expensive, odds were you could find it there.

But not for much longer. Give it about two weeks, and all those items would be in Citadel City.

It was useless to look in Freeport for something like that. The city had so few players in it, and those that were there were newer players who hadn't yet ventured out into neutral territory.

So, with a bit of reluctant remorse, I took human form and emptied my shop stock items into the house's inventory—I'd have to go into the shop to "load" them into the shop's inventory—added my usual supplies into my inventory, and used the most direct and shortest means to get to Freeport. I cast the Teleport spell, and I appeared in the scion under the city of Freeport. I reported to the palace and talked with the king and got my next quest. And it was going to be *messy*. Merria had gotten intelligence that a sea giant raid was planned on the wood elf coastal village of Elarin, and I was being deployed there to protect the village as a favor to the Silver Blade, to curry favor with their leaders and solidify the alliance of the three southern factions.

Seeing the quest made me sigh and feel a little mad and a little sad. It was officially marked as a *raid quest*.

A group quest. I now had a non-solo quest in my quest log. My solo challenge was *technically* now over.

I knew it was going to happen. I knew that the Grand Crusade was eventually going to give me a group quest, or a raid quest, or both. And now it had done so. But I couldn't be too disappointed. I had accomplished so, so much as a solo player. I had raised my average skill rating higher than any other player on the server, making me officially the most well-rounded player on Methrian. I had become a Champion. I had gotten a Legendary Skill, and then an augment to it. I had defeated three other champions in combat, who were all much better geared than I was. I had my Legendary swords, the Soulblades of Shatra Sha, as well as three pieces of Champion's Raiment. I had come a long way, had reached the top echelons of power on my server, and I did it all *by myself*.

And that, I could be proud of.

Why it was marked as a raid quest became very clear when the King started talking again. "This is not just a matter for Freeport, Champion," he

told me. “To convince the Silver Blade of the danger, and of our intend to support them, the champions of all races in both the Golden Lion and the Amber Shire factions are being called to defend Elarin, where the Silver Blade champions will join us. As we speak, the other leaders in our faction are calling their champions to them to assign them this task. If Merria is right, and she is almost always right, you will face a considerable force at Elarin, Champion, so be very careful. Sea giants are powerful creatures, as you well know. And you will be facing *dozens* of them.”

“I will, your Majesty,” I said. “I can get to Elarin in a matter of hours. Should I leave now, or wait?”

“Do as you see fit, Champion,” he replied. “Just *be careful*. Sea giants are dangerous, dangerous adversaries, and I’ve grown quite fond of you over the last few weeks,” he smiled.

I left the palace, a little pensive and a bit crestfallen, as well as a bit worried. If *all* the champions of the three southern factions were going, that meant I’d have to deal with Emelda and that wood elf champion that was in on the plan to rob me of my title. That would put two hostile players in a raid in which I had to participate, and it may make the entire raid fall apart if they refused to work with me. And I had the feeling that this was going to take all of us to do. A lone sea giant was a handful for a group—or me—and if there were like fifty of them, it was going to take a raid party to take them on. But I’d get to meet the other two champions in our faction, as well as the other three champions in the Amber Shire faction. As I recalled, all of them belonged to the guild Savar was in, the one that split off from the Dragon Knights and formed their own guild. They were called Pactum, and between them and the Golden Crusaders, the leftovers of the Dragon Knights that held all the champions that tried to cheese me, they represented 23 of the 40 champions on the server. The rest of the champions on the server except me belonged to just two other guilds, the Black Riders and Seva’s Band. They were the number two and three guilds on the server, with the reformed Pactum holding the number one slot and the Golden Crusaders dropping down to #4, mainly because most players on the server knew that they were the cheesers that tried to steal my title, and because of it, the guild had major problems recruiting new players to make a go of raiding.

Well, this was the beginning of a new phase of the game for me. After over two years, countless adventures, and a lot of cursing, my solo challenge had come to an end. I was going to join my first ever group in the near future, and working with others, we'd protect the wood elf village of Elarin from a sea giant raid.

It was fairly late, so I logged out in my house in Freeport and got a few chores done, but then I was drawn back to the vidlink. I went to the server forums and found myself starting a new thread. *And so my long journey ends* was the title, and I wrote about something I'd kept secret for a long time.

As most of you know, I'm the human champion on Methrian, I wrote. I'm posting this to announce the end of a long journey that most of you didn't know that I was on.

Most everyone knows that I'm a solo player. What most of you didn't know was that this was a conscious choice on my part, part of a challenge I set forth for myself not long after I started the game, which I call the Solo Challenge. The objective of this challenge was to see how far I could go playing this game completely solo, without grouping, without help from other players. I've spent nearly three years in this game working towards that goal, deciding on a set of rules that I had to follow to ensure that I earned everything by myself, grinding my skills, researching the best gear I could get without grouping, testing the limits of my abilities against overworld boss mobs, then against dungeons, always seeing just how much a lone player could accomplish in this game.

I then told the story of Grul the Ravager, the same story I told Mrima, to explain exactly how and why I ended up on this strange path, then got back to the meat of the post.

One of the rules of the solo challenge was that I would never have a group quest in my quest log. Well, today, the next quest in the Grand Crusade was added to my quest log. The quest is a raid quest.

Having a raid quest added to my log today broke the rules of the Solo Challenge, officially ending it.

I'm a little sad that it ends like this, without me seeing just how far I could go, but I knew this was going to happen. I knew that eventually, the

Grand Crusade was going to give me a group quest or a raid quest, but I didn't expect it to happen this soon. I thought I had more time to try a few more boss mobs, try to clear a couple more dungeons, before my journey came to an end. But that's life, I suppose. I decided when I began the Grand Crusade that I would not abandon it to protect my solo challenge, and I will see it through to the end. I'll never get another chance to do something like the Grand Crusade, and I decided that if I had to choose between the Solo Challenge and Grand Crusade, I would complete the Grand Crusade.

But, I'm also happy that I got this far before it ended. My solo challenge brought me to this point, where I represent the human race as its champion on my small, cozy little server, and I had the chance to do something truly amazing. I got to stand at the top of the hill and see the view, if only for a moment, and it was entirely worth it. I got the chance to prove to myself that a solo player could accomplish something that matters in this game, if he was crazy enough to commit to the hardest playstyle in the game and was enough of a masochist to stick with it. I won't lie, friends. Playing solo is incredibly hard, and there were more times than I can count that I almost gave it up out of sheer frustration. When you die to the same overworld boss mob 200 times trying to figure out its abilities so you can kill it, you can start to get just a LITTLE discouraged. That's why this play style requires more than a little masochism and a whole lot of bull-headed stubbornness, to stick with it, to continue to beat your head against that wall knowing that eventually your head is going to bring that wall down. All it's going to cost you is a severe concussion.

And that's just the gameplay. It's a harder thing than you can know to hold to these strict rules and still be a friend to people you meet in the game, people that you sincerely like and feel that you are letting down because you won't group with them, try to keep your distance from them. There are several players on the server that I would love to add to my friend list, but I've always kept my distance because of the temptation that they would represent in bending the rules by which I've played for so long.

The Solo Challenge has come to an end, but in a way, it will live on. It has officially ended because I've violated the rules I set for myself, but I will continue to play in the spirit of those rules, to follow my personal Solo Player's Code of Honor, because I don't feel that I got as far as I could possibly go. I've decided that I'll not allow myself to advance or profit from

any group activity I have to do for the Grand Crusade, which will adhere to the spirit of the Solo Challenge. If I get gear from the raid quest I have to do, I'll never equip it. I'll give the gold reward away, and I'll suicide away the XP I gain so it does not benefit me. I will only complete a group or raid quest that is part of the Grand Crusade, including grouping to help other champions complete their parts of the questline. While this isn't absolutely mandatory, I've decided that this is an acceptable exception to the rules because doing so is a part of the overall Grand Crusade. It advances the entire Crusade to help other champions, thus I have decided it's acceptable to group with them to help them advance their own quests. However, I'll continue to only advance myself through solo activity. I want to see how much further I can go in this playstyle. I feel like there's more road ahead of me before I reach its end.

And when I find my limits, when I know that I can go no further on my own, then I will then allow myself to experience the part of the game most everyone else enjoys. I'll join a guild of good people and I'll group and raid, and finally see what I've been denying to myself. I'm looking forward to it. I've always wanted to see what a raid is like, to feel like I'm part of a team working together towards a grand, challenging goal. But until then, the spirit of the Solo Challenge will live on.

Until then, wish me luck. I think I'm going to need it.

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to explain my actions as I posted the thread, but I...felt like I owed people that had been following my progress in the Grand Crusade an explanation, on top of explaining my very unusual playstyle the way I had to Mrima when we were sitting in that tavern weeks ago. And the first reply to my thread made me feel like I'd done a good thing. It said *that explains SO MUCH! This is Savar, by the way! You scared me half to death, I thought you were quitting the game when I read the title!*

Expect the friend request and group invite to hit your window two seconds after you log on tomorrow!

Savar! Well, maybe now she had a better understanding of why I do the things I do. And the idea of being able to group with her without violating the spirit of the Solo Challenge made me *very* happy.

I read through some other posted comments after eating dinner, and I was surprised at how supportive players were. They had no idea what I was doing, that me playing solo was part of a challenge to myself, and I got quite a bit of encouraging replies. Many said that the Solo Challenge wasn't really over because the Grand Crusade was an extenuating circumstance... which was exactly what Mrima told me. But there were also the trolls, mocking my playstyle, and even a few downright nasty comments that I suspect came from Emelda's guild.

Enough people asked me what the exact rules of the challenge were that I listed them in a follow-up post, and further explained the methodology and techniques I use to pursue the challenge. I explained how the need to constantly search out new boss mobs to find gear upgrades and get as many chances as possible to get Ancient Skills led me to exploration, and stressed the vital importance of building strong rep with as many NPC factions as possible to get access to their quests and getting some unique gear and items from them. I also stressed that being solo meant being a true jack of all trades, because conquering boss mobs solo often required an unorthodox approach, and required the player to be tank, healer, and DPS rolled into one. In addition to that, it required high spellcasting skills for both survivability and utility, because having access to buff spells and other useful magical effects was extremely important when taking on the game solo. And most importantly, I warned that consumables were the key to successful soloing. I revealed that the biggest portion of my success came from Lucilia, that her consumables were often the reason I won fights against boss mobs or completed very difficult quests... I just didn't *name* her. I simply said *having a strong relationship with a highly skilled NPC enchanting merchant or player enchanter and getting access to powerful consumables is the most important thing you can do if you want to kill boss mobs solo, on top of being able to complete some very difficult quests on your own. Be prepared to spend a LOT of gold on consumables. There were times that I spent upwards of ten thousand gold on a single consumable that was the key to beating an especially hard boss or completing a really difficult quest.* I warned them that you had to be good at PvP to make it solo, since a lone player was often seen as a target by other factions. I warned of the importance of tradeskills, since once you got them very high you could craft dungeon and even raid quality gear, and stressed most of all that the solo playstyle at the high end of the game was not anything I'd

recommend to anyone else, because it's the hardest way to play the game... but it was that difficulty that drew me to it in the first place.

If it's not hard, it's not fun.

Tomorrow, when I logged on, things were going to be different. I'd accept Savar's friend request, and I'd be in my first ever group in this game. It was like I was starting a new chapter in a long book, and in a way, I was looking forward to it.

Chapter 6

Savar was a woman of her word, at least within reason.

When I logged in after work the next day, there was no friend request or group invite within two seconds, because I actually have those features set so that only I can initiate them in my player options. That prevents people from spamming me with group invites or friend requests. But what I did get was a page knocking on the door as soon as I logged on, and when I answered it, he handed me over a dozen letters. That was in-game mail. I looked through them, finding that most of them were just random players that read my forum post sending me notes of encouragement in game, but one was from Savar. It said *send me a friend request. Yours is set to invite only. I'll invite you to a group as soon as I accept it. You'll be joining a group of the four champions from my faction, we've grouped up to take on that sea giant raid.*

I didn't hesitate. I brought up the social window from my character menu and sent her a friend request, and it was accepted immediately. That meant that she was online. I changed my settings to allow group requests from friends, and seconds later, I received a group request from Savar.

I did hesitate a second or two before accepting it. But I did.

For the first time in my game life, I was in a group. There were four other members in the party, and their names and stat bars appeared on the upper left side of my field of vision, like a heads-up display, as well as a real-time image of their face. I'd never grouped before, but I'd watched streams of other players to know that group members could talk to each other on a dedicated "channel" that only they could hear, and they could be anywhere in the Twin Worlds and hear their group chat. "Welcome to the world of grouping, Xen," Savar said in human Common, her face on her icon giving me a bright smile. "Since you've never grouped before, it's kinda like talking to someone on your friend list. You've done that before, right?"

I had. I oriented myself to using the group channel and “spoke” my reply, which was actually more like using my jack to communicate with a computer. What I would say would go to the group channel, and my facial expressions on my player icon in their group list would animate. I could control that face, the way Savar had to give me a dazzling smile. That way, I could separate what I said aloud from what I said to my group, and kept people from hearing what the group was saying, which was an important tactical advantage in PvP when groups fought each other. “Yeah, I have an IRL friend on my friend list,” I told her. “I kinda had to, she works in my company. She could punch me if I declined.”

That made all four of them laugh. I’d met the halfling champion, Meldo, but I’d never met the Joradim or the Vissanu champions before. The Joradim’s head was bull-like, like a minotaur or an Ogravian, with reddish brown fur, black eyes, and onyx colored horns that had gold bands on them as decorations. The Vissanu had a snake-like head and face with mottled brown scales, wearing a chain mail cap. The names listed on my group icons were Bullox and Sandscale... Bullox. I wondered if he knew what that meant.

“What languages do you speak?” Savar asked. “We need a common language for everyone to use.”

“I speak all player languages,” I said modestly.

“Alright, we’ll use elvish since we’re going to a wood elf village, then, okay?”

“Works for me,” I said in fluent elvish.

When Bullox talked, I was sure he did, because he spoke in the elvish language with a *British* accent. “Nice to finally meet you, mate,” he told me. “Savar thinks you’re the best thing ever, Emelda hates your guts with a passion that borders on holy, and both of those opinions tell me you’re okay.”

I had to laugh. “Thank you,” I said easily.

“I’ve been keeping tabs on what you’ve done, Xen, and I gotta say, you’ve been impressive,” Sandscale told me. “I wasn’t sure a solo player could handle something like this, but you proved me wrong. You’ve

advanced the Grand Crusade further than any other server on Terra, which means Methrian is in the lead. You're alright."

"Well, I've had plenty of time to work on it," I said modestly.

"But you've *finished* the quests, Xen. As a solo player. That demands respect," he said with a kind look. His snake face made showing emotion kind of hard.

"Well, thanks," I said.

"Okay, guys, we've gotta get together. Who's where, so we can pick the best place?"

"If you don't mind a suggestion, everyone can just come to the Citadel," I said. "There's a scion in the Smoking Mountains, right along the border with the forest, and we can use that to get to Evarin. It'll only take a couple of hours after everyone gets to Citadel."

"How are we going to do that?" Bullox asked.

"I have Teleport, and I can reach any other scion I've used before from the Nexus Scion here on Citadel. I have the Nexus Scion marked, so I can get us all back up here once we're done. I guess you'll be on your own to get back home from here once we're done."

"Holy—you have *Teleport*?" Meldo asked in surprise.

"I've had it a while, I just didn't have the skill to learn it," I laughed. "I finally got the skill up high enough a few days ago. One way being solo is an advantage is I get to keep *all* the loot, Meldo, even stuff I don't need or can't use right away."

"Wow. Never thought of that," he mused. "Is your Scribing skill high enough to scribe the spell onto a tradeable scroll?"

"Not yet, but when it is, yes, you'll get a copy," I promised. "At cost."

He gave me a smile that almost eclipsed the sun.

"I think we can all spring for a crystal to get up there," Bullox said easily. "So let's all meet at the Citadel scion."

It took us about two hours to gather because the others had to make their way to a major scion, time I used to practice my Bow skill in Djinn

form up on my roof garden. When everyone got up here, I met them at the stone dais holding the scion on Citadel. Bullox was nearly as tall as my Djinn form, Sandscale was a little shorter than me, and Meldo came up to my thigh. From their gear, I could tell that Bullox was a heavily armored tank archetype, with his plate mail armor and Champion's weapons being a very large shield strapped to his back and a stout one-handed axe at his belt. Sandscale was also a melee type, wearing chain mail and carrying a scimitar made of obsidian glass from the looks of it and a small buckler shield. Meldo was a caster archetype, which I already knew, who probably knew some healing spells. With Savar to serve as a ranged attacker with her Champion's bow, that gave us a very well-balanced group. "Alright, the closest scion to Evarin I know of and I've been to before is the one in the Smoking Mountains," I said. "Does anyone know of one that's closer?"

"Nope," Bullox said, and the others concurred.

"Then that saves us having to use a scion crystal. If everyone's ready to go, we can get moving," I offered.

I got to *finally* use Teleport with a group, taking us to the scion in the Smoking Mountains, which was in a steep valley between two active volcanoes. There was a lava flow behind the platform holding the scion, but it didn't cover the path leading up to the scion. That path connected to a road that wound through the mountains, connecting the northwest edge of the Luran Forest with the northeast edge of the Kaldion Desert. We started out at a brisk walk, Bullox carrying Meldo on his shoulder so the halfling could keep up. I listened to the others chat, not saying very much myself, feeling them out and getting a handle on this very new thing for me... grouping. They were all guilded, knew each other very well, and were talking about some quest they did to help another of their Champion guildmates last night, before they were summoned back to their home cities to do this quest. I amused myself as we walked by keeping an eye on the surrounding hillsides, the casual alertness I'd come to practice at all times, honed from months, years way out in the hinterlands.

But the conversation came back to me. "If you don't mind, Xen, can I see what your swords look like?" Bullox asked. "They're one of the most unique weapon models I've ever seen."

I drew one of my blades and held it out so they could see it, the blade glowing with that reddish-black nimbus. “They’re called the Soulblades of Shatra Sha,” I told him. “I have not regretted choosing them one bit,” I added with a chuckle.

“Elegant,” Sandscale said with a nod. “Which one-shot effect do they have?”

“Vorpal.”

“Mine does as well,” he nodded, patting the hilt of his scimitar.

“The one on mine is called Dragon’s Bite,” Bullox said. “It can go off when I shield slam something.”

“Ah, so the shield is the primary weapon in your set,” I noted.

He nodded. “I’m a tank, so a shield was the obvious choice. But the axe does have a proc and its own special ability, called Rend Armor, so it’s definitely not an afterthought.”

“Your buckler like that?” I asked Sandscale.

He nodded. “It doesn’t have a proc effect, but it does have a special ability.” He put it on his arm, then blades snapped out from around the edges, surprising me a bit. “It’s very useful.”

“So I see,” I said with an approving nod.

About half an hour later, as we started down a long slope towards the visible Luran Forest between two towering volcanoes, we happened across a group of NPCs. They were firescale sabax, a reptilian NPC race that lived in the mountains. The others formed up and prepared for possible fighting, as did the sabax, but I stepped out from the group and put my arms out. “Don’t raise your weapon to me, Sinvadra,” I called in Sabaxan.

“Xen? Xen, what do you do traveling with these enemies of my people?” he demanded, pointing his spear at the others.

“An alliance of necessity,” I answered him. “I vow that they will cause you no trouble. I will keep them on this path and escort them out of your lands.”

The red-scaled reptilian gave me a look, then lifted his spear and grounded the butt. "I will accept your word, friend," he declared. "Stand down," he said to his troops.

"What brings you this far south, Sinvadra?" I asked as the others returned their weapons to their scabbards.

"Salamanders," he spat. "They've started to come out of the volcanoes on the north side of our territory. The Chief sent us down here to see if they were invading the southern marches as well."

"Salamanders?" I said in surprise. "How many? Scouts, or raiding parties?"

"Many, and mostly scouts. They seem to be studying the mountains, searching for passes and pathways."

That fit what I already knew. I knelt down in front of him and pulled out my scrolltube. "Let me get a map, friend, and you can show me where you've seen them."

"Xen?" Savar called.

"Stay back there and give us a minute," I called in elvish. "They've seen Salamanders scouting the mountains, I want to know where they were." I switched back to Sabaxan. "My companions have had run ins with the Salamanders as well, Sin, that's why we're here," I told him. "Their chiefs sent them here to investigate things, and my chief ordered me to help them. After all, I know these mountains well, and am a friend of the Sabaxi. It would benefit all of us for you to show me where the Salamanders have been spotted."

"Are they about to invade?"

"We believe so," I nodded. "We believe they are in league with a human kingdom from across the sea to invade Arcavia. You should warn Chief Sivansik and get your females and hatchlings to the high passes that the Salamanders can't easily reach."

"I will do so, friend Xen," he said as I pulled out a map and unrolled it. It was of the Smoking Mountains, and it was very accurate. "They've mostly been seen here, along the Firecrag Pass," he said, pointing with a clawed, scaly finger at a long pass on the northern side of the mountains

that ran east to west. “They move in small groups and avoid our warriors, which tells us they are scouts. Normally, Salamanders would attack.”

“A wise assumption,” I agreed. “Any further south than this?”

“Not yet, but they seem to be searching for passes to the south and west from the crag. Since they don’t have legs, they can’t use some of the more common passes that we do.”

“That fits what we’ve learned,” I told him. “We believe the Salamanders are going to split into two forces. One will attack the Luran Forest and the other will cross the Kaldion Desert, while their human allies attack the western side of the Amber Shire’s territory. That will prevent the forest-dwellers from coming to the aid of the Amber Shire, and pincer the Amber Shire forces, attacking them from both sides.”

“I can see the advantage of it,” he nodded in agreement. “So they are searching for the passes that will lead them here and into the desert.”

“We believe so,” I told him. “If your Chief wills it, he can use that information against them. He will know where their scouts are going.”

The sabax gave me a predatory smile. “We can ambush them,” he said.

“The Sabaxi are brave and mighty warriors,” I said with a pleasant smile.

“We will take your words to the Chief, friend Xen,” he said as I rolled up my map, then we stood up. I took his wrist.

“I will conduct these outsiders out of Sabaxi territory and ensure they cause no trouble,” I assured him. “But we may return this way to report back to our chiefs once our mission is complete. If we do, I promise to keep them on the road and away from your villages.”

“I will warn our sentries,” Sinvadra nodded.

I stepped aside, then motioned at the others to do the same. They did so, getting out of the way of the unit of sabaxi, who marched past them and headed up the path, back into the mountains. The others stepped up to me as we watched the sabaxi leave.

“What did they say?” Savar asked.

“The Salamanders are looking for passes to get both down here and into the desert,” I answered. “I told Sinvadra what they were doing, and he’s going to suggest to his leader that their warriors ambush the Salamander scouts to keep them from reporting back. After all, they know where they’re going.”

“That’s clever,” Bullox chuckled.

“I didn’t know that they were a faction you could befriend,” Sandscale said.

“They are, but the way to earn rep with them is fairly well hidden,” I answered. “If you can find the Sabaxan language tutor, you can start the rep quests with them. He gives the first one out.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised. Savar said that you’ve explored the game world more than anyone else on the server,” Meldo chuckled.

“I have tons of friends, Meldo. They’re just all NPCs,” I said mildly.

It took us another hour to reach the wood elf village of Evarin, skirting the edge of the Luran Forest first along the foothills of the Smoking Mountains, then along the edge of the dry grassland that bordered the Kaldion Desert. Evarin was right on the edge of the forest, a fairly large fishing village just inside Silver Blade territory. Each of us had a letter of introduction sent with us by our leaders, and when we reached the village, we presented them to the guards that blocked our entry at an archway that marked the border of every wood elf village or town. “We are ordered to provide you with hospitality,” the guard said in elvish, in a grumbling voice. “But make no trouble in our village, outsiders. The innkeeper has been ordered to provide you with rooms and meals at no cost while you are here. The inn is right there,” he said, turning and pointing to a high-roofed building built against the side of a massive tree.

“Thank you, noble guard,” Savar told him in elvish. “We’re supposed to meet Kade here,” she said as we walked into the village.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“He’s the Ursok champion,” she answered. The Ursok were one of the four races of the Silver Blade, and they were best described as really tall, burly bear-like humanoid creatures, probably inspired by the Haumda from

the Confederation. They were the *big and powerful* race on the Silver Blade faction. The other three races in the faction weren't very big, with the wood elves, an elf-like race a little taller than them called the Spriggen, and an even smaller race called Pixies. But in this game, size wasn't everything. Spriggen were nasty because of their racial abilities, and Pixies were even worse. Spriggen were tricksters who had illusion powers, but were also formidable fighters, representing the "balanced" races in their faction along with the wood elves, and Pixies were the magical powerhouse race in the faction. Like the halflings, the smallest race in their faction held their most powerful magicians.

"In your guild?" I asked, and Savar nodded. "So, what about the champions from the Golden Crusaders? Are they going to work with us, or what?"

"Nope," Meldo replied. "Emelda and Strongbow refused to group with you. That's the wood elf that was in on Emelda's plot," he supplied. "The spriggen and pixie champions are in Seva's Band, so they'll have their own group. The rest of Emelda's guild will be here with her group, and I think several from Seva's Band are going to help their champions, so we'll have three different groups here doing this."

"Any of your guild coming to help?" I asked.

Savar nodded. "Quite a few of them are," she told me. "We had thirty-two people say they'd come help with the quest, and they're on their way now. We should have the largest raid here, so I doubt the others will bother us. We can steamroll them if they try."

"I just hope everyone remembers that the sea giants are the enemies," I grunted.

Kade was indeed in the inn, and he was just as big as Bullox. He had an absolutely gigantic warhammer sitting beside him, his Champion weapon, which looked truly frightening. It was nearly as tall as I was. He wore plate mail armor over his brownish-black fur and was sitting in a chair way too small for him, a tankard of ale in front of him. "Hey guys," he called in elvish, waving. "I see you brought the solo guy."

"The *solo guy* has a name, Kade," Savar corrected primly, switching to elvish. "Kade, this is Xen. Xen, this is Kade," she introduced. Seconds later,

he joined the group, and then the group was incorporated into a raid holding 27 other members. We sat down at his table, and a pretty wood elf barmaid scurried over and took our orders as I listened to what was now raid chat, as people were saying they were on their way to Evarin.

The raid window was different from the group window. It only showed the group leaders of the other four groups in the raid, but I could change that to see the other raid members' status bars. I opted to hide the other group leaders' bars as well; I wasn't a healer, so I didn't need to know about the status of the other members of the raid. The raid had its own comm channel, so I now had normal speech, group chat, and raid chat to manage. When someone spoke in raid chat, an icon of their face with their name under it appeared in the bottom right corner of my field of view, and then that face in the small window spoke. If more than one person was speaking at a time, they lined up along the bottom right of my field of view.

This was getting a touch confusing.

"He's already been helpful, he got us past a Sabaxi war party," Bullox chuckled. "Turns out it's an NPC faction, and he has rep with them."

"Any activity yet?" Savar asked.

"Nothing yet," Kade answered. "I don't think it's going to trigger until enough of us who have the quest are here," he speculated. "So maybe two or three more and we might get some action. Did you see Emelda or Strongbow?"

"Are they here?"

He nodded. "I'd stay from them if I were you," he said, looking at me. "Emelda blames you for the Dragon Knights breaking up, and she'd kill you in real life if she knew your address."

"The takes a game way too seriously type?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," he nodded. "When we finish the quest, I suggest you disappear quick. She'll be gunning for you the instant the quest completes."

"I have a plan for that," Savar said. "Just to warn you, Xen, I may suddenly drop group and attack you."

"Why?"

“Because if you take damage from another Champion, you don’t count as credit towards the mount quest,” she answered. “And if I attack you first, you lose your champion point to *me* if you die. And I’ll just give it back to you by letting you kill me. It robs Emelda of any victory she may get by going after you.”

“That’s pretty damn clever,” I chuckled in admiration. “Alright, I won’t hold it against you if I suddenly get an arrow in my butt.”

“I’ll be gentle,” she winked.

The others laughed. “Savvy’s definitely one of our most clever guildies,” Kade said in appreciation.

“If Emelda does go after me, just let me deal with her. I have a plan,” I said mildly.

“Alright.” Bullox said calmly.

The inn quickly started to fill up with Savar’s guildmates, coming to help us do the quest, and while I was pleasant enough to them as I was introduced, I didn’t feel all that comfortable around them.

I met the other two champions in my faction, though. Both were in Savar’s guild, and they arrived with the guild’s leader. The dwarf champion had embraced the icons of dwarves in lore, wearing plate armor and with his Champion’s weapon being an axe and a shield, and the Jagaara champion wore leather armor and carried a long-bladed spear as his Champion’s weapon. The dwarf champion was named Braggan, and the Jagaara champion was named Hinasa, hinting that the player behind him was Japanese. “So you’re the guy that’s caused so much trouble,” Braggan grinned at me through his bright red beard. “Nice to meet ya, Xen. I’m Braggan.”

“I read your post on the forums,” the Jagaara told me. “I had no idea that you do what you do like that. I thought you just didn’t like to raid. Lots of solo players just don’t like to do group stuff.”

“I’ve never done it before, but I’m not against it. I’m actually curious to see how this goes,” I replied. “But, keep in mind that I’ve never been in a group before. If I run off on my own, it’s because I’m kinda used to doing things my own way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” the guild leader chuckled. He was a Drakkin, wearing a mixture of chain and plate armor and with an iconic Drakkin crossbow slung under one wing. His name was Felik, I remembered seeing it in the raid window when I looked it over. “Just keep an eye on things and listen for my commands, and I think you’ll do just fine. When I speak in raid chat, you’ll know.”

“Alright,” I said, sitting back down beside Savar. The guild leader turned a chair around and joined us, along with Braggan and Hinasa. More players entered, and more, and even more, until the place was almost standing room only. “Those from the other raids?” I asked.

“Some. Some are just people coming to get in on the action,” Felik answered. “Here lately, when word gets out there’s a Grand Crusade quest going on, people come to it to watch or help, to try to get in on it. I can’t blame them, I’m overjoyed that I get to participate in the Grand Crusade by helping our guilded champions,” he said with an honest smile. “I can’t blame other people for wanting to get in on the fun too.”

“So, the giants are going to run into a sizable force, and not just us,” I said, then I chuckled. “Good.”

“They’re gonna help, no doubt,” Felik nodded. “We just gotta hope they don’t get underfoot.”

“I’m sure they’ll be careful. And it’s a good thing so many players want to get in on it. I have the feeling that the Grand Crusade is going to end in a large-scale battle, and we’ll need every player we can get our hands on to fight for our side.”

“We figure the same thing,” Kade nodded in agreement. “That’s why Felik put out a general call to arms of all players on the forums, warning people that we might have one of those huge battles like the orc invasion last year, and people should start preparing for it.”

“That orc battle was so awesome, people almost can’t wait to do another one like that,” Braggan said brightly.

“Were you in that fight, Xen?” Felik asked.

“Yeah, but I was there solo,” I answered. “I did have a lot of fun, though. It was totally epic.”

“Yes it was,” Savar agreed.

“With the Citadel being unlocked, people are gonna show up to this battle much better skilled than the orc invasion,” Meldo chuckled. “Everyone I know is going nuts trying to gear up and grind skills to get to where they can adventure on Citadel. Everyone wants that awesome Citadel gear.”

“There’s some pretty good gear up there for sale with the NPCs, but the merchant barons have already cornered the market on it,” Braggan grunted. “They’re marking it up so high, I don’t think anyone’s gonna buy it. Not when guilds are saving money to buy guild headquarter buildings in the city.”

“Glad we already bought ours,” Kade said with a smile.

Kade was correct, it turned out. We heard the warning horns about two hours later, when the last of the champions who had the quest got to the village, the spriggen and pixie champions. We hurried out to see dozens of giants walking out of the ocean about three hundred meters east of the docks, way too many for me to have been able to finish this by myself. It was indeed going to take a raid to do this but given there were now about 200 players in the village, those giants were about to have a bad day.

“Alright, they’re here! Let’s form up!” Felik called over raid chat. “We have to fight them as far from the coast as we can, or they’ll just retreat into the water and throw boulders at us! Valder, Goil, your groups stay at the docks to protect against them trying to come into the village from the coast. Meldo, take command of the magicians. Bullox, get the tanks formed up, archers form up on Savar. Warriors, on Kade.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what I was supposed to do, so I moved up to where the Ursok was, his massive warhammer in his hands, along with Sandscape and several other raid members carrying melee weapons. Bullox moved in front of us with six equally big players, all equipped with shields, and formed a line. I took out a growth crystal...and was surprised that nobody else was doing the same. Didn’t they know about them?

Wait. They didn’t want to be big, so the casters and archers had an unimpeded line of sight on the giants.

Okay, that was one way they'd do things differently than I would. I'd use the crystal to make myself the same size as the giants so I could fight them more effectively. So, I supposed we were going to just go after their legs and let the magicians and archers hit them.

The other raids and random players formed up around us, and we formed a wall of steel to keep the giants from getting into the village. And the giants wasted no time, they rushed our position as soon as they had enough to do it.

That was *way* too dumb, I realized. Why attack from the coast when they could come right up out of the water into the village?

It was a diversion. Felik told two groups to stay at the docks to watch for any giants coming ashore in the village, and he was right. That was where the main fight was going to be.

"It's a decoy," I said to myself, then repeated it, louder. "They're a decoy. The main force is going to attack the docks!" I turned and rushed away from the line, passing the magicians—Emelda among them, who glared hotly at me as I ran by—heading for the dozen or so players standing at the edge of the docks. I heard the giants engage the line behind me, but my eyes were on the water past the docks of the village. And sure enough, I started to see swells and distortions in the water that had nothing to do with waves.

Lots of distortions. There were twice as many giants coming from the water than there were on land!

I didn't hesitate, and I didn't stop. I ran down the dock and then vaulted off, landing on the surface of the water, drawing my swords as I tried to get into position. When they came up, their heads would be above the water, and I'd have a free shot at them since Feather Light let me walk on water.

I was right on both counts. The lead giant's head came up out of the water as he walked up the slope of the sea floor, and I was almost in perfect position. I ran right by him with a sword out, the point low, and he stiffened and fell forward and back under the water when I slashed my sword right through his left eye and along the side of his head, my blade going through his skull and hitting brain. I diverted to go after another rising giant before the first one went back under, and he shrieked in pain and then fell

backwards into the water when I thrust both swords down into his face and put out both of his eyes. The downward angle of my blow made me miss his brain, but enough of my blades went into his head to just *ruin* his nasal passages, the blades coming through the roof of his mouth and piercing his tongue and upper neck.

“They’re coming in from the water!” I heard someone scream.

Suddenly, I was surrounded by giants, arrows, and spells. The ranged attackers were going after the giants as they tried to reach the shore, and I was the only warrior among them. My footing got treacherous as the giants roiled the water, as they sped up to try to reach the docks before the players could divert forces to intercept them. I had their attention, them swinging at me with clubs, hammers, and axes, because with me on top of the water I could get at their heads and necks. I rolled forward and to the side to avoid a club smashing into the water, trying to crush me, then was up and lunging forward, slashing my sword across his shoulder, missing his neck. The giant staggered back and tripped when an arrow hit him in the face and then exploded—an arrow Ancient Skill, Explosive Shot—and I pivoted and went after a giant that had just been nailed by a fireball, his hair flash-dried and now on fire, and trying to dunk himself to put it out. He saw me coming and took a swing at me even as he ducked down, but I jumped up over his club and activated Sword Blitz, which caused me to charge through the air right at his face. I scored the blitz hit and then two more hits with my basic Sword skill, then went for broke by using Doom Blade. My gamble paid off, because I hit him in the neck, very nearly taking his head off. The blow killed him instantly.

I *love* the vorpal effect on my swords!

The dead giant fell under the water as I turned and charged down a giant that got behind me, who had reached the edge of the dock. He smashed it with his club, shattering it, and continued to bash on it as he advanced up towards the shore. But he didn’t make it, a huge explosion going off in front of him, and he was lifted up out of the water. I had to scramble to the side to keep him from landing on me as he slammed back into the water, sending up a huge wave that knocked me off my feet and caused me to roll across the surface of the water.

“Xen, it’s too dangerous out there!” Felik called over raid chat. “Join the forces at the dock and let them come to you!”

“I’ll be there in a minute, I have a plan to slow them down,” I answered back as I sheathed one blade, pulling a crystal out of my Bag of Carrying, then crushing it in my hand, activating it. I then slammed my dust-covered hand against the surface of the water, and that set off the crystal’s effect. Under my hand, ice quickly formed and then spread out, freezing nearly a meter down and going so fast it froze waves in mid-crash. It swept over the legs and waists of the giants lumbering towards the docks, extending out to its full effect of fifty meters, freezing the closest giants to the shore in place for a critical few seconds that would give the others more time to get ready for them, as well as creating a physical barrier for the giants behind, forcing them to break the ice out of their way or try to climb on top of it.

That crystal was a Lucilia special, and it cost me a thousand gold. But the effect made it worth every gold coin.

“Hit the ice with lightning!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “Use lightning!”

“I’ll hit you!” someone shouted back.

“Don’t worry about me! Hit it!”

One of the mages engaged with the giants did as I asked. A brilliant bolt of lightning raged from a line of robed casters and hit the ice, which conducted through it and electrocuted all the giants trapped within it. My immunity to lightning protected me, arcs of it dancing around my legs as I ran back to the shore and got up onto the dock as more lances of lightning raked over the ice.

I joined other melee types at the dock, and a few moments later, we got to do something. We met the giants as they came ashore, holding the line and keeping them from getting past the ruined dock. We could only really attack their legs and lower bodies, but the archers and mages had clear lines of sight on their heads and chests. I’d never fought with a healer behind me, and it was a bit of a strange feeling having those healing spells wash over me whenever a giant scored a hit on me. I didn’t let it go to my head, continuing to fight with the caution that I usually held, always aware of my situation and the enemy...just now I had other players around me. It was

like the orc invasion again, a pitched battle along the coastline of the village and to the west of it, and I honestly had fun.

It took us nearly half an hour to push the giants back, until the survivors turned and ran into the water, quickly going under, and we watched for nearly five minutes to make sure they didn't come back. But I knew they wouldn't when I saw the quest complete in my field of vision, telling me to report back to King Gerin and inform him of our success.

And with the quest complete, an entirely different danger faced me now...Emelda. But I had a plan for that, and I activated it. I took a small charm out of my Bag of Carrying as I moved carefully among the other players and ensured that I couldn't see Emelda anywhere, and once I was in the perfect place, I wasted no time activating it. The entire world seemed to shimmer and blur, and then everyone around me was like thirty meters tall. The charm shrunk me, shrunk me down to about five centimeters high, so much that I dropped between a gap between two boards along the ruined dock and fell what to me was dozens of meters, landing on the surface of the water.

Shrink charm. 200 gold from Lucilia's shop, and one of the most underestimated consumables in the game as far as usefulness went. I knelt down as a giant wave went under me, lifting me up and making me fall back down to the water's surface. "Guys, where's Emelda?" I asked in group chat.

"Looking for you," Savar said. "She's near the docks. I think she's using Detect Player."

"Damn. I'm leaving the raid guys, I can shake her if I'm not grouped. Just wait for me in the inn, and when Emelda leaves, I'll come out of hiding and teleport you guys back to Citadel so you can head for your cities to turn in your quests."

"Alright," Savar said. "We'll wait for you. Keep an ear out for me in friend chat, Xen."

"Will do," I replied, then I mentally commanded the game to remove me from the group and the raid. The instant I was clear of them, I shifted into Djinn form, going from five centimeters tall to eight centimeters tall—defeating Detect Player—and was immediately swamped by a giant wall of

water when the effect of Feather Light was removed from me. I managed to swim back to the surface and got into the air, then rose up high enough to get above the swells of the waves. I then used an Improved Invisibility spell to further hide myself, and then nestled myself under the dock and moved east, staying out of sight and getting away from where Emelda would be looking for me. Being that tiny meant that I was moving at a walk for a normal person, so it took me a few minutes just to get to the far side of the dock. When I did, when I could get onto land, I rose up between the crack in two boards and rushed as fast as my Djinn flying power could go into the village, to seek out a mouse hole or other exceedingly tiny cubby that no normal sized person could possibly get into. Between Improved Invisibility and the fact that Detect Player wouldn't work on me, I was fairly confident I'd be able to evade Emelda once I was firmly entrenched in a tiny little hidey-hole.

"She's still here, Xen, and she's getting really mad," Savar told me, with a bit of amusement. "She's on a flying disc, looking everywhere. I hope you're out of the village."

"I am," I assured her. I can speak in friend chat in Djinn form, since that has nothing to do with me not being human and she already knows about my Djinn form, so I wasn't worried about her seeing my face over friend chat. "She should have realized that I wasn't going to hang around once the quest was completed."

"I think she was going to head you off before you could get out of the village," she surmised. "Wait, she's going out over the water."

"I've done that before," I said lightly. "It's how I got away from her last time. She knows I have Faerune, and she knows I have something that defeats detection spells like Detect Player."

"Smart," she said approvingly.

I looked back towards the dock, and I could see her. She was up on one of her discs, moving slowly out over the water. I raced—relatively speaking—up the dock and got to the first building at the edge of the docks, a fishmonger's shop. I watched her as she patrolled the water, casting several spells from the look of it—no doubt trying to find me with magic—then she turned and moved back over the land. That incited me into going into the

shop and tucking myself into a mouse hole behind the counter, which got me inside the wall.

I could hear her near scream of frustration from where I was.

She was very persistent. She stayed in the village for half an hour, well after everyone else except for Savar and her group left, and Savar kept me informed on what she was doing. She searched the village building by building, even my own building, but she couldn't find me. she ultimately left the village on her hovering disc, moving in the direction of the scion, no doubt going to see if she could catch up to me since I'd given her the slip.

I scared the hell out of the group when I returned to my normal size in human form by their table, making Bullox nearly spill his ale, then he laughed brightly. "Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Shrink charm. One of the most useful consumables in the game," I said with a smug smile. "And a Non-Detection charm made sure she couldn't find me with magic. When you're only this tall, there are tons of places you can hide where a normal sized person will never find you," I said, holding my thumb and finger a little bit apart. "Anyway, you guys ready to head back to Citadel?"

"Sure am," Meldo chuckled. Savar invited me back into the group, and I accepted as the others stood up.

"Wait, I'll drop group. I can get back to Ursine faster from here. See you guys later, and thanks," he said, then he left the group and stood up, then stepped back away from us.

"Later, Kade. Nice meeting you," I told him, to which he nodded.

One Teleport spell to the Nexus Scion later, we were on the platform outside the city. "Afraid from here, you guys are on your own," I told them regretfully. "This scion can take you to any other scion you've used before. Since there's a good chance you guys use scions I've never used, I can't teleport to them. I can only teleport to scions I've touched."

"No worries, Xen, you saved us a good two hours of travel time getting back to the scion in the Smoking Mountains," Bullox said.

The group broke up, and one by one, the others teleported using the scion, starting on their journeys to get back to their home cities to turn in

the quests. Savar waited until the others left, then she turned and gave me a smile. “Did you enjoy being in a group for the first time?”

“It wasn’t bad at all,” I chuckled. “And the raid was fun. Are they all that exciting?”

“That one was boring compared the raids we do,” she winked. “And I think Felik was pretty impressed by you. If you asked to join the guild, he’d snap you up in a heartbeat.”

“Not anytime soon,” I chuckled. “I’m gonna go with the solo thing for a while longer.”

“I know. But when you’re ready, we’ll be here waiting for you.”

“I appreciate that, Savar,” I told her, bumping the back of my fist against hers. “But for now, I’m glad that you’ll be waiting for me too.”

She gave me an odd, very pleasant look, then she smiled. “Whichever of us gets a quest first, let’s do it together,” she offered.

“That’s a given,” I answered. “I’m not sure what’s next.”

“Most likely you’ll get an active quest while the rest of us get a *hurry up and wait* quest. Since our quest lines are dependent on you doing yours, we often do nothing but sit around waiting for you to advance the main questline.”

“I’ve had to wait myself. I think some quests in my chain don’t come available until all the other champions complete certain steps in theirs. We may all be sitting around waiting for the Netherim champions to do the quests that unlocks the next step in mine.”

“True,” she nodded. “So, if we’re both waiting, how about we work on that Bow skill of yours tomorrow?”

“Don’t you have to help your guild with quests?”

“Nope, all the champions in my guild either just did ours or they have sit and wait quests. That’s why I think you’ll get a quest when you get back to Freeport.”

“Here’s hoping. Though, the idea of just spending a day hanging out with you sounds just as good.”

She gave me a wondrous smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Xen.”

“Good luck,” I said. She stepped into the scion, touched a spire with a crystal, and vanished.

I didn’t think much about it, heading back to Freeport to see if she was right. I reported back to King Gerin, and when he congratulated me on a job well done, my quest completed. I got a large chunk of XP—I took note of how much, I’d have to commit suicide to get rid of it later once I spent the XP I’d already had to get it down to that number—and I found that Savar was both right and wrong. I was given a quest, but it was a ridiculously easy one I could complete by myself in an hour.

King Gerin was sending me out to negotiate with an *NPC faction*. He knew I was in good standing with the Brownrock hakla, a “furry” race of bipedal canines that lived just outside Auger’s Ford, so he was sending me out to see if they’d agree to aid the faction against the Kanlon invasion.

That was damn smart, in my opinion. There were quite a few NPC factions that very well may sign on to repel an invasion, especially if their own lands were directly threatened. The hakla were formidable fighters, and for the last few months, relations between the Golden Lion faction and the hakla had been good.

I knocked that out without telling Savar, who logged off, most likely to eat dinner, and when I got back, I was given another quest, this one way more serious. And this one would give me a reward, my fourth piece of Champion’s Raiment! I was tasked to sail on one of the Kanlon rakers we captured when we raided their island base, and our mission was to find the routes the Kanlon were using to move their ships around the southern edge of the continent. When we found their route, we’d return to Freeport and inform Admiral Rogers so he could send out the fleet to engage them.

This...was a quest that Savar couldn’t help me with. No way would the Freeport Navy allow a Savasa to sail on their ship, even if I vouched for her. Because of that, I convinced the King to let us leave immediately, and an hour later, we were aboard the Kanlon raker, flying Freeport’s colors, and heading out to sea from the harbor.

This would be a relatively easy and boring quest, and I found it odd that it rewarded the next piece of raiment. But I wasn’t complaining that much,

since it meant that I could equip that piece without feeling like I violated my solo challenge. What it did tell me, though, was that this was the last quest in this chain. The end of each chain ended with a loot reward. When I finished this, the next chain in the questline would begin, and I had the suspicion that it might be the final one. Things were coming to a head, and I felt that a battle with the Kanlon, sea giants, Sahaugin, and Salamanders was imminent.

And I thought it was going to be easy.

Six days later, about two hours past midnight game time, our raker limped into port. The top of the mast was gone, several sails were almost in tatters, and the rigging was held together with twine. I was at the helm because the captain of the ship and all the officers were dead, and we only had six sailors left to handle the ship. We'd been found out as we scouted out Kanlon naval routes, and we had a furious battle with two Kanlon ships, a raker and a galleon. We sank both enemy ships, but the cost was over three quarters of our own crew, including Captain Breeg.

That hurt. That hurt a *lot*. What few human players there are all love Captain Breeg, and I was the player that got him killed. And like I said, in this game, when an NPC dies, they are *gone*.

But the quest was complete. And that meant that the fourth chain in the campaign was now done.

We tied up at the harbor with King Gerin and Admiral Rogers standing on the quay waiting for us, despite the late hour, along with the king's honor guard. "Champion, your ship looks a bit worse for wear," he noted dryly.

"It's a miracle we got back at all, your Majesty," I answered as I came down the gangplank, then bowed to him. "We lost Captain Breeg and the entire officer complement, my King."

"Breeg," Rogers sighed. "A terrible loss."

"He saved us all by single-handedly sinking a Kanlon galleon with a powderkeg bomb, Admiral. He died a hero," I said proudly.

"And he will be remembered as such," Rogers declared.

“Did you find the Kanlon’s route?” Gerin asked.

“We did, your Majesty,” I said, holding up a rolled chart, then offering it to Admiral Rogers. “But there’s something strange going on, something I think we need to talk about at length.”

The quest completed, but I ignored it for the moment. I wasn’t about to pick my new piece of gear while talking to the King and Rogers. But the game seemed to be ready for that. “We’ll give you a chance to get cleaned up and collect your breath, Champion. We’ll meet in an hour to discuss our next step.”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

Once I was in my house in Freeport, which I almost never used anymore, I then perused the available pieces of Champion’s Raiment, studying them to decide which was best. I decided on a sleek black leather jerkin that looked quite dashing that had a pretty strong special ability on top of some impressive stats. The ability on the jerkin was Sorcerer’s Bulwark, which gave me a *hefty* bonus to all six schools of magic that had offensive spells (Abjuration, Divination, and Translocation did not), which would reduce magic damage against me by a whopping 15%. For a solo player who often fought boss mobs that had special attacks based on *magic*, that was a much welcome ability.

After picking my new piece and cleaning up, I met the King and Admiral Rogers in his study, then got to the meat of my concerns with the quest. “We found a shipping route the Kanlon are using, Admiral, your Majesty, but they’re not moving troops. We thought that they were moving troops to a staging area on an island, but they’re not. What they’re moving is supplies. We captured a Kanlon raker, and it was loaded to the brim with equipment, equipment that was clearly meant for the Sahaugin and the sea giants,” I explained, then pulled a map out of my scrolltube. I set it on the table in the war room and spread it out. “The route runs here, through the Skipjack Islands, they’re using the islands as an equipment depot. They’re dropping off the supplies on the islands, and the Sahaugin and sea giants are picking them up. But there are no Kanlon soldiers. Captain Breeg suspected that the attack on the Amber Shire wasn’t going to include Kanlon military assets, so he took us to one of the naval bases we found, the one closest to Freeport, and we found that they have a massive number of troops there, as

well as an armada of ships. They're coming, your Majesty, but Captain Breeg didn't think they were going to attack the Amber Shire."

"If they were going to invade the Sea of Grass, they'd have their troops on the Skipjacks," Rogers said, which made me nod immediately. "Breeg was right. If they're staging at Skull Rock, then it's clear that their target is Freeport. The attack on the Amber Shire may be nothing more than an elaborate deception to make us march our troops east and leave Freeport defenseless."

"No, the Sahaugin and sea giants are obviously going to invade the Sea of Grass, and they're going to do it in force. The amount of supplies and equipment the Kanlon are leaving for them in the Skipjacks is far too much just to be a bribe for making a lot of noise. The Kanlon must have agreed to supply them for the invasion to get them on board. Breeg thought that they were going to invade on *three* fronts after seeing Skull Rock, and I think he was right. The Salamanders are going to prevent the Silver Blade and the Covenant from assisting the Amber Shire, and the Sahaugin and sea giants are going to come ashore at the Sea of Grass. Your Majesty, Captain Breeg thought that the Kanlon are going to take advantage of the Sea of Grass invasion to attack Freeport, and I think he was right. If I remember correctly, we were going to devote a large portion of the army to assist the Amber Shire, and that would leave Freeport relatively undefended. I think the Kanlon were going to take advantage of that and sail that invading armada of Kanlon ships right into Freeport Harbor while most of our troops were a hundred leagues from the Golden Lion's borders. If the Kanlon can sack or capture Freeport and capture the Vissanu port of Vistara, they'd have virtual control of the western and southern seas. The Vissanu Navy and Freeport Navy control the seas on this side of the continent. Remove their two major seaports, and you remove them as a threat."

"I think the Champion is right," Rogers said, looking carefully at the map. "It's only about three days' sail from Skull Rock to Freeport with favorable winds, and with half of our navy committed to assisting the Amber Shire, we may not have seen them coming until their masts came over the horizon. They would destroy what ships we have here and capture the city, and it would take a massive military operation to get them out. If the Kanlon want to take over Arcavia, the first step is to remove the two naval powers that can stop them, us and the Vissanu."

“Given who their allies are, I’m not sure they want to conquer Arcavia so much as destroy it,” Gerin said grimly. “They would let the Sahaugin and sea giants raid the coasts and the Salamanders burn the rest of the continent to ash. Perhaps they see Arcavia as a threat to their future plans, or perhaps they simply can’t stand another human civilization having control of the seas, but I don’t think they’re here to capture as much as destroy. But either way, it’s clear that we need more information. I need to confer with Merria and my advisors, my friends. We need to find out exactly what the Kanlon are trying to do before I make a decision on how to respond. Admiral, alert our forces and assemble the war council. Champion, I need you to be ready at a moment’s notice to be deployed for a mission,” he told me. “Merria might need someone with your skills to gather the information we need. She often tells me that you’re the best spy she’s ever had in her employ, and that you are very much in the wrong line of work,” he said with a slight smile.

“Even if I am a good spy, your Majesty, I far prefer simply being an explorer,” I told him honestly. “I’ll be doing some work outside the city, but I’ll be half an hour from Freeport at all times, just in case. Contact me using the communication crystal, and I can be here in thirty minutes.”

“That’s more than acceptable. Thank you, Champion.”

I got a new quest, a *hurry up and wait* quest, and I was alright with it. It would give me some time to work on my Bow skill and my new Djinn skills...and it would give me a chance to get to know Savar better.

It was almost scary how quickly I’d come to like her.

But I had other work to do, too. After six days, my shop had to be completely sold out by now. However, it would have to wait until tomorrow. It was late both in the game and in real life, I was tired, and there wasn’t much I could do with all the shops in Freeport closed. So I went back home to Citadel, didn’t even bother to check the shop when I came in and instead went straight upstairs, and then logged out for the night.

The next afternoon after I got home from work, I went to work...just the work I enjoy. First, I checked the store, and I was right. It wasn’t just empty, it was stripped completely bare. Absolutely every item I had for sale was sold, and after separating out Savar and Lucilia’s gold, I dropped the

profits off at the bank in Citadel City. I returned to Freeport and bought a staggering amount of stuff from the markets there, then dropped off Lucilia's gold and got more stuff from her to sell in my shop. After finishing the shopping, I then returned to Citadel. I got into the apartment, shifted to Djinn form, then went down to the shop, entering through the workshop. It was just past sunset in the game, and my shop was open...but empty. Both empty of customers and empty of wares.

My shop never closes, that's why I use Djinn form to restock it.

It took me the better part of an hour to restock the shop and conjure the food stocks I sold. I couldn't go out to restock on what I bought from Citadel City because it was night and all the NPC shops were closed, so I went up to the roof and worked on my Bow and Conjuring skills. I basically just dicked around until sunrise, and when the NPC shops started to open, I shifted back to human form and headed out. I made the rounds of the usual merchants, buying the goods I resold in my shop, but I also visited several new merchants. After hearing about the gear that was sold in the city, I'd researched the Citadel City NPCs on the resource sites to find the ones that sold that, to check out the prices on the gear that was supposedly just as good as the gear dropping in the raids that the top guilds on the server were doing. That kind of gear, raiders called *catch-up gear*, gear that was just good enough to give a player the ability to function in a raid, though their performance would be sub-par if they didn't have the skills to back up that gear.

In that respect, this game was very different from most any other MMO. Just having uber gear wasn't enough, you had to have invested the time and effort to raise your skills, because gear just augments the base skills of the player. That was how a player like me, a solo player, could compete with the ubergeared raiders on my server. My skills are *significantly* higher than theirs thanks to Lone Wolf, and when combined with the gear I do have, it puts us on an even keel.

The equipment I was looking for wasn't super-uber, it wasn't catch-up gear to allow players to jump directly into the lowest tier raid on Citadel. It was gear designed to allow new players to start raiding at about the Endless Caverns raid, which was five steps below the lowest tier Citadel raid... which ironically enough was where the top guild on the server was

currently at. The gear was understandably *dreadfully* expensive. The gear averaged around 80,000 gold per piece, and since it took eight pieces to fully equip a player, that was 640,000 gold to buy a full set of catch-up gear. That was nothing to sneeze at. So, on Methrian, this was gear that would allow the top guilds to quickly gear an applicant and get them right into the Endless Caverns, but on most other servers, this gear was basically worthless to the top guilds. In addition to being ridiculously expensive, the merchant only kept one of each piece of each type he made, chain mail and plate mail, and when I asked how quickly he could make new ones, he said he could make one a day. It was all sold out right now, bought by the merchant barons, so he'd only have one piece made by tomorrow. So, it would take him twelve days to replace the items, one for each gear slot for both chain mail and plate mail (only tailors sold cloaks, so he had no cloaks).

It was the same at the other merchants that sold that gear, the leatherworker and tailor. They had sold out of the tradeable gear in stock, bought up by the merchant barons, but they could only make one piece of gear a day.

Needless to say, after spending so much on my house up here, I could no longer afford stuff like that. But I wanted to get a look at it anyway, mainly as an option to gear up my Djinn form.

That was the armor. I went to a few more merchants who sold *weapons*, and I found that they were way, *way* more expensive than the gear...and they too were sold out. The cheapest weapon I saw on the resource site, a dagger, was 120,000 gold. The two-handed sword I looked up was listed at a jaw-dropping 270,000 gold.

Wow. Talk about inflation once you get to the endgame, that was just nuts.

So, to gear up my Djinn form with gear that would put it equal with the top raiders on the server, it would cost me nearly 700,000 gold. And if I wanted a weapon to go with it not my bow, it would cost me well over another 100,000. But the trick was, I'd have to buy it before the merchant barons, who often hired players and NPCs to go buy things for them. So I'd have to all but sit in the shop and wait for the NPC to make the next piece he was going to sell and buy it before anyone else had the chance.

That was why I was going to make that gear myself, it would be much less of a headache. Not to mention cheaper.

I returned home, switched back to Djinn form, and then entered the shop to stock it with the supplies I bought in Citadel City. There were several players in there, and to my surprise, so was Kade and Bullox. They didn't know who I was as I came in through the workshop area, and Bullox stepped up to me as I opened the counter and floated through. "Is this everything?" he asked immediately.

"Nay, good sir," I replied. "I have only just retrieved the last of the wares and will be putting it out for display."

"Why was the shop empty for days?"

"I honestly know not, good sir. My benefactor hadn't come back to the shop for several days. I haven't even seen her, she must have come and gone in the night, dropping off new items for me to put out for sale."

They watched as I set out everything, but they must not have seen what they were looking for. They left the shop without buying anything.

When I was done, I went into the workshop, changed form, and sat down at my tailoring bench and started working on a list of materials I'd need to make the gear for my Djinn form. I was still going to set it up as a mage archetype, so I needed the mats that would cause the gear to have high stats in intelligence, willpower, and bonus mana. The Intelligence stat would increase the damage my spells did. The Willpower stat decreased my chance that a spell would be disrupted or misfire if I took damage while casting, which was a very important stat to have. A misfired spell could hurt me, or my party members. Bonus mana was just that, it increased the mana pool so you could cast more spells before running out.

However, intelligence and willpower also awarded extra mana, so those would also increase my mana pool.

To make my spells do respectable damage, I needed to raise my spellcasting skills to a minimum of 1,200 in the six schools that had offensive spells—Evocation, Invocation, Transmutation, Conjunction, Illusion, and Necromancy—and my Djinn form just may be a viable alternative when I needed to switch to a focused spellcaster. I already had Evocation and Invocation well over that (Invocation was the school that

held most healing spells, but Invocation also had quite a few attack spells so healers had the ability to deal damage when they didn't need to heal), and I had Transmutation at 1,223 because I cause Create Shelter and several other Transmutation spells so much, but I didn't have Conjunction, Necromancy, or Illusion anywhere near there.

The six schools of offensive magic were very wide-ranging. Evocation was the magic most commonly thought of as offensive, fireballs, lightning bolts, and so on. If it brought magical energy into the world and then harnessed it, it was Evocation. Invocation was *holy magic*. It was similar to Evocation, but the difference is, that magic was invoked from a Power, beseeching the Power to manifest the effect. Most healing magic was Invocation, but there were quite a few combat spells that also used Invocation. Transmutation was changing something into something else, and it was the most versatile of the six offensive schools because it had tons of defensive and utility spells as well. A spell that changed water into acid or raised a row of stone spikes out of the ground was Transmutation. Conjunction was the creation of solid objects out of magical energy, and it was nearly as versatile as Transmutation. It also had a lot of combat spells associated with it. If a spell summoned pure energy to attack enemies, it was Evocation, but if it summoned solid objects to attack enemies, it was Conjunction. Necromancy was dark magic, and it dealt with the negative energy of death, draining life, weakening life, and so forth. The school also dealt in a lesser way with the effects of negative energy, disease and debilitation, and some spells in Necromancy redirected that energy into an effect beneficial to the caster in some way. The life drain proc from my swords was Necromancy, draining the life energy of my victim and using that energy to heal my wounds. Necromancy had some exceptionally powerful spells, and in my opinion, at the highest levels, it was the most fearsome of all the offensive magical schools.

Illusion was a bit of a strange case, but it was classified as an offensive school because illusion spells had the potential to do real damage when the caster had exceptionally high skill. Illusion spells as a rule weren't patently dangerous, but the effects they could create could be downright *lethal* if the caster was clever about it. Using an illusion to hide a pit of spikes was the perfect example of that. The illusion spell did no damage itself, but it tricked victims into taking damage from another source. But, at very high

skill levels, illusions could manifest into the real world—so to speak, since this was a game—and do real damage. Oddly enough, the most powerful spell in the entire game, Alter Reality, was an *illusion* spell. Alter Reality had the ability to change something about reality and shape it to the caster's wishes, and since it was limited only by the caster's imagination, it was potentially the most powerful spell in the game.

Needless to say, Alter Reality was also the *rarest* spell in the game. To my knowledge, nobody on Methrian has the spell.

There were four other schools of magic, Abjuration, Divination, Charm, and Translocation, but none of them had offensive spells. Abjuration was related to Invocation and Evocation in that it summoned magical energy, but that energy was directed to *defend*, not *attack*. All buffs were Abjuration, including buffs to offensive stats, and there were a large number of defensive spells that fell under Abjuration. Abjuration is my second highest spellcasting skill, because I use it the most to give myself buffs and set up defensive protections. Divination was using magic to gain knowledge beyond the normal senses. It could affect the senses and could even predict the future in a limited degree. All scrying spells, detection spells, sense-enhancing spells, and augury spells were Divination. Charm was the school that dealt with spells that only affected the mind, and it was very versatile. The most famous spell of the school was the similarly named Charm spell, but it encompassed any spell that had an effect on a target's mind and no real effect on the "real" world. Fear spells, sleep spells, suggestion spells, those were all Charm magic, and in a few ways it overlapped with Illusion magic because Charm spells could make someone see something that wasn't there. The difference was, Illusion spells created an effect that wasn't just in the victim's mind, where Charm magic did. Translocation was self-explanatory, it was the magic of motion and travel, moving an object or the player from one place to another. Translocation dealt with both players and objects, with spells that summoned objects to the caster and others that banished objects from the caster's presence. Reclaim Arrows was a perfect example of that. It was an Ancient skill, but it was a *magical* skill that used Translocation, it just didn't raise Translocation when it was used, it raised the skill rating of the skill itself. If the spell simply summoned arrows that previously didn't exist out of thin air, it would be Conjunction. Since it

specifically summoned the player's own arrows and put them in a specific place, it was Translocation.

Just as I was about to go up to the roof and get in more bow practice, I saw Savar log on. She barely waited thirty seconds before calling out to me over friend chat. "I see you're in Citadel City. Finish your quest?"

"This morning," I replied. "We got the ship back to port...barely." I'd been keeping Savar up to date on my progress on the quest, so she knew all about us nearly getting sunk. "I think it sank at the dock."

She chuckled. "Well, you finished. Get a new quest?"

"Nope. I think I have to wait until another champion finishes his quest before I get the next one."

"Well, it's not me. I'm waiting too," she replied.

"So, since we're both not busy, you can put yourself in a position where you're in the shop in about an hour," I told her. "We'll go find something to do."

"I need to come get my gold from you anyway and drop off the last of your arrows, and drop off some more arrows to sell," she mused. "Oh, I have a couple of bows I want to put out, too."

"I have room," I assured her.

"Then I'll be up in about an hour."

I went back to human form and went back out to peruse some of the shops in the city I hadn't visited very much to look for new merchandise, and found a few little trinkets little more than toys that I thought players might want to buy. Savar was there when I got back and entered the shop in Djinn form, hurrying up to me as I came in through the workshop.

"Good morning, Avrazzi," she called...she'd *named* me? She spoke fluent Djinni, which I didn't know she spoke.

"Welcome back to the Plucky Scrub, Mistress Savar," I told her in fluent Djinni, playing the game. "Excuse me, I have some work to do before we can chat."

The players in the shop drifted in my direction as I went to the nearest open shelf and set out the trinkets I'd found, rings and earrings and such from a jeweler that had a variety of cosmetic effects. They were meant to be toys, things you used for fun that had no real gameplay value, but things like that were wildly popular in this game. We do play it to have fun, after all, and toys could be very fun. When I was done with that, I stocked more conjured goods on the shelves dedicated to food. After stocking the shop, I went upstairs, and she was at the back door before I even got to it. She came in and looked around the empty room as I closed the door. "You know, you should set up this floor as an apartment for *you*," she told me, still speaking Djinni. "You don't really use this floor, and it would look right if you were living here."

"That's not a bad idea," I told her, looking down at her. "But Djinn don't really use furniture. Djinn houses are usually just filled with tables, shelves, and decorations, and they sleep on piles of cushions piled on the floor. It's the only time they're not hovering in the air," I noted.

"Then it'll be easy for you to do," she said lightly. "Lemme get the stuff." Seconds later four large barrels appeared on the floor in front of her, the arrows she wanted to sell, an even larger barrel holding the arrows she made for my Djinn bow appeared with them, and then three bows appeared on top of them. One of them looked fairly fancy, and the other two looked to be lesser quality.

"Cleaning out the inventory?" I asked lightly.

"More or less. After buying that new guild HQ, all of us are hurting for gold, so I'm selling about everything I can. Two of the bows I've had at the guild forever, but I made the nice one yesterday. I was working on fletching," she smiled.

"Any skillups?"

"One, so it wasn't a waste," she replied. She offered the items to me in a trade window, and I put her cut of the gold in the window. "Wow, nice," she said as we completed the trade.

"You had a lot of arrows for sale, and they sold out," I told her, putting the arrows and bows in the house's item storage, which made them vanish. "Lemme go down and put them out, be right back."

Savar was on the middle floor of the apartment when I came back, surveying one of the empty rooms with her hand under her muzzle, clearly in thought. “What are you going to do with this floor?” she asked

“I was thinking of using it for magical skills,” I answered. “I have Research skill, but it’s fairly low. It’s expensive to rent space in a magical library. I could set up this floor as a library and work on Research. I was going to also put in an Enchanter’s workshop in here to go with it. I’m sure tons of people would love to buy Teleport,” I said lightly.

“Bow skill first, then you can play,” she said imperiously, which made me chuckle.

“The library and lab would take up nearly the entire floor, you know how big they are. And why not, this is effectively just wasted space. The only rooms I use are on the top floor and the second floor. And in a way, it would be like a buffer between the two different *me*’s. Both of me can use magic, so since it’s the one thing we have in common, it’ll be the transition between the Djinn apartment on the second floor and the human apartment on the top floor.”

“Sounds like a plan. So, that target dummy still up in the garden?”

“Of course it is,” I smiled.

We spent the rest of the day working our skills together, me practicing Bow skill and Savar practicing her new Legendary skill, constantly buffing herself and trying to land her Slow Time ability on the target dummy. We talked as we practiced, about both game stuff and real life, working on my Bow, Conjuring, and Reclaim Arrow skills in tandem. I again almost marveled at how *comfortable* I felt with Savar, willing to talk about things outside of the game, willing to show her some of my secrets, like my Djinn form. I learned more about her, that her parents and her younger brother had moved back to the Federation after the evacuation ended and her older sister was in the House of Karinne and lived on Karis, but she couldn’t really tell her family all that much about what she did. Her sister was in Karinne’s military, so she did super top-secret stuff. Her family was quite proud of her despite her secrecy, because she was a ship captain in the Karinne Navy. I didn’t have much to give back in that regard, since I’m an

only child and my parents both died before I turned 20, so I've been more or less alone in the world for quite a while.

Her full life of family and friends made me feel...*awkward*. I'm very different from her, I'm an introvert with only one real friend, no family, and more than a few physical and psychological scars from the subjugation. But she seemed to like me despite that.

Not only was my time with her fun, it was productive. The skillups I gained from our session put me just 33 points away from being able to equip the bow she made for me.

After we were done practicing, I offered to make her dinner in-game to get some use out of the cooking equipment I bought to put in the kitchen. That only lasted like five seconds. She kicked me out and took over when she found out what my cooking skill was, making me stand and watch as she prepared ingredients. "I'm *Shio*, you silly boy," she told me lightly as I protested. "Food is a core part of our entire society. If I didn't work to have the highest cooking skill I could in this game, I'd be a terrible *Shio*."

"So how high is it?"

"I just broke two thousand last month."

I gawked. "Holy—two *thousand*?" I gasped. "I've never heard of *anyone* with a cooking skill that high!"

"Well, now you have," she said lightly, giving me a fanged smile. "I'm not a very good cook in real life, so I compensate for my shortcomings in the game," she winked. "The good part about cooking in the game is it barely takes any time. So go set the table," she ordered.

"Yes ma'am," I chuckled.

In a word, her cooking was *amazing*. I was almost stunned into speechlessness with the first bite, I hadn't anything that tasted that good in *years*, in either the game or real life. I told her as much, which made her almost modestly shy in accepting my praise. It also said a whole lot about just how incredibly detailed the *simsense* was in this game, that it could so effectively put such incredibly complex and subtle taste into the food.

We started to talk again, and Savar asked me about the fight against the sea giants, how I was both so nearly reckless and how I was able to kill

more sea giants than anyone else in the raid. I then told her something I hadn't told anyone else. "Well, to be honest," I hedged, then I spilled the beans. "My sword skill is really high. And since I got my Champion weapons, my DPS went up. Way up."

"How high?"

"I'm almost at three thousand. Well, I'm actually at 2,992. I'll break three thousand probably sometime late this week or early next week. Where it stands now, I get one or two skillups per gaming session on the average, if I do a lot of fighting."

She nearly dropped her fork, giving me a shocked look. "I've never heard of any skill being that high! My Bow skill is only just a bit over twenty-five hundred, and I've been playing as an archer since the first day! How in Sebaro's crystal did you get it that high?"

"Just by playing the game," I shrugged. "I don't think you understand just how overpowered Lone Wolf is. It cranks up my chance to get a skillup to the point where even where my sword skill is now, my chance to get a skillup never drops much below one quarter of one percent. And since I dual wield, that is a *ton* of opportunities for the skill to increase."

"Holy...no wonder you took out Sebirk. The Drakkin champion. You may not be raid geared, but if your sword skill is that high...wow. You must do nearly as much damage as he did."

"Not quite. I remember that fight. He was just as much DPS as me, but his defensive skills weren't as high as mine. That, and I dual wield, so I do more base damage than a player who only uses one weapon. I also have several defensive Ancient Skills that would usually go to tank type players in a raid. One of the real advantages my playstyle gives me is that I have the defensive skills of a tank on top of the offensive skills of a dedicated DPS player. Players like him aren't used to being the one the monsters attack directly. All he ever gets hit by are the monster's area of effect attacks, where I'm used to being the target of every single attack. I'll bet that his Magic Resistance is much higher than his Defense, since most boss monsters have magic-based area of effect attacks. When it comes to fights like that, against raiders, my skills make up for my lack of gear and put us more or less on even ground."

“And now that you’re getting Champion’s Raiment...” she breathed, then she laughed. “You may be the most powerful player on the entire server,” she smiled at me.

“I wouldn’t go *that* far, but let’s say that right now, no other player would probably attack me if they knew what my skill average and damage rating modifiers are,” I said modestly. “Since I PvP so much, I’m used to fighting other players.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “You don’t know what it’s like as a solo player out in neutral territory. Groups see us as irresistible targets,” I told her. “I’m more or less used to being constantly attacked by other players, often when they go after me so they can try to kill the boss monster I’m fighting. Then there are the ones that just want to kill you for your gold, or even just to grief you so you lose your XP before you can get back to a safe zone to spend it. That’s one of the things that drove me to exploration. If I’m so far out that no other players have even been there, then I can adventure in peace and quiet. In a game like this and with a playstyle like mine, you eventually get to the point where you consider *every* other player as an enemy.”

“Huh. You’re right that I don’t really know. I’ve been in a guild for almost as long as I’ve played the game. I’ve never really played solo that much.”

“And the one thing you’re overlooking is that I’ll probably *never* upgrade from the gear I have now, where you guys will,” I told her. “I don’t think I’ll ever find better than what I’ve been getting. Well, I may upgrade to another piece of Champion’s Raiment if I get it, but once this is over, once I go back to playing solo...I’ll never find a piece of gear better than what I have now. In a few months, as you guys start adventuring on and in the Citadel, you’ll outgear me more and more. And there will be a tipping point where your gear quality increases faster than I skill up, and you’ll pull away from me. I’m just in a sweet spot here, where for a brief window of time, I have a leg up on everyone else. But it won’t last very long,” I predicted. “Once you guys are doing the first raids here on Citadel, you’ll be so far above me that I won’t stand a chance if I come against you in PvP. The armor rating on all that gear will be so high that not even my high skills will give me a chance to beat you. So I’ll enjoy my moment in the sun, and

when it's over, I'll go back to playing so far away from everyone else that we'll never cross paths," I told her with a rueful chuckle. "Where I'll be *safe*."

"Maybe. But when that does happen, then you'll know you can't go any further as a solo player, and you can join my guild and raid with us," she said with an eager smile. "We'd love to have you. You have no idea how impressed everyone was seeing you fight. You may have high skills, Xen, but you're *smart*. Those consumables you had with you, it showed that you carefully planned for that fight, and it was a *good* plan. You said on your forum post that consumables were the key playing high-end solo, and you proved that they have their place in *raids* too. My guild master wants to know where got those from. He's never seen anything like them before."

"I have a long relationship with an enchanter NPC merchant," I answered. "Her skill is so high, she can make custom consumables. I explain to her what I need, and usually, she can make a consumable that can do it. The only catch is, they usually cost a *lot* of gold for her to produce."

"Wow. Where is she?"

"She's in Freeport, and before you send one of your Golden Lion guildies there, I can't tell you who she is or where she is," I said reluctantly. "That's part of the deal when it comes to being her customer. *She* picks her customers. She doesn't sell to just anyone, even if they know where her shop is. She has to *like* you to sell to you. If someone knows who she is, he can probably shop from her. If he doesn't...well, I don't want her to fire me as a customer, or even worse, move her shop and I can't find it again, so I'm not saying anything. If she suddenly had a ton of people beating down her door, she'd move her shop somewhere else and wouldn't tell anyone. And if she knew it was because I told someone about her, she'd be furious with me."

She gave me a long look, then nodded. If she had any experience with this game's NPCs, she knows that some NPCs did indeed behave like that. The AI in many NPCs in this game was just as complex as a living person, with defined personalities, quirks, and idiosyncrasies. There were more crotchety, highly selective NPC merchants in this game than just Lucilia. "Sounds like she's part of the city's underworld."

“In a way, she is,” I chuckled. “In reality, she’s just one of those NPCs that’s very hard to get to trust you, enough for them to sell things to you, even if you have rep with her faction. She has her chosen clientele, and we buy enough from her that she’s content with her income. Believe me, I had to *work* to get into her good graces. But, if you just want the name of a high-level enchanter, I know several just as good as she is. Most of them are in neutral territory and require rep with their faction to shop from them. I’ll make you a list of them and their factions, and you can find out if anyone in your guild has standing with them. Any one of them can make the consumables that I get from Freeport.”

“That’ll work,” she said with a nod.

After dinner, we did something I never thought I’d do with a girl...we sat on the couch and watched sports on the vidy. Savar was a super-hardcore shiziki fan, and her team in the Federation Shiziki League was playing. So, she convinced me to tune in my viewing glass to the Federation’s sports channel, and we sat on the couch and watched the game. Shiziki is a ball sport sorta related to baseball and cricket, but with very different rules. The playing field was a triangle, kinda like baseball, and there were *three* batting stations, called posts. The objective of shiziki for the offense was to get a player at all three positions, and any batter past that who managed to get “on base” scored a point. A player got “on base” by touching both of the other posts on the field and then getting back to his home post before the defense could touch the ball to all three posts. If he managed it, the next batter would bat at a different post, and the pitcher and the entire defense had to rotate to that post.

The clever part about shiziki was that there were no foul balls. Since a third of the playing field was behind the batter, the batter could try to hit the ball to the sides, or even behind the post, which required the defense to cover the entire playing field. But, while there was no foul territory, there was also no home run. The borders of the field had glass walls more than high enough to bounce a ball back onto the playing field, and if a ball did go over the wall, it was considered out of play and the batter was automatically “out.” So shiziki players didn’t try to just murder the ball and send it as far as possible. They were complete hitters, their job was to find the weakness in the defense and hit the ball to that location. A few pro

shiziki players had made it to the MLB, and they were *dangerous* at the plate.

Another way it was different from baseball was that the entire team batted in every inning, which they called a *rotation*, and each player batted once and once only per rotation. The objective was to score as many points as possible during their team's batting rotation. A team would bat their thirteen players, score as many points as they could (up to ten), and then would go on defense and the other batted. There were ten rotations in the game, but at the last rotation, whoever was behind at the start of the rotation got to bat last, to ensure that both teams got to bat for all ten rotations. The last rotation was also different from all other others in that the team batting last *could* bat more than once through their roster, but *only* if they were down by more than ten points when they came up to bat. It was called the "last chance rule," giving a team that had been dunked on during the game and was down by more than ten points a theoretical chance to win the game. But that chance was *theoretical*. First, the team had to score a perfect rotation during their batting phase, scoring all ten available points (which was very hard to do). After the team batted through its rotation, it then went into sudden death overtime. The team could continue to score points, but only so long as they scored at every batting attempt. If they failed to score during the at bat, then the game was over. Needless to say, it was a very rare occurrence when a shiziki team managed to win in the last rotation using that rule.

Did Savar ever get into it. She cheered loudly for her team, even jumping up from time to time when her team did something I supposed was really cool, and most of those moments were on defense. Since I don't really know all that much at all about shiziki, all I could really do was sit there and ask her what the hell was going on.

She was so patient with me, explained things as the game went on, even laughed when I told her that I'd get my revenge when it was American Football season and I'd make her sit through Jaguars games.

When I made that quip, her team held a comfortable lead going into the last rotation, so she was a little more willing to be conversational. "Jacksonville needs a baseball team," she told me. "We have one here in Sao Paulo, it was part of the expansion the Major League did to sixty-four

teams, when they started expanding out to the rest of the planet. I go see their games sometimes, baseball's just close enough to shiziki to be fun, and the company I work for can get the tickets for a discount."

"There's a team in Atlanta and another in Miami, but I don't really go see them," I said. "I think we have a minor league shiziki team here, cause so many Shio live in Jacksonville."

"Planetary League, the Jacksonville Fleet," she said immediately. "They're in our division."

"Who's our?"

"The Sao Paolo Lancers," she winked. "Ten and five, first place in the Atlantic Division. Hate to tell you this, but the Fleet are the basement dwellers in the division. They're five and eleven."

"Well, that's just normal for this city," I said darkly. "The Jags have been bottom feeders for three years now. Haven't had a winning record since 2019."

After the game was over, she got up and yawned and stretched. "Hate to say it, but I gotta log out," she said. "I have to work tomorrow."

"I have tomorrow off, so I'll hang around a while longer. You can log off in the spare bed," I offered. "That'll save you paying at the inn."

"That's nice of you, sure," she replied. I'd set up a guest bedroom on the top floor, and I could allow other players to log out in my house the same way I could. All I had to do was assign them a bed. I did that mainly thinking about Mrima, but it was coming in handy now.

"Lemme assign you the spare bed," I said, bringing up the house management menu. "And done. Feel free to log out anytime."

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon our time?"

"Sure thing. I have tomorrow off, so I'll probably either be up on the roof practicing or doing the next quest, if I get it."

"Okay. If you're not here when I log on, I'll let myself out."

After she left the room, I sat there a few minutes. Did...did we just have a *date*? Dinner and a game, that seemed like a date to me. And despite not

knowing a thing about shiziki, I did have fun. I was a little lost, but I had fun. And I got to see another aspect of Savar's personality, I had no idea she was into sports.

The more I got to know Savar, the more I liked her.

It didn't take two weeks. It only took about ten hours.

I noticed it during the fight but didn't think much about it because I was trying to keep my face from getting wrecked.

I was out in the wildlands of Citadel, testing myself against the weakest monsters I could find that drop loot...and they were every bit as fearsome as I expected. I was being that crazy because I was after skill crystals to raise bow skill in Djinn form. Besides, it had been a while since I'd done any real grinding in human form, and I did need to raise Blade Dance much higher. So, instead of working on Bow skill, I headed out the next morning and tried my hand by hunting the weakest monsters on Citadel for those skill crystal drops.

It was...almost embarrassingly bad. The monsters here were god-level, even the squirrels and bunny rabbits, and my attempts to kill them were almost laughable. They hit like freakin' meteors blowing up a city, and they had so much health that I rarely got one to half health before I died. I did the run of shame back to my corpse over and over, but I didn't give up, because that's not how I roll. I was convinced I could kill one of them, treating them like an overworld boss mob, and I was bound and determined to try.

And try, and try, and try, and try. For ten hours I tried, and I never got a single monster under 30% health.

But it wasn't a complete waste of time. During those ten hours of white-knuckled intensity, my sword skill had raised eight whole points, getting me to 3,000. It was almost like fighting mobs so much stronger than myself increased my chance to raise my skills, because all of my skills seemed to be raising faster, not just sword skill. I got 10 Defense skillups as well, and my Defense skill was already at 2,974, getting closer and closer to that magic 3,000. It made me think that maybe fighting on Citadel gave a bonus chance for skillups, but only when you were fighting the monsters.

Practicing on Citadel had the standard chance for skillups but fighting for real had an increased chance.

And ten hours of hunting had been in productive another way. Citadel was like Arcavia in that there was treasure laying around, if you were clever enough or lucky enough to find it. Treasure chests were hidden all over the place, but the catch was, they were usually *very* well hidden. You had to be very clever to find them. Most treasure chests held loot equivalent to the monsters in the area, usually holding some gold or gems or trade bars, maybe some tradeskill materials, and sometimes they held a piece of bonus loot gear of the same quality as what was dropped from the monsters nearby.

And on Citadel, that meant that treasure chests could hold loot equal to the bonus loot *dropped from the monsters around the chest*.

That meant that in addition to money and tradeskill materials, the random treasure chests hidden on the planetoid might hold equipment that would be *far far FAR* better than anything most anyone had. I could sell a piece of gear I managed to get for hundreds of thousands of gold, because it was far superior to the best gear the top raiders on the server had.

That was what made this place so nuts. You could get insane gear *just laying around*, provided you could find it and get away with it before a hostile monster melted your face.

But that was what Djinn form was for. I found out quickly that while most monsters out in the overworld wouldn't bother me, some *would*, so I had to be very, very careful when I explored beyond the city and was close enough to the ground for them to attack. As long as I was extremely careful, I could fly over the old ruins that dotted the landscape here and search from the air, out of reach of most hostile monsters and animals, and those ruins were the best place to hunt for treasure. I was able to explore the closest ruin to Citadel City fairly thoroughly, and there, I found nine treasure chests that held a surprising amount of gold, some gems, some tradeskill materials, and *two pieces of gear*! I found a cloth doublet and a pair of plate pauldrons in the nine treasure chests that I found as I explored the ruins.

I could *use* that cloth doublet! Not for my human form, the doublet's stats were for a spellcaster, not melee, and besides my Champion's Raiment

gear had better stats anyway, but my Defense skill was high enough to equip the piece in Djinn form! It required a minimum Defense of 2,000 to equip, and mine is 2,974!

That one piece of gear would make my Djinn form far more dangerous, because that cloth doublet had stats on it oriented for a spellcaster!

When I got back home from my epic fail trying to kill monsters for skill crystals but a very lucrative treasure hunting session, I realized my sword skill had hit 3,000. In fact, it was 3,003 now. And what was a habit for me, and most any veteran in the game, I opened my skill window to see if I got any bonus abilities after hitting a threshold level. And to my delight, I did! Under Sword skill was a brand-new child skill added to the other four skills I'd gained from reaching threshold levels—1,000, 1,500, 2,000, and 2,500—and this new one was named *Blademaster*.

I highlighted the skill to read the description:

Your mastery of the sword increases both your offensive and defensive abilities:

Increases the Damage Rating of your swords by a proportion based on skill rating.

Increases the damage of sword-based skills by a proportion based on skill rating.

Increases your Armor Rating by a proportion based on skill rating.

Increases the damage reduction bonus of your defensive sword-based skills by a proportion based on skill rating.

Gain the ability to parry both incoming missiles and projectile-based spells and skills.

A buff to both the damage rating of my swords and the damage I deal with sword-based skills, a buff to my armor rating and defensive sword skills, and I can parry arrows now? And *spells*? Wow! That's *amazing*!

What a truly awesome skill! And totally worth all the hard work I'd put in to raise my sword skill that high!

I shifted to Djinn form quickly to check, and sure enough, it was there: *Blademaster: 1*. That almost made it worth switching to swords as my primary weapon rather than the bow!

Almost. But it did remind me that I had yet to make that pair of swords I intended for my Djinn form. I really needed to take care of that, and soon.

I decided to call it a day, at least from farming, because I felt drained from the constant adrenalin of fighting that intensely all day long...not to mention dying so many times. I could test to see if I could raise Blademaster with the target dummy on the roof. If so, I'd do a little work on it. Savar logged in almost as soon as I made that decision, and she wasted no time after walking into the parlor from the guest bedroom. "How long have you been on?"

"All day, told you I have today off. I decided to try myself against the weakest monsters I could find out in the wilderness," I answered. "It was messy."

"How did it go?"

"I think I died over a hundred times," I admitted ruefully. "And I never got anything under a quarter health. But it wasn't a total waste. I found a couple of pieces of loot in treasure chests out in the ruins, like the forum guides said. One of them was a cloth doublet I can use for my Djinn form. The other was a pair of plate pauldrons."

"Really? Awesome! What are its stats like?"

"Insane, like not far from Champion's Raiment pieces," I said. "It looks like the random loot drops from the wilderness here is the catch-up gear meant to get players ready for questing in the overworld here on Citadel. From the looks of it, Champion gear is equivalent to maybe the lower tier of raids on Citadel. It's meant to be upgraded, but for us, not for a long time. I can't really use the plate pauldrons, so I guess I'll sell them. Sucks you can't wear plate, I'd give them to you."

"I'd almost be tempted to try," she chuckled. "Kinda sucks that our Champion gear will eventually be replaced, despite it being Legendary

equipment.”

“They gotta make sure we have a reason to keep playing,” I chuckled as she sat down on the couch beside me. “What fun would it be if you couldn’t upgrade your gear anymore?”

“Not as much,” she agreed. “I mean, we’d have skills, but just grinding skills all the time would get boring after a while. So, about those pauldrons. We do have quite a few plate wearers in the guild,” she said trillingly. “How much would you sell them for?”

“I’m not sure, but given they’re better than anything that anyone can get out of any raid we can do on this server, I’m gonna get my money’s worth out of them,” I chuckled. “Actually, I know exactly how much I’ll sell them for...two hundred thousand gold.”

“Done,” she said immediately. “I’ll tell Felik about them, he’ll snap them up in a heartbeat. Bullox hasn’t gotten shoulders from the Champion’s set yet, so he can use them. He’s our main tank, we need him to be as geared as possible.”

“Well, from the looks of it, if you guys could explore the ruins out in the wilderness without getting obliterated and pick up some gear, you could bypass the Endless Caverns and the other two raids in the Twin Worlds and just leapfrog up to here if you farm the drop gear. That would get you geared up enough to do the dungeons, and the dungeons would get you geared for the raids.”

“We thought of that. It didn’t go well,” she laughed ruefully. Besides, we don’t just do the raids for the gear, Xen. We do them because they’re fun. I want to do those other raids, I want to see all of them. I don’t want to bypass them, and I doubt that many in the guild would want to either. *But*, I doubt we’d mind getting a few drops from Citadel to help us do those raids,” she amended lightly. “They’re a lot more fun when you don’t die thirty times a night trying to kill a boss.”

“Cheater,” I accused, which made her laugh.

She was quiet a moment, clearly talking in her guild chat. “Felik wants to inspect the pauldrons, but he agrees to two hundred thousand. He’s on his way up to look at them.”

“Sounds good to me,” I told her. “I can’t use them, so may as well sell them to people I like enough to help move up in the world. And since you’ve been so nice to me, you get them for half of what I’d sell them to someone else,” I said, which made her smile. “So, Bullox is your number one tank?”

“Oh yeah. He’s a god among tanks,” she told me. “Best tank I’ve ever seen, and not just because of his gear.”

“If I can find a few more pieces like that, I might be able to help you guys get geared,” I speculated. “The loot drops will fill the slots you haven’t got Champion’s gear for yet.”

“If you’re willing to sell them, we’ll buy them until we run out of gold. We still have about six hundred thousand gold left over after buying our HQ. And all of us already have our fourth piece, we’ve all finished the fourth quest chain. We’re like you, waiting on the fifth chain to begin. We were going to try to do some monster hunting, this time with an all Champion group. After all, we’re halfway geared for the Citadel now,” she grinned

“Well, good luck.”

Felik arrived about an hour later, and we met him at the scion. I let him inspect the pauldrons, and it was like all the light in the world was suddenly shined upon his face. “Two hundred k is a steal for these,” he said beamingly.

“They’re worth what I want for them, and that’s what I want for them. Besides, you guys have been good to me, and selling these to you way cheap is one way I can repay your kindness,” I replied. “But the caveat is, you give these to Bullox. You don’t resell them.”

“Good God yes, that’s exactly what we’re gonna do,” he replied fervently.

“Here’s hoping it helps you guys out,” I told them as I formally traded the pauldrons for a mixture of gems, platinum trade bars, and gold coins that had a combined value of 200,000 gold, which was verified by the trade valuation algorithm. Felik couldn’t very well carry around that much in gold coins, he’d be so encumbered he’d barely be able to move. For really, really big financial transactions, players and NPCs used gems and platinum

trade bars. Gems had standardized value, from ten gold all the way up to 10,000 gold, and trade bars were worth what they said on them, not their value in metal. Trade bars came in 500, 1,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, 25,000, and 50,000 denominations. “And this gold is gonna go to good use,” I said happily.

That gold got me that much closer to buying Succor. That was my objective here, since I now had a house on Citadel for the spell to serve as a centralized home point, a much better one than my house in Freeport. Succor would drastically improve my game experience, far more than any piece of gear, because it would give me the ability to carry only what I needed and still have access to everything else.

Succor was the goal here, and I was gonna work hard to achieve it.

Chapter 7

My plan had met with mixed results.

I'd spent the days waiting for my next quest searching for unopened treasures chests out in the wilds of Citadel, and while I'd found 15 of them, I'd only found one piece of loot in them, a leather doublet that I would have kept for myself if I hadn't have taken leather chest as Champion's Raiment. I did haul in some decent money and some valuable tradeskill materials, but just the one piece of loot. That meant that I'd only had one item to put up in my shop.

It sold within four hours of me putting it up for sale, which put 300,000 gold in my bank. And that was enough for me to feel comfortable that I could afford Succor if I found a copy of it.

Savar was right that the guild wasn't going to skip those raids, I'd found out. They were going to do them, *then* they would start working on Citadel progression, because they wanted to do things in the right order, and they wanted to complete every raid...and it wouldn't be as much fun if they went back and did an old raid when it wasn't challenging anymore. They'd try to get some drops to make finishing the pre-Citadel raids easier, but they still wanted to do them. And I could respect that.

The city was really starting to take off as well. The merchant barons were now fully set up here, and what was more, players were renting stalls in the marketplace now and putting out their own goods for sale. My shop was seeing more and more competition, and while it was hurting my bottom line, me selling that leather doublet certainly didn't make me mind all that much, since it put me back over 500,000 gold.

Stalls weren't as good as owning a shop. Stalls only had a limited amount of items they could sell. A marketplace stall only has enough storage space for around fifty items on the average, though the size of the items being sold dictates how many items a stall can sell. A stall can sell one giant's skull, or maybe a hundred piece of jewelry. A shop like mine

has much more space, because I can put in way more shelves and containers. Stalls only have one shelf, so it severely limits that amount of merchandise a stall can sell. A shop like mine, with dozens and dozens of shelves and stands and racks and containers, can sell thousands of items. I only have to expand the number of shelves in my store to expand my inventory space, and I have room to put in at least four more shelving units, six more barrels or baskets or stands, and I have a bare wall above a shelf unit where I can put another rack to hang merchandise. I can even hang ceiling-mounted hanging baskets.

My shop was truly an absolute gold mine, as long as I keep it stocked.

But there was one thing I did have on my mind...Succor. I headed out into the city, then started making the rounds through the other player shops and stalls in the marketplace, hunting for a copy of Succor.

And to my absolute shock, I found *two* for sale. And one of them was within my price range!

What insane luck! Someone was selling the spell that didn't know what it was truly worth!

One was listed for 750,000 gold, and the other for 550,000. I didn't have that much gold in pure cash after restocking the shop, but Savar was my savior. When I told her what I was doing, she offered to lend me the 15,000 gold I needed for the spell. She knew I was good for it.

Usually I'd say no to something like that, but not this time. Succor doesn't show up in a market that cheap more than once in a blue moon.

It was about the most nervous fifteen minutes of my game life when I went back to my shop to get the money and get the gold Savar was lending me, then rushed back to the market stall as fast as my heavily encumbered waddling gait would allow to buy the spell. And me being that encumbered told everyone that I was loaded down with gold, which would make me a ripe target to get ganked. Citadel City was *not* a safe zone, so thieves could pickpocket you and the more brazen ones could try to mug you for your gold if you wandered too far from the main thoroughfares. I managed to get back to the marketplace with my gold, and with a bit of relish, I picked up the Succor scroll, ensured it was genuine (spell scrolls can't be faked, but a well-known trick was to write what looked like a spell on a common scroll

and try to sell it as the real thing), and once I was certain it was, I paid for it at the stall's checkout stand.

And that was that. I was now 15,000 gold in the hole, but I had Succor. And now I just needed to raise Translocation 50 more points to use it.

I sent the scroll into my item storage to make extra sure nobody could steal it (items in item storage can't be pickpocketed, but money and items in bags or packs can), and that done, I walked victoriously back to my shop. And now that I was in debt, I desperately needed money. And that meant I had to go explore ruins to try to find treasure. So, I geared up, then I headed out to the ruins I'd mapped in my first forays out into the wilderness, fully expecting to die.

A lot.

And did I ever. I died nine times in the first hour, because there were a lot more animals and monsters in that area that would attack me in Djinn form than there was in the first ruin, which meant that I'd be attacked when I came down to open a chest; the act of opening a chest canceled my Improved Invisibility spell. And that pattern repeated itself for four more hours, five hours of pure terror and adrenalin mixed with exultation over finding trinkets and gems, jewels and baubles, but sadly no pieces of gear or equipment. But that was a reward unto itself, because when I finally managed to get home, I'd found that I'd scavenged nearly 3,000 gold in treasures from the ruins, and my shop had sold enough to give me enough money to pay Savar back the money I owed her and still have about 2,300 gold left over.

I went back out after letting my nerves settle, and after three more hours of sheer terror, I found another piece of gear. And to my shock and delight, this one was a *leather belt*, something I could use! Its stats blew my current belt out of the water!

I wasn't selling *that*, especially since my current belt wasn't a piece of Champion's Raiment. That made it a massive upgrade.

So, I went home feeling almost glorious. I'd found a piece of gear I could use, and not for Djinn form!

Savar logged on and asked to come up as I was heading home, and she was waiting by the back door when I arrived, carrying a basket. She

followed me up to the fourth floor, which was my living space. “And here we are, my first chance to celebrate,” she said brightly. “I have four new recipes using those cooking mats we got from our monster hunting session, so we’re gonna give them a try.”

“Works for me, I have something to celebrate myself. I got a leather belt from a ruin!”

“Really?” she gasped. “That’s awesome! Tell me you equipped it!”

“Of course I did,” I said, touching the belt with a grin. “That’s one piece of Champion’s Raiment I won’t have to get!”

“Good for you! You’re not the only one that got lucky today. Or last night, I should say,” she said. With a dazzling smile, she pointed at the leather straps that crossed between her furry, exposed breasts. “Doesn’t this look a little different, Xen?”

“I’m not—well, it’s a different shade.” I gasped. “You got a drop!”

“I got a drop!” she said excitedly. “Leather tunic that I converted to a Savasa racial appearance! It dropped off a monster we managed to kill!”

“Congratulations!” I said excitedly. “That’s a great day!”

“You said it!” she laughed. “Okay, so do you want suntouched elk flank steaks or scarfang prowler stew?” she asked with a smile. “I have the mats to make two servings of both of them.”

“Let’s try the steaks,” I proffered. “Any veggie dishes you can make?”

“Yeah, but I only have the mats to make one garlic baked deeprock potato and one portion of aborian moonstalk chutes,” she answered. “We can split them.”

“Sure.”

The food was incredible, but it was the company that made it so good. We both reveled in our respective accomplishments that day, Savar talking eagerly about her guild killing about fifteen monsters and her getting a drop yesterday, and me telling her about my plans to use Succor to explore the most remote, distant parts of the Twin Worlds. After dinner, we sat on the couch and continued talking as we watched another shiziki game, this one her Sao Paolo team playing the Caracas Black Pirates, but she wasn’t quite

as into the game this time. Maybe it was because it wasn't Federation shiziki, maybe because she was more excited about her day than the game, but I rather enjoyed being the center of her attention.

There was no other place I wanted her to look but at *me*.

That startled me, so much that after I logged out a half hour later, I had to sit on the edge of my bed and consider what was going on. Was I...was I falling for Savar? It sounded absolutely crazy. I mean, she didn't *look* like that in real life. I had no idea who she was in real life, what she looked like. She was a player in a *game*. How could I be falling in love with a woman who wasn't entirely real? I mean, yeah, Savar is real enough, but I don't think who she is in the game is who she is in real life. I'm certainly not. I'm a meek, timid introvert in real life, where in the game, I'm a much more self-confident, assured, assertive man. The game lets me be something much more than myself without fear, and it wasn't a stretch to think that Savar was the same. What was she like in real life? Was she old? Young? She was Shio, so would she act in a way I could understand? Even though Shio do look exactly like humans, just with green skin, they're *not*. They have a very different culture from us, with their own deep, impressive history and traditions. And I don't know very much about them. Had she lived long enough among us humans to understand us and our society?

I had no idea.

And what would she think of me? I was no catch. I live in a tiny efficiency apartment. I have a dead-end job with no hope of upward mobility. I live an intensely private life, almost afraid of other people, always keeping my head down, always finding excuses to avoid other people. I have all of one friend in the entire world, Mrima. I live a life of constant nagging, nameless fear, trying to find my way out of the dark place the subjugation left me in after the Trillanes were forced off Earth. About the only thing I have going for me is my looks. I'm not ugly, but I'm not really all that handsome either, but I am in fairly good shape despite spending most of my free time laying in my bed. I do work out in the gym here in my building quite a bit, precisely because I sit all day for my job and lay down all evening to play CO.

Yeah, all I have to offer a girl is the fact that I run two miles a day and I'm not fat.

Wow. That makes me such a keeper.

I thought about it a long time, until I worried myself nearly into a panic attack over it. I left the apartment and went for a walk on the beach south of Jacksonville in the moonlight to clear my head, letting the sound of the waves crashing on the beach soothe me and calm down my racing thoughts. I wasn't the only person on the beach at that time of night, because not every species that lived on Earth now was active during the day. The nocturnal races loved to come out to the beach at night, when it wasn't busy at all, and when the sun was down, and they felt much more comfortable.

And often, people left things behind on the beach. I almost stumbled over a pair of wikli sticks that someone had forgotten, which were bamboo sticks used by the Jirunji to play a game kind of like pickle ball, just on a beach and without a net. The objective of the game was to use your wikli stick to catch a wooden ring and return it back to your opponent, trying to make them miss it and have it land on the ground inside the field of play. There was no net in wikli, just a playing area where each player had to stay inside a box that was about three meters away from the other player, but the scoring area was another box behind the player box, which gave the player the chance to catch the ring. The sticks they used were made of bamboo here on Earth, because they had to have a very strong yet flexible wood, and they were about 170 centimeters long. I picked them up and looked around to see if anyone was around, but they'd clearly been forgotten by whoever had been here. They were half-buried in the sand. I dug around in the sand and found the ring, which was about 40 centimeters wide and surprisingly heavy, made of a dense, strong wood like oak.

I had no idea what to do with them. I couldn't just leave them on the beach, someone might trip over them the way I did. They were in good condition, I didn't want to just throw them in the trash, whoever owned them may come back to look for them. These were good quality sticks, they weren't cheap. I could take them up to the picnic tables by the parking lot and leave them there. If whoever owned them came back, they'd find them there and take them home.

That's one good way Earth had changed, I suppose. Nowadays, if you left something of value on a table and walked away, it would still be there when you came back. People were much more honest and considerate now

than they were when I was a kid, when I had to lock my bike up every time I left it or it would be gone when I came back. If I left the wikli sticks on the table, nobody would really bother them until it was obvious they'd been forgotten, much as I was only taking the sticks to keep someone from getting hurt by tripping over them. If not for that, I'd leave them right where I found them.

So, I walked to the nearest walkway up over the dunes and saw the picnic tables that were commonly at the entrances to the beach as I came over the curve of the walkway over the dune. I slowed to a stop, however, when I saw a small group of older teenagers and young adults, sitting at the tables and drinking. While Earth was much safer, it still wasn't entirely *safe*, especially for humans. Not because of the other races, but because troublemakers wouldn't take on something like an Urumi or an Ubutu. The other races were unknown factors, they may have claws or venom or were inhumanly strong, where humans knew exactly what humans were.

My suspicions were right. A couple of them took notice of me as I moved to turn around, and the largest of them stood up. "Now why would you turn around and go the other way, neighbor? Aren't we all friends here?" he asked, which made a few of his friends snicker.

Oh, great.

"I was going to leave these on the table for whoever left them," I said. "I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble could there be?" big guy asked with an edge to his amused voice. "You're the one causing trouble with your unfriendliness. Just automatically assuming that we're not fine, upstanding citizens? Why, I'm feeling insulted!"

"So am I, Mick," one of the girls giggled.

"You hear that? You've hurt Mary's feelings. I think you'd better apologize," he ordered.

I've seen shit like this before, back in the subjugation. There was no way out of this situation without a fight. Even if I apologized, the big one would just push and push and push, force me to humiliate myself for their amusement. And something in me wasn't going to stand for that. Not this time.

Not again. *Never* again.

I pocketed the ring and took a wikli stick in each hand, then took a step back and spread my feet. I had no idea why I did that, or what I was doing, but it felt *right*. “I’m leaving,” I declared in a calm, firm voice.

“Not until you say you’re sorry,” the big one said, in a much more hostile tone. “And maybe not until you empty your pockets.”

“Piss off, budger,” I retorted. Where did *that* come from?

His face turned flat, and out of nowhere, he produced a long-bladed knife. “Nobody calls me a budger, dickface,” he said in a hiss. “You have no idea what it means.”

“Farm nine, Aparara Province,” I said.

“What’s that mean?” one of the girls whispered.

“He was one of the slaves the Trillanes put on the farms,” the other girl whispered back.

“You’re a fellow picker, and you call *me* a budger?” big guy said hotly.

“I don’t see the scar on the side of your neck,” I said, pointing with a stick at the left side of my neck. There was a fifteen-centimeter scar there. “That makes you a *budger*.”

The scar. Every farm worker who worked out in the fields has that scar, a scar that both identifies us and unites us as brothers and sisters. It was from the ID chip they implanted in us, which also had a locator in it so they could hunt us down if we ran away. The way they implanted them left a distinctive scar on the sides of our necks, and that scar itself separated the pickers, people who worked out in the fields, from the budgers, the suck-ups and toadies that curried favor with the guards and got soft, cushy jobs for their capitulation. Odds were, big guy there worked on a farm, he had to in order to know to call me a picker, but he worked in the barracks, or in the barn, or a shop, or in the admin building, in a job where he got to sit on his ass and play games over CivNet while the rest of us worked ourselves to death out in the fields. We pickers had a particular loathing of budgers, the sell-outs that watched us suffer as they slept in air-conditioned private rooms and cozied up to the guards.

The word *budger* was a corrupted form of the Faey word *buje*, which meant *traitor*.

He lunged, but it was like he was moving in slow motion. I saw him coming, saw the angle of the knife, and I reacted with smooth, fluid motion. I parried the knife blade with one stick and then rapped him across the side of the face as I sidestepped him with the other, making him stumble forward and nearly fall down. He whirled on me, blood trickling from his nose, and tried to stab me again as the others gasped and backed off quickly—they clearly wanted nothing to do with *this*—but I slipped aside with almost ridiculous ease. I very nearly tried to Flame Strike him, but instead jammed the end of my left stick into his throat, making him stagger back and wheeze hoarsely.

That was—I was fighting like I was *in the game*! Just without using active sword skills!

Holy *crap*! I'd learned how to fight for real just by playing the game!

It clicked. In an instant, it clicked. Basic sword skills weren't guided by the game's player assist algorithms once you got the skill past a certain point, because it didn't need to help you anymore. You were skilled enough *in reality* to do it yourself. You learned as the AI guided your movements, teaching you how to move, how to react, how to shift your weight, how to strike without overextending, how to use the available terrain to your advantage, learning how to react to the movements of a weapon. The techniques I learned in the game translated to real life and had honed my reflexes to give me the reaction speed to take on big guy and his knife. I was even using the same combat stance and was dual wielding almost without thought! As long as I didn't try to Sword Blitz him or use any of my other attack skills, I could fight!

It felt different. I didn't have the strength or agility I had in the game, but I was in fairly good shape and I was always very graceful, and those allowed me to fend off big guy and his knife, almost easily. He tried to stab me or slash me several times, but I was able to parry or evade every attempt with confident, flowing movements. It was like I was fighting a low-skill monster in faction territory; this guy wasn't half as fast or as strong as the opponents I was used to fighting. His movements were quick, but they were unskilled, even clumsy, and he had no sense of balance. That made it easy

for me to hold him off using the narrow confines of the walkway, where the rails hemmed him in and kept him from trying to get to my outside. With me having two weapons with longer reach and holding the center of the walkway, I had the advantage.

He finally made a mistake too egregious for me to pass up. I caught his knife in a scissor between my wikli sticks, then I wrested it out of his hand with a torqued jerk to the side and rotation of my arms and wrists, moving aside and upwards and wrenching his wrist. The knife sailed over the walkway, and I took him down in a matter of seconds with a series of whip-like strikes from the wikli sticks against his head and face, leaving him writhing on the walkway, his boots kicking against the support post of the rail as both arms wrapped tightly around his head.

“Anyone else?” I demanded of his friends, who were watching from a generous distance. They were all the way out in the parking lot. “Then I’m leaving. Pick him up and get out of here. I won’t call the police this time, but I won’t be that nice again. And if you come out onto the beach after me, I’ll do way more than just smack you with a wikli stick,” I warned. I then backed slowly away from the kicking man, and when I was a good ten meters away from them, then I turned and walked back to the beach.

Slowly. I didn’t run, didn’t let them think I was afraid. And in a way, I wasn’t. I’d just beaten down a man using a knife, and I was still almost dazed over finding out that playing CO had just had a very real benefit. The sword skills I learned playing the game, I could use in *real life*.

I felt something...*change*. I’d just faced down someone that wanted to hurt me, and I put him on the ground. I’d protected myself, but more important, I’d stood up for myself. I hadn’t let what they’d done to me in that farm cause me to give in. But that wasn’t all. I just found out I could *fight*. I’d been trained to fight in the game, *by* the game, and the skills I learned playing CO had protected me in the real world. I’m not sure that was entirely what the game was supposed to do, but there was no doubt. The moves I used with the wikli sticks were just as if I were dual wielding my Dark Blades of Kirizaki in the game...just with shorter weapons. And I’d even taken the shorter, lighter weapons into account, almost instinctively, when I fought back against the guy with the knife.

For the first time in years, since I was in high school, I didn't feel weak. *Vulnerable*. I didn't submit when I was intimidated, I didn't run away. I stood my ground, and when I was threatened, I *fought back*. And I fought back with *skill*, with skills I didn't even know I had until the moment of truth.

Citadel Online was just a game, but the fighting skills it taught had carried over into the real world. And they were enough to protect me when I needed it most.

The next day, I spent maybe a little more time than I should doing a little research over CivNet when I should have been working.

I looked for any instances where people playing jacked simsense games like Vanguard or CO were demonstrating real-world ability with the skills they learned in the game, but I didn't find very much. I found several articles about how many militaries were now using simsense programs to train their soldiers, providing ultra-realistic simulations that helped them hone their skills...but those were skills they learned in the real world. Were they being taught those skills in the simsense, then using them in reality? That was what I wanted to know, because that's what had happened to me. I'd learned how to fight using swords in Citadel Online, and unlike things like the in-game languages that I forgot the moment I logged out, that weren't part of my own memory, the sword training I'd undergone for years in the game had stayed. What was it about the sword training that made it different from things like languages?

I did more searching during lunch, not leaving my cubicle, but again found nothing definitive.

After work, when I would have run straight home to log on, I instead stopped by a fabrication shop and picked up an order I placed just after lunch, picking up two replica swords that were the same length, weight, and appearance as the swords I use in the game. They weren't sharpened and were made of synthplas instead of metal, but everything else about them was faithful to my swords in the game, even down to the wrappings on the hilts and the engravings on the blades. For all intents and purposes, they looked like decorations, but they were made of high strength synthplas,

which would make them harder than steel. I took them with me to the gym in my building, and where I usually would have went to the treadmill or the exercise bike or the rowing machine, I went into one of the empty studio rooms where they did aerobics and had dance and tumbling classes. When they didn't have classes, they were free for anyone to use. I then went through the forms I'd learned in Citadel Online, which were taught by the skill assist algorithm at first, and then stopped once the players could do it themselves.

I worked for nearly an hour and learned a whole lot. My sword skills weren't as good in reality as they were in the game, but I knew what the hell I was doing. I was fluid and graceful, knew almost without thinking how to move my two swords so they complemented one another, knew how to shift my weight, where to set my feet, how to move my body to get maximum power but without overextending, which would leave me open to counterattack. I also learned that I was nowhere near as strong, agile, or durable as I was in the game. I could fight for a solid hour in the game without getting out of breath, and was strong enough to arm wrestle an ogre, and could walk a tightrope without it so much as shivering under my feet. But those were game stats, when my real body was nowhere near that superhuman. My arms started to burn after about twenty minutes of practice, and I got winded after another five minutes. And my avatar in the game was *way way way* more limber than my real body. I felt the tightness in my joints with many of the moves, meaning I didn't have the flexibility to pull off some of the moves I'd learned in the game. My real body wasn't used to this kind of exertion, most of the exercises I do are like jogging and the exercise bike, keeping my weight down and mostly working my legs. The rowing machine was the closest thing to an arm workout I did, and it clearly wasn't enough to allow me to swing the swords for very long before I started to tire.

But I will say this. Practicing with the swords was one hell of a workout. Muscles I didn't know I had were burning by the time I decided to call it a day.

But the hour in the studio told me a whole lot. I retained almost all of the skills I'd learned in CO with swords, but only the *basic* sword skill. I could mimic the movements of some of my attacking sword skills, like Mortal Strike, Flame Strike, Doom Blade, and the rest, but they didn't have

the same effect...obviously. And some of them were actually impractical in real life. Attempting to use Mortal Strike in the real world nearly made me lose my balance and fall flat on my face. Blade Dance's scissor attack, though, that was a viable move in the real world. It had a lot of setup with me having to cross my arms and the swords in front of me, leaving me open for a split second, but it could theoretically be used. And moves like Sword Blitz, Triple Strike, Flurry, Sword Barrier, Wind Shear, Cross Defense, they were completely impossible, they relied on the game's physics engine, and that wasn't the physics of real life. So, I couldn't do the fancy sword attack and defense skills, but the basic techniques I had mastered with Sword skill had carried over into the real world. I'd learned them *for real*, not just in the game, and those skills were not part of the game-only memories that I forgot when I logged off, then remembered again when I logged back on.

Jacks made that possible. A part of my memory when it came to CO was actually in the game program in my vidlink, it acted as an extension of my brain where those "memories" were stored, in the form of data. I couldn't access that memory when I wasn't logged into the game, but when I was, it was just like any of my other memories.

I found out that it wasn't just sword skills I learned. After my arms burned too much from swinging the swords, I set them down and tried the unarmed combat skills I learned in the game. And those too carried over. There were no official martial arts styles like karate and kung fu in the game, there was just one style that used elements of several martial arts disciplines. I found it quite surprising that I knew how to execute the punches and kicks, knew how to move to keep my balance. I'd bet that if I sparred against an opponent, I'd be able to hold my own.

I suddenly felt like Neo from the *Matrix* movies. "*I know Kung Fu!*" It was almost a jolt to find out that the skills I used in a game could be used in the real world...at least with some practice. My avatar in the game is far stronger and more agile than I am in reality, so I'd have to train the skills I use with a different body to this one.

After I was done, I sat cross-legged on the mat in the studio and considered this. Just how many skills from the game had become part of my real-life memory? Could I shoot a bow as well as I could in the game? Make maps as well as I could in the game? Why did only certain skills

carry over into the real world when others didn't? Should I tell someone? Contact the game devs and tell them what happened to me?

No, no, *hell* no. If they didn't drag me into a hospital to find out what was wrong, they might *shut down CO*. And no way was I letting that happen, I love the game too much to do anything that might cause it to fold. What had happened to me wasn't a bad thing. It was unusual, yes, but it wasn't bad. It had possibly saved my life. It hadn't done any harm to me, and I didn't feel in any way different or not right. If I started feeling like something was wrong, I'd tell someone. Until then, I'd keep my mouth shut. I wouldn't even tell Mrima and Savar.

But one thing I would do was start practicing the sword skills I learned in the game in real life. I wanted to see just how much of it I'd absorbed, how much of it I could do. I'd need to do some work in the gym and definitely do some stretching exercises, but I wanted to see just how good I could get.

I wanted to feel *safe*, and knowing how to use the swords, that had made me feel safe. I wanted to continue to feel safe, that I could protect myself if I was ever in another situation like what happened last night. I may not conveniently have wikli sticks with me next time...but there were things I could carry that were just as good, and were much smaller and easier to conceal

There were these super-neat items called *bakku batons* that were used by the Verutans. They were made of this strange metal that could expand from the size of a marble to the size of a bowling ball by applying a power source to them, and what they did was make fighting rods out of them. When contracted, they were the size of just the handle. But when they were activated, the metal expanded out of the handle assembly and extended out nearly a meter long. What I could do was order a custom version of bakku batons that would be just the hilt of the sword, and when you hit the button, boom, you had a full-length sword. They could even make it sharp, but that would be against the law here on Earth. But what I could do was order *blunted* versions, which would have the same weight, length, and feel of my swords, but wouldn't have edges. Those would be legal, and with them, I'd feel very safe if anyone ever tried to mug me again.

The only drawback was that they weren't cheap. A pair of custom bakku batons would cost me nearly five hundred credits, so that would be a very expensive security blanket.

I could get real weapons if I wanted them, though. You could carry weapons if you had a permit, and permits weren't *outrageously* hard to get. You had to go to a series of classes and pass both a written test and a comprehensive practical exam to ensure that you knew how to use the weapon, and you also had to pass a background check to ensure you didn't have a criminal record.

Written tests...that was it! That was the difference between the skills! There was a difference between *physical* skills and *mental* skills in the game, and I'd bet that the mental skills were saved in the vidlink's memory where the physical skills had been absorbed by the player!

It made sense. The skills that carried over into the real world were *physical* skills. I'd practiced them in the game, learning how to move, learning how to keep my balance, honing my reflexes and reaction speed, developing *muscle memory*, and that must have been stored in my *real* brain instead of in the game's player memory. The skills that didn't rely on muscle memory, like languages and other purely intellectual skills, they were stored completely in the game's player memory. Skills that used both, like tradeskills, they were stored in both places, leaving me with the physical skills to do the tradeskill but not the intellectual training to know how to do it right. And because of that, those skills I picked up in the game that relied on physical activity were part of my permanent organic memory. Even though I've never picked up a needle and thread in my life in the real world, I'd bet that the Tailoring skill I practiced in the game would allow me to sew the various stitches I learned in the game, because that was *muscle memory*. I'd never done it before, but I'd bet money I could do saddle stitches. I may not be very good at them, but I'd know how to do them.

I could. I sat there and thought about it, about how to do a saddle stitch, and *I could do it*. I'd have to practice to make them pretty, the game's skill assist algorithm was what made them neat and symmetrical, but I knew the steps to do a saddle stitch. The game taught them to me. But what I didn't know was when a saddle stitch was the best stitch to use in a garment. I

knew how to do all the stitches, but I didn't know when to use which stitch, what purpose they served. That was part of the intellectual side of the skill that was stored in my vidlink's memory.

Wild. Totally wild. I could sew complex stitches, because of a game. I could fight with swords, because of a game. I could do martial arts, because of a game.

Who said that games were a complete waste of time?

It made me think for a minute. Did your skills in the game increase because the RNG said they did, or because you *learned*, you got better at the skill, relied less on the skill assist algorithm? No, not exactly. The skill assist algorithm eventually stopped helping you, but that had nothing to do with your skill rating in the skill. It stopped helping you when your *real* skill reached a point where it didn't have to help you anymore. The skill assist algorithm was actually completely separate from the skill rating system. That was just game code and math, it calculated the damage dealt and whatnot. The skill assist algorithm made sure that the moves you made matched your skill rating. And someone like me, who was no longer aided by the skill assist algorithm when I used swords, had sufficient real-world skill to not need its help anymore, at least for my basic sword skill. It still kicked in when I did my sword attack skills like Sword Blitz and Mortal Strike, I think because those moves rely on the game's physics engine, and thus I can't do those moves in real life. Granted, my skill was with my avatar body, which was stronger, faster, and more flexible than my real body, but I was still at that point.

I'd bet that I wasn't the only one to have this happen, and I may not be the only one that figured it out. If I put a bow in Savar's real-world hand, I'd bet she'd be able to shoot with the skill of an Olympic archer. I'd bet she too had picked up real skill in her in-game weapon of choice.

But, since I couldn't find any articles or posts that mentioned it, it said that the others who figured this out were also keeping their mouths shut. And if they were keeping their mouths shut, then so would I.

I can keep a secret. It's easy for people like me, who generally avoid other people.

I developed a new routine over the next couple of weeks that reduced my play time in CO and replaced it with skill training in the real world.

I took two hours out of my afternoon every day and devoted it to sword training and martial arts training in the gym downstairs. I spent an hour a day working on my sword skills, and then after a rest break, I worked on my unarmed combat skills. I felt myself get stronger and stronger over those two weeks, my body becoming more flexible as I did stretching exercises, and started to feel both better about my health and more confident about my life.

It was almost strange how a single fight could change someone's entire outlook. It was like that fight showed me that I wasn't as helpless as I thought I was, and that if I could beat that guy with the knife, then there were other things in this world I could do that I would have never tried to do before.

But despite being the newer, more confident me, I was still an introvert that preferred my own company to others. I just didn't feel *afraid* to be in the same room with other people, at least not quite so much.

One of the ways that confidence showed was in the delivery that was made to my desk just before lunch on a Friday. I'd given the company my work address because if you had it delivered to the building, the super had a terrible habit of making you wait or jump through hoops to get your package. It was like he resented taking the packages of his tenants, so he got back at us by holding them back as long as he could without getting in trouble with his boss.

I couldn't open the box, the company had a no weapons policy, so I stowed it under my desk and went to lunch. I met Mrima at our usual table, and she was excited because she'd be going to Norfolk to see her kids after work. She only went up every other weekend now, and she looked forward to the weekends when she did. "I have some news today," she said with a smile. "Good news, but maybe bad news."

"What is it?"

"I got a promotion," she said.

"Congratulations!" I told her happily, reaching over and taking her small hand. "Why is that bad news?"

“It’s to the office in Norfolk,” she told me. “I’ll be moving next week, Kevin. I’ll be right there for the kids, it’s going to save me a lot of money, but it does mean I’m going to be leaving you. And I’m worried about it.”

“Pshaw, don’t worry about me, Mri, this is the best possible thing for you! A pay raise *and* being right there in Norfolk? You and the cubs can share an apartment!”

“No, I’m not going to do that to them,” she laughed. “They’re out on their own now, Kevin, they deserve their own space. But the one I’m worried about is *you*. I don’t want you being down here by yourself, Kev,” she said, giving me an earnest look and patting my hand. “So, I have a proposition for you.”

“What?”

“How good are you at math?”

“I did pretty well when I was in high school,” I shrugged.

“How would you like to enter the company’s accounting apprenticeship program?” she asked. “When I’m a supervisor, I can get you into it. It’s a three-month course where they teach you basic accounting procedures and the math we use, and when you’re done, I’ll request you be transferred to Norfolk to apprentice in my office. Apprentice accountants earn more than database managers, Kev,” she told me enticingly. “And when you earn your certification, it’ll more than triple your salary.”

I gave her a surprised look, then took her tiny hands between my fingers. “Mri, that’s so generous of you,” I told her. “But I’ll be honest. I doubt I’d be a very good accountant. Or a happy one. But it touches me that you care so much that you’d do that just so we could keep having lunch together,” I said, patting her on the shoulder.

“Are you sure, Kev?” she asked, looking up at me. “You’re not going to go anywhere if you stay in database management. You know that.”

“I know, but I can be honest in saying that I’d rather be a happy data entry clerk than a miserable accountant,” I smiled gently. “I don’t want to be a data entry clerk the rest of my life, but I do know that I’d hate being an accountant.”

She had to laugh. “Hey, you’re insulting my profession, Kevin,” she said playfully.

“Accounting isn’t for everyone, Mri,” I told her. “To be honest, I have no idea what I want to do with my life. I’ve been doing this job trying to figure it out,” I sighed, letting go of her hands so we could eat. “It pays enough for me to tread water until I figure out which direction I want to swim in, I suppose. I won’t be alone, so don’t worry. Me and Savar are hanging out almost every day now, and I can see you in the game too. We can just move from having lunch here to having dinner there.”

“It’s not the same. You need a friend, Kevin, a real flesh and blood friend. If all your friends are just in the game, you won’t have any reason to stay in the real world. And you need to be here,” she told me in a motherly voice.

“I’ll be fine, Mri,” I told her assuringly. “Trust me, the last couple of weeks have taught me that. But I tell you what. I’ll look over the company openings list and see if there’s an apprenticeship in there that appeals to me. And if I do find one, I’ll apply for it.”

“You better. You’re way too smart to be *here*, Kevin,” she told me seriously. “Once you find that job you’re looking for, you’re going to go far. I know it,” she said confidently, giving me a nurturing smile. “As smart as you are, and as much as you’ve accomplished in CO, there’s no reason you can’t find the same success out here in the real world. You just have to want it, Kevin, you have to want it enough to make it happen.”

I thought about what Mri said for the rest of the day, doing my work with mechanical efficiency, then I went home with my bakku swords, changed into my workout clothes, and practiced with them as I thought more about what she said. What *did* I want to do with my life? I had no idea. Much as Savar had described her life after coming here as a refugee, I was just drifting. I had no goals, no destination in mind. I was working a dead-end job because it paid enough to meet my needs but would never satisfy my *desires*. But I really had no idea what I desired out of life. I’d looked over the available apprenticeship programs, but none of them really appealed to me. They were all the same, paperwork, bureaucracy, being cogs in the vast machine that was Merrane Macrotechnology. I doubted my

future was in the corporate world. But if it wasn't then what the hell did I want? Did I want to join the military and be a soldier?

Hell no. I'd be a horrible soldier after what the Trillanes did to me. Psychologically scarred introverts like me have no business being soldiers.

Well then, what? Start my own business? Go into a hands-on trade like being a plasma systems tech or a mechanic? Become a pilot? A bus driver?

Nothing. I didn't want to do any of them.

What I was good at, what I liked to do, was Citadel Online.

Well, there *were* some people who earned money playing video games. They made tutorials and other videos, they streamed their gameplay and other people paid them money to watch it. We had people like that before the subjugation, the YouTubers, and now we had CivNet game streamers. Some of them made a lot of money, enough to make a career out of it.

I did have all those recordings of my simsense stream I'd been saving. I was going to edit and post them after I finished the Grand Crusade to let people see it from my perspective. What if I posted up my recordings from the first chain of the quest? Let them see how it began and what I did in the first steps?

I could do that. I could edit out the parts that I didn't want other players to see, some of my most secret secrets. It wouldn't give too much away, since I had the feeling that the Grand Crusade was almost over. And with me now having Succor, I'd never be found by players looking to take a shot at me, players like Emelda. I'd be in the most isolated, remote places in the game, the most far-flung wilderness where no other player dared to tread. While everyone else was swarming over Citadel, I'd be in the farthest reaches of the Twin Worlds, exploring.

Doing what I love to do.

It wasn't that hard to set up streaming accounts at the popular gaming sites. *CO Today* had one, and quite a few champions from other servers posted videos and streamed their gameplay there. And you could earn money from people watching your viddys, advertisers paid you to put their ads in your viddy. I doubt I could ever earn enough to quit my job, but I could supplement my income *and* do something I enjoy doing.

People had asked me all those questions about soloing on the forum. What if I put up a how-to viddy about high-end soloing? If anything, I *am* something of an expert on the subject. I could pull selected clips of my recordings and do a voiceover, explain what people were seeing and how it mattered.

That sounded...*fun*. But it would probably take forever, and right now, the Grand Crusade had priority. I was currently halfway through the third quest in what I thought was the last chain, where we were gathering NPC allies to face the Kanlon and their allies. I was currently in the Endless March north of the Sea of Grass, negotiating with the centaurs for them to send warriors to aid the player factions. After all, the Kanlon and their seaborne allies would march right through centaur territory, so it behooved them to join the alliance to oppose them. The last two quests had also been about gathering support, moving us towards the big battle I was more and more certain was coming. Since I was friendly with so many NPC factions, King Gerin was abusing my contacts to have me go out and gather as many allies as possible.

My quests were very different from the other Champions. Currently, Savar and all the champions in her faction were doing a quest to protect their territory from Sahaugin incursions, fighting skirmishes along the coastline. I wanted to help them, but my own quests were keeping me busy, and mine were ones I could really only do alone.

Funny, that. When I finally wanted to do quests with someone else, the quests I was getting were forcing me to do them alone.

Savar was still very much on my mind, almost all the time. I really did think I was falling for her, but I had no doubt that she would find the idea of falling in love in a game to be silly, maybe even frightening, so I was keeping my growing feelings to myself. I treated her as the friend she was, we still tried to get together when we could and share dinner or watch a shiziki game, but I tried to keep things squarely in the friend zone. Savar was my friend, and I didn't want to lose her as a friend by trying to be something more.

Besides, in the game, she was a Savasa, and I'm a human. We're two very different species, and I'm not even sure we'd be...you know... *compatible*. She has fur, a tail, and a muzzle, for Pete's sake. She doesn't

have prehensile lips, so she can't even kiss. And behind the avatar was a *Shio*, a very different race from me, with their own culture and society. I know that there are some interracial relationships on Earth, but I'm not sure if humans and Shio get along, you know, romantically.

Anatomically, though, Shio girls were *exactly* like human girls. The only way they were different was the green skin and green blood, and Shio had a higher body temperature than we did, so their skin was hot to the touch.

I'm sure that to her, I'd be cold to the touch. I doubt that would be much of a turn-on.

It wasn't what she looked like that attracted me, though. It was who she *was* that I was falling in love with. She was smart, funny, witty, a touch mischievous, and she was confident and strong, and I admired that in a woman. The real woman behind Savar could be fat and ugly, and I don't think I'd care that much, because I was falling for her without ever seeing her.

After finishing my workout, I went upstairs and logged on, then finished my quest as I waited for Savar to log in as well. She still hadn't logged in when I returned to Freeport, and to both my delight and frustration, I was given a hurry up and wait quest. That freed me up to do other stuff, and naturally, I returned to Citadel and geared up to do some ruin exploration until Savar was on and I could go help her with her quest. I'd been working in as much skill training as I could to raise Blademaster and had even gotten some experience with my new parry skill. I'd had some NPC friends of mine in the factions I negotiated with shoot blunted arrows at me so I could learn how to parry them, at least after I assured them I wouldn't get mad if they hit me by accident. That training was very useful and productive, teaching me how to track an arrow, and how to set my blade so it hit my sword at an angle and then deflected to the side. It wasn't the same as parrying a weapon, and I had the feeling that parrying projectile-based spells and Ancient Skills would also be different, but it gave me a good foundation on which to build as I learned how this new skill worked.

I got in about an hour of exploration before Savar logged on. I didn't find anything noteworthy outside of a small leather pouch with an interesting design on it that hinted to me that it was magical—I wasn't

about to drop my guard enough to use Appraise Item out here—so I put it in item storage and got back into the air, high enough to be out of reach of most monsters but low enough for me to see small details on the ground. As usual, she contacted me almost as soon as she logged in. “Back on Citadel, you finish your quest?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a wait quest now. I must be waiting for another champion to finish his before I get the next one,” I answered as I flew slowly over the treetops of the Twilight Grove in Djinn form, keeping my eye on a pair of astral wolves. Those were hostile to my Djinn form, they could see through my Improved Invisibility, and they had a ranged attack. If they looked up and saw me, they might try to attack me. I didn’t go any higher because there were some really big carnivorous birds out here that could also see through invisibility, and I didn’t feel like going high enough to get their attention. I’d learned the hard way that staying just over the treetops was the safest place to be in this area. “Give me fifteen minutes, and I can come help you with your quest.”

“We finished just before I logged out last night,” she told me. “So I have to go back to Savalda and see what I get next. If I end up waiting too, how about some dinner?”

“I’d love some, but I don’t have any cooking mats. I haven’t found much of anything this exploration run,” I told her, flying over a sun-dappled clearing. “Right now, I’m trying to get back to the city without getting eaten by something.”

“You know, I could come up and help you.”

“You, help me? Ha!” I retorted playfully. “That would violate the Solo Code of Honor!”

“Keep talking, mister solo master,” she shot back impishly. “I’m sure you won’t be talking so big when I have to come and scrape you off the wall.”

“Hush, you. I’ll be home in a little while. Probably long before you get here.”

“No doubt.

I managed to get to the edge of the grove, and as I descended to change back to human form, a blinding flash and explosion threw me back into the air, the sky and ground trading places multiple times before a nearly stunning impact against a tree dumped me into a bush at its base. My hair was on fire and I'd lost nearly 20% of my health. I shook my head to shake out the cobwebs, and then heard a voice chanting the words of power to a spell.

Emelda! It was Emelda!

I raced backwards around the tree trunk, and just in time. A pillar of fire consumed it, roaring up over the trees, and I saw her as I glanced back. She was up on one of her discs, looking right at me as she started chanting another spell, it was apparent she knew the Djinn was me.

Damn it damn it damn it! I was so busy watching those wolves that I didn't think to look *up*! She'd been right over and behind me!

She must have been stalking me with Detect Player, and instead of attacking, she watched. She must have seen me change back and forth between human and Djinn form while I was exploring, and then no doubt it all came together for her when I vanished from her Detect Player spell. She now knew about my Djinn form, and that it allowed me to evade player detection spells.

I slid to a stop even as I shifted back into human form, my hand dipping into my Bag of Carrying. I had several Plan Emeldas, each one covering a different contingency, and this one called for Plan D. I whipped a large glowing red crystal out of my bag as she finished her spell and pointed at me, but I shattered it in my hand before her spell could go off. A shimmering cube of pure energy surrounded me, and when her spell struck the face of it, that face vanished, and a new face rotated towards her.

That would buy me time, but only about ten seconds. If she was smart, she'd just cast five very fast spells at the Cube of Force to expend all six faces, and then she'd have a shot at me again. But ten seconds was all I needed. I pulled out another charm, another Lucilia Special, and then equipped another Crystal Shield on my left arm, an item she knew very well given I used it to make her eat one of her Conflagration spells the last time we tussled. I activated the charm, causing it to crumble to dust, and felt its

magic infuse me, then retrieved my Spider's Fang from my item storage and nocked an arrow.

Emelda had a love of fire-based spells. I was going to use that against her.

When the last face of the cube was gone, she got a clear view of me pointing an arrow at her. She remembered what I did last time and had raised a barrier that protected her from arrows. I used Imbue Arrow and fired anyway to deplete a charge off her shield, and that had results. Her shield stopped the arrow, but it didn't stop the lightning bolt, which penetrated her shield and did damage to her. She shrugged off that hit, chanted words of power behind her shield, and then I raised the crystal shield to square off against her, sending my bow back to item storage and drawing one of my swords.

As I expected, she cast a weak spell to consume the shield, a Magic Missile spell. Ten magical darts streaked away from her and raced towards me...ten *projectiles*. The first would be reflected by the shield and then I'd eat the other nine...if I allowed it to happen.

I drew my other sword and set myself. They seemed to slow down, my eyes were able to track them, and I knew exactly what to do.

I don't think I ever did anything like that before, and I was glad as *hell* I was recording my simsense stream when I did it. In a rapid succession of sweeping movements of my swords, I *parried* seven of the ten missiles. The first four hit my swords and were disrupted, causing small explosions of magical energy, the fifth and sixth hit, I parried another, the seventh hit, and then I parried the last two. Emelda's face took on a shocked expression, utterly shocked, because she had never seen anyone deflect a spell with a *sword*. And neither had I, for that matter, until I did it.

She was stunned into inaction for a critical moment, and I seized on her shock by turning and shifting back into Djinn form, then bolting towards the city...just not at full speed. If I went full speed, I could have left her in the dust.

That was a ruse. I had no intention of running this time, because I was sick and tired of this damned bitch. I just wanted her to chase me, I wanted her to cast her most powerful fire nuke at me, because she had no idea that

the effect of my consumable carried over to Djinn form. I didn't try to dodge or zigzag, I flew arrow straight back for the city just over the treeptops, and she did exactly what I expected her to do. She was casting Cataclysm, her most powerful attack spell.

A *fire* spell.

Cataclysm hit like a Mack truck, but the balance of it was that it took a long time to cast. She thought I was running, felt she had the time to cast a spell, that I wouldn't get out of range before it went off. She had no idea. Absolutely no idea.

The spell went off, a massive meteor of fire that manifested high in the sky and then raced right at me. I cleared the grove of trees, dropped to the ground, shifted back to human form, and didn't even try to stop the spell with my crystal shield. I needed it to hit me, and I needed it to hit for its full effect.

And it did.

We don't feel pain in this game, just an awareness of damage, but that came close to pain. The consumable I used reduced my Fire Resistance and Magic Resistance against fire spells to *zero*, which allowed the spell to hit me for its full damage, unresisted, unreduced. But the effect also wouldn't allow the spell to kill me. The spell's raw power took all my remaining health, reducing me to just *one* hit point, and she lost sight of me in the explosion that followed the meteor strike. She didn't see a black nimbus form around my hand, but she saw it when the fire and smoke cleared, saw me pointing the palm of my enshrouded hand at her.

She had no idea what was about to happen.

The spell had absorbed nearly 10,000 points of fire damage, the full unresisted power of her spell. I only have 4,112 hit points, so it was massive overkill, it would have one-shot me even at full health twice over. The spell had taken the remaining 80% of my health bar, and *that* was the number that mattered here. The consumable was an extremely powerful, rare, and dreadfully expensive consumable known as the Periapt of Charred Magic, which was fueled by fire-based magic. I thrust my hand upwards at her, and the black nimbus around my hand turned into a bolt of black magic, lancing up through the smoke and dust and striking her in the chest. It initially did

nothing, just surrounded her with a dark aura, but I was sure she was seeing the debuff in her field of vision. She hit me for 80% of my health with that attack, and now that debuff would prevent her from using anything magical for twice that percentage in seconds, or 160 seconds. For two minutes and 40 seconds, she would be unable to cast any spell, use any magic-based skill or ability, or use any consumable that involved magic.

And the first aspect of that effect manifested, when the disc on which she was standing burned away to nothing, charred by her touch.

The gamble of using Charred Magic was that the debuff was on *me* as well, for the same amount of time, so I couldn't use any magic either. That meant that I had one hit point, and I couldn't heal using a totem until Charred Magic ended. So I had to kill Emelda without being hit even once.

Given she was a spellcaster and had just fallen a considerable distance, taking fall damage, I'd take that gamble.

And she did the first thing I expected. She turned, and she ran.

I raced after her on foot—I can't take Djinn form with Charred Magic in effect—moving through the brush and getting out of her sight, then I flanked her, ran up a leaning tree, then jumped off and blindsided her. Her eyes widened as she saw me suddenly appear, swords out and in the air hurtling right at her, but she didn't freeze. She tried to evade, but I was right on top of her, slashing her across her left side as I came down, rolling through and back to my feet as she tumbled, a wide glowing red slash across her side. I'd taken nearly 5% of her health with that strike.

“Are you going to run or fight? I only have one hit point. All you have to do is scratch me with your dagger, and I'll die. I won't even use any of my sword skills. I'll kill you with basic sword attacks, when I could Doom Blade you here and now and most likely kill you. You'll never get another chance like this,” I said tauntingly. “Or are you so one-sided that you can't even manage that without your magic?”

She snarled at me and yanked out her dagger, holding it point-down so she could stab at me overhanded. I gave her a mocking, flourishing bow, then waded right in.

She had some skill with a dagger, but she simply didn't have enough. She wielded it with confident skill, but she found her every attempt to stab

or slash me parried or avoided, while my swords used their superior reach to bite into her again, and again, and again, and again, whittling her health down. Her health steadily dwindled as the seconds counted down, as she shifted from trying to kill me to stalling for time, trying to get the debuff to drop off so she could finish me off with magic.

The fury in her eyes turned to fear as she realized that she wasn't going to make it, that I would kill her before the debuff faded. That made her attack with her dagger in an absolute frenzy, trying to get that one hit on me that would kill me. When I had her under 10%, she went even more crazy, whipping and swinging and stabbing with her dagger almost mindlessly, and to my surprise, she had tears in her eyes.

I'm sure to her, it was almost a gut punch. The debuff had just nine seconds left on it when I disarmed her, kicked her backwards, and then finished her, taking the last of her health. Her body collapsed to the ground, I gained a Champion's Point, and my Champion of Champions quest updated to show my victory over the high elf champion. But I didn't care about that. I was honestly concerned about her, to the point where I healed myself with a few totems, sheathed my swords, then sat down next to her body. She'd come back to it to recover her gear, and I wanted to talk to her. The tears, the look in her eyes, I'd never seen anything like it. It disturbed me, really disturbed me, like I'd shattered her entire world. Savar said she took this game way too seriously, and now that was in the back of my mind.

I don't play this game to hurt people.

She came through a gap in the trees and stopped dead, gaping at me. She was still crying, her eyes haunted, standing there naked as a jaybird (we reincarnate naked, making the run back to your corpse a bit humiliating), then she dropped to her knees well outside of my reach. "Are you taking my title?" she croaked.

"No. I want to talk to you, now that *this* is out of the way," I replied in a gentle voice. I sent my swords into item storage, which made her give me a strange look. "Go ahead and take your gear back. I won't try to stop you."

She did so, rather quickly, and almost looked ready to either attack me or run away. But she just stood there, her eyes still haunted, tears still on her cheeks. "Have a seat," I said, motioning in front of me. She slowly walked

over, as if she were a child caught misbehaving by her parents, then demurely seated herself. “I think that right now, you’re starting to understand that I am not someone you’re going to kill easily, Emelda. I may not have your gear, but what I do have are plans, as well as very deep pockets that I’m willing to spend on very exotic consumables to counter your magic. And now that you’ve seen my little Djinn secret, you understand just how hard it’s going to be for you to find me when this is done. Once the Grand Crusade is over, Emelda, no spell you’ll ever find or research is going to track me down. I told you before I could vanish off the face of the Twin Worlds, and now I think you understand that I was being deadly serious.

“Now, we can spend the rest of our game lives scratching at each other like to angry cats, or we can end this here and now. You once offered me a win trade to get the mount. Well, I don’t want the mount, but you do. So here’s the deal. I’ll allow you to kill me so you get credit for me in your mount quest, and in return, you *leave me alone*,” I said intensely. “You let everything else go, and from here on out, when we have to work together to finish the Grand Crusade quests, we do it to the best of our ability, *together*. You can choose, Emelda. Keep hating me for what happened and never get what you want or leave it behind us and get the mount. I’ll let you think about that for a few minutes,” I said calmly.

“What is that? The Djinn,” she said, sniffing. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s a Legendary skill called Touched by the Djinn,” I said honestly. “What makes it so powerful is that when I take Djinn form, the game no longer sees me as a player. So Detect Player spells don’t work on me, and monsters that aren’t hostile to the Djinn in the game won’t attack me. I use it to slip past hostile monsters and NPCs, and it’s one of the secrets of why I’m such a good explorer. I can avoid a lot of fights using Djinn form because I can fly and because I’m not seen as a player.”

“I can see why,” she said, then she wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand. She was quiet a long moment, then took a breath. “Alright. If you let me get credit for you for the mount, I’ll stop chasing you. That’s what I want the most.”

“Alright then,” I said, standing up. “Go ahead and buff up, and I’ll meet you at the graveyard as soon as you get there. We’ll do it there, so I can reclaim my gear inside the graveyard safe zone.”

She gave me a long look, and I could see it in her eyes. She thought I was lying, that I was getting her hopes up and then would just walk away, that I was toying with her.

“Or I can wait for you to be ready and we can go together,” I amended calmly. “It’s your choice.”

I saw something in her eyes change, and she looked down at her hands. “Why?” was all she said.

“Because I don’t play this game to hurt other people,” I told her simply. “I know what it’s like to have someone tear away everything you care about, laugh in your face, and feel absolutely powerless to stop it. I treated you the way the Trillanes treated me when I was on a work farm, and for that, I’m sorry.”

To my surprise, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. I stood there, not sure what to do, then she looked up at me, her eyes haunted and her expression horrified. “Farm sixteen, Meria Province. Two years, three months.”

“Farm nine, Apará Province, three years, six months.”

“Brother,” she said through her tears.

“Sister,” I said with a respectful nod. “We stand together.”

“We stand together,” she repeated.

We stand together was our motto, our slogan, and it was often the only thing we had. On the farms, we pickers were a *family*, and we looked out for each other. We made sure the hungry were fed, that people who lost clothes got new ones, that the sick were protected until they got well. The only way we survived that hell was by standing together.

I stepped over to her and offered her my hand. She took it, her eyes still sheened with tears, and I helped her to her feet. “Now let’s go get you one step closer to your mount, sister,” I told her.

Her expression was chagrined, almost anguished. “If I’d have known —,”

“We all have our secrets, Emelda. And that part of my life is something I don’t like to think about.”

“Rita,” she corrected. “My name is Rita.”

“I’m Kevin,” I returned. “And I know that if you knew I was a picker too, you wouldn’t have come after me. We stand together.”

She gave me a sudden, earnest embrace. “I’m so sorry. I would never hurt a brother.”

“Apology accepted,” I told her warmly, patting her on the back. “And if anyone asks me, I’ll tell them you got me fair and square.”

She gave a wan laugh. “No wonder you’re so good,” she said. “You were a picker so long, you have to be smart to survive that hell for three and a half years.”

“I was one of the first people put on a farm,” I sighed as I let go of her, and we started walking back towards the city. “I was only seventeen. But they didn’t care. All they saw was a slave that was in good enough shape to handle the work,” I said stonily.

“It sounds like you play this game for the same reason I do. Here, I can forget about the farm.”

“We never forget, Rita,” I told her. “All we can do is learn how to live with the memory.”

It made sense. She was so into this game because in a way, she was like me. This reality was better than the one we left behind. Here, we were powerful, formidable people. We were never *slaves*, we never had our minds raked over the coals by sadistic guards. Here, we had power, the power to protect ourselves, to ensure that nobody ever did anything like that to us again. It explained her irrational hatred of me. In her eyes, I’d broken up her guild, her *family*, and that struck at the core of her entire identity. And she must have felt betrayed by those who quit the guild over what she did, because she did it for *her family*. She was trying to advance one of her guildmates by taking my title and letting him claim it, and while how she did it was dirty, all that mattered to her was that she was helping her family.

We all did things we weren't proud about on the farm.

I was a man of my word. When we reached the graveyard, I put my gear in item storage to reduce my hit points and magic resistance, and I let her kill me. When I reincarnated barely five meters away, I put my gear back on and came back over to her, reclaiming the last couple of pieces of gear off my prior body. When it was completely looted, it vanished in a puff of magical motes. "Good luck with the rest of them," I told her.

"I only need six more," she told me.

"Then it won't take you too long," I said.

"Can...can we talk sometime?" she asked me, almost timidly. "I've never met another picker in the game."

"The Plucky Scrub is *my* shop," I told her without hesitation. "I think the name probably gives that away to the more observant players."

"You living up here, or still in Freeport?"

"Here now," I replied. "Living in Freeport doesn't get you very far, since nobody ever goes there. Having a shop up here gives me a chance to actually make money."

She chuckled. "I know that feeling. I have a house and a shop in Astralar, where I sell my tailoring goods." That was the high elf capitol. "It totally changed how I play the game. Heck, sometimes I log in just to watch vidy in my house. My house here is way better than my apartment in real life."

I had to laugh. "I know that feeling. I live in one of those little efficiency apartments, you know, the shake and bake buildings they built to ease the housing shortage after they made Earth neutral," I admitted. "The apartment over the shop in my house in Freeport isn't much bigger than it is. But now I have this three-story townhouse with my own private garden on top in the game. It makes me never want to log out and look at my apartment."

She laughed. "Exactly. Get Succor as soon as you can."

"I have it. I just can't use it," I told her. "Fifty points to go until I can learn it."

“Then you’re all set once you grind out the points,” she said with a smile.

When we reached the scion, we attracted a little attention. Most veterans on the server were well aware of the history the two of us had, so no doubt they were shocked to see us walking side by side without trying to kill each other. “If you need help with your Champion quests, I’m available,” I told her. “As long as the rest of your guild doesn’t mind.”

“I’ll probably take you up on that,” she told me.

“You know where to find me. Just tell the Djinn that works in my shop, Avrazzi, you want to see me. If I’m home, he’ll come up and get me.”

“Alright. Thank you, Xen. For everything.”

“Any time,” I told her, taking her hand. “See you the next time we have a common quest.”

She nodded, then stepped back into the scion and cast Teleport, and then she vanished in a wavering blue flash of magic.

Naturally she’d have Teleport.

“Dude, we heard you two hate each other,” someone said to me.

“We both found out that life is too short to hate,” I answered. “So the feud is over.”

Savar came to the house about half an hour later, and she was a bit shocked...word had already gotten out that me and Emelda had buried the hatchet. But what I didn’t expect was that my other little secret would get out as well. “Xen, people know you own this place!” she told me. “I heard it at the scion! Did you start telling people?”

“No,” I said, then I smacked my forehead. “Emelda!”

“I heard you two made peace.”

“We did, but when we were at the scion, I told her to come to the shop if she needed to talk to me, that the Djinn would let me know she was there. The people around must have heard that.”

“That’d do it,” she said, then she chuckled. “So, you’ve been outed. You better be ready for the people banging down your door asking for a loan.

They know you have to be rich to own a building like this.”

“I’ll mute the doors, and use Teleport to go directly to the scion so they can’t harass me outside” I said, which made her laugh. I can do that, by the way. I can set the house to *do not disturb*, so I won’t hear anyone knocking or using the doorbell. “Guess I don’t have to sneak in through the back anymore.”

“So, I thought you hated Emelda.”

“That was before I found out she’s a sister,” I said, then explained the background of farm workers. “She was on a farm too, and our biggest rule was we stand *together*. Pickers do not fight pickers. We don’t steal from each other. We help each other as much as we can, and most of us are still like that. If a fellow picker showed up at my apartment hungry and homeless, I’d give him my bed, my food, and share my money with him. When we found out we were both pickers, the feud was over like *that*,” I said, snapping my fingers. “I let her kill me for her mount quest, and I told her I’d help her with her crusade quests if she needs it. Because she is a picker, and pickers stand together.” I looked at her as we went into the kitchen. “So I’d appreciate it if you talk to your guild and have Felik make peace with her guild. And don’t hate Emelda. Now that I know what I know, I understand *why* she did what she did.”

“She tried to take your title, in the dirtiest way possible.”

“She was helping a guildmate, who she sees as *family*, Savar,” I told her. “Now that I know what I know, I can understand why she did it. It being cheap and dirty didn’t matter to her, because she was doing it for *family*. She’d do *anything* for family. That’s how we survived on the farms. And that’s why she was so hurt when you guys quit the guild. In her eyes, she did it all for *you*, and you turned your back on her. She’d do anything for you, and you didn’t return her loyalty. That’s a terrible betrayal for someone whose very life once depended on being able to depend on those around her.”

“I never thought of it like that,” she said pensively as she pulled those flank steaks I love so much out of her item storage and put them on the counter. I don’t know how she got them, and I’m not about to ask. “And it explains why she’s been so, well, vicious.”

“You hurt her deeply and lashing out was the only way she could respond,” I nodded. “But I will say this. Make up with her, and she’ll take you back so fast you’ll think she’s a different person. Because despite how much you hurt her, you are still *family*. She wants her family back together, and she’ll bend over backwards to make it happen.”

“I doubt we’d ever reform as a single guild,” Savar said. “Felik’s proven he’s a better raid leader than Baron was, and I doubt Baron would accept a demotion like that. Baron’s very into his power as a guild leader. But I guess we could form a guild alliance and help each other push through the last five raids before Citadel.”

“I’ll leave all the silly politics to you people,” I said, which made her laugh.

“I’m going to get you into my guild, Xen,” she threatened with a toothy grin.

“Then I’d better run harder.”

After enjoying her sumptuous dinner, we sat on the couch and talked about a few things, then watched a baseball game on the viddy. Since it was *just* baseball, we kept talking, and drifted into a topic I wasn’t expecting. “I know you don’t like to talk about the farms,” she said, looking at me. “But it sounds like there’s a lot that people don’t know about what happened there.”

“That’s because those of us who survived them don’t like to talk about it,” I told her. “We were *slaves*, Savar. We were treated like objects, they worked many of us to death, and the guards used to abuse us for fun. And the abuse wasn’t just physical,” I said with a shudder. “If you’ve never had your mind unraveled one layer at a time, then you just can’t understand. What the guards did to us, no physical torture could come close to it. I’d rather have a red-hot poker shoved into my mouth than have my mind ripped apart over and over again.”

She put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t your people that did it, and I don’t blame all Faey. I know that what they did to us was illegal, that the Imperium would have stamped it out if they knew what was happening. But I can’t trust them. I see them, and all I can think of is what they did to me. I know it’s not fair to those who

didn't know what was going on, or would have stopped it if they did, but I just can't help it. Even after fourteen years since I was released from the farm...sometimes I feel like I never left it," I said without emotion. "And I think, in a way, I never will. A part of me will always be on that farm, Savar, the part of me the Trillanes ripped out of my soul. I'll always be trapped behind that fence, searching for a way out."

She put her hand on my cheek, then pulled me over to put her forehead against mine. I closed my eyes and found the gesture very comforting, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Hello. My name is Sano Strongblade, from Shio Prime in the Federation. I live in Sao Paolo, Brazil," she said in a gentle voice. "It's nice to meet you."

"My name is Kevin Ball," I returned. "From Earth. I live in Jacksonville, United States. It's nice to meet you too."

She pulled me into a warm, gentle hug, and I held onto her for a long, long time. Telling her part of my past had brought out the old pain, but the warmth of her fur and her kind gesture soothed it, soothed it in more than one way.

Eventually, she let go of me, then smiled at me as she sent me an in-game text message over friend chat. It was a number. A *vidlink* number. "That's my vidlink number. I'd like to talk to the real you, Kevin. If you'd like."

"I don't look anything like this in real life," I warned.

She laughed. "Neither do I," she winked. "So, why don't we talk face to face?"

"It'll feel weird."

"I can handle it if you can."

I gave her a long look, indecision gripping me and my feelings for her warring with fear of losing her friendship, then I finally nodded.

"Give me a minute to log off," she said, standing up. "I'm still assigned the bed?" When I nodded, she leaned down and licked me on the cheek, then went to the guest room. I waited a moment before getting up myself, heading to the bedroom so I could log off.

I did so with a little trepidation, sitting up from my bed and facing the vidlink, then calling her vidlink number. I was nearly stunned at the face that answered...she was *gorgeous*! She had Shio green skin, sure, but she had lustrous dark hair with greenish undertones, lucid, glittering green eyes, and a beautiful, beautiful face. She had on a tee shirt with some logo I think is from a shiziki team, since the writing on it wasn't any language I'd ever seen. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, her room small but immaculately clean, with two Shio dream crystals on her nightstand. They were an old Shio tradition meant to bring good dreams, if I remember right. And I was certain she was disappointed at what she was seeing in return. I'm not very handsome, but at least I'm not ugly, and I have visible scars from my time on the farm, including the one on my neck from the chip. I'd never had the Medical Service remove them...to remove them would be like taking away a part of who I am. I am my scars, and each one represents a part of what I went through on that farm. "Hi, Kevin," she smiled as I gawked at her, speaking Faey. Faey is more or less the common language on Earth. "What? Am I wearing my shirt backwards or something?"

"You're *beautiful*," I blurted, also speaking Faey.

She actually blushed, her cheeks turning a darker shade of green. "Why, thank you," she said modestly. "So, disappointed I don't have fur?"

I had to laugh. "A little. The question is, do you have phantom tail syndrome?"

"Oh yeah," she said with a grin. That was a common thing for people who merge to a game where their avatar has body parts that they don't. When they log out, they have psychosomatic sensations in a limb they don't have, like how someone who lost an arm would have phantom sensations in a limb that wasn't there anymore. "I get it every time I log out. I usually wait a minute or two before I get up, or I'll fall flat on my face thinking the weight of my tail will balance me." She glanced to the sides. "Your place looks almost as small as mine."

"This is about it. I have another, even smaller room that holds my kitchen and washing machine. But I do have a bit of a view." I had the vidlink launch its hovering camera pod and stood up and had it look out the window. In the distance was the ocean, but it was only visible between the

other mega-buildings between the coast and my building. “It’s almost sunset here, so it’s easier to see. There’s often fog in the morning, though.”

“You’re only an hour behind me, so it’s after sunset here,” she said. Sao Paolo had to be in the Atlantic time zone. “I’d show you my view, but all you can see is the hillside and the next building over.”

“You’re compulsively neat,” I noted, which made her laugh.

“Blame a strict mother,” she winked. “She’d see those socks on your floor and have an absolute conniption.”

“Obsessive compulsive?”

“*Beyond* obsessive,” she drawled, which made me chuckle. “Mother would make us arrange our toys on the shelf by size. My sister would always put them up out of order to trigger Mom.”

I laughed. “Sounds like a troublemaker.”

“Mikano is very much a scoundrel,” she grinned. “Mom was shocked when she joined the Federated Navy, she didn’t believe she could handle the discipline. But she’s very proud of her now that she’s a ship captain in the Karinne Navy.”

We knew each other very well from our talks in the game, but it was very different seeing the real woman behind Savar, and to know her name. And even her name was pretty...*Sano* just rolled off the tongue. I had some issues talking to a woman that pretty, but I found that if I concentrated on her voice, it was much easier. Sano’s voice in the real world was the same as it was in the game, so I was hearing Savar.

A lot of Shio women had names ending in an *-oh* sound, I’d noticed. It had to be some kind of cultural tradition. Two of the three Shio women in the company were like that, their names ended with *o*. The one that wasn’t was named Medik.

I blurted it out before thinking. “Why do so many Shio women have names ending with the *oh* sound?”

“Because that’s the feminine version of a person or object in our language,” she answered. “Our language assigns gender to most objects, both living and inanimate, *-oh* for girls and *-ick* for boys. The only Shio

men you'll find with a name ending in *-oh* are ones whose mothers were bitterly disappointed they didn't have a daughter."

I laughed brightly. "We have things like that in English too," I said. "So the word Shio itself is feminine?"

"Mmm-hmm," she hummed; she *had* to pick that up here in Earth. "But Shio men aren't *too* hurt over it," she winked. "The word *Shio* in our language means *borne from*, and since we're borne from our mothers, the noun is feminine."

"So the Shio people see themselves as borne from their world, since it's *also* named Shio. Poetic," I noted.

"You have a good ear for language," she said with a commending nod. "In the First Religion, we were considered to be children of the world itself ...*shio em edo*, that means borne from the world. And I guess the word *shio* stuck more than *edo* with our ancestors. But at least we didn't name our planet after dirt," she winked.

I laughed. "You live here too, Savar—Sano. Sorry."

"I'm gonna do that a lot too," she told me with a grin.

"Wait. There's a Shio woman in my company named Medik," I realized. "So she's named like a boy?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "If I only saw her name on a list, I'd automatically think she's a man. What was her mother thinking?" she asked aloud.

"I guess she was bitterly disappointed she didn't have a son," I mused.

"Probably," she laughed. "I bet she moved to Terra just to get away from the teasing," she grinned.

It got easier and easier talking to Sano in real life, as I got over how pretty she was, and realized that the personality was the same as the Savasa archer I'd come to know. We talked about nothing in particular for a while, just chatting as we often did, until she veered into unexplored territory for both of us. "You have an interface?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied, pointing at my endtable.

“Kevin, would you mind giving me your interface ID number?” she asked, almost hesitantly. “That way we can talk over CivNet when we’re not home.”

“Well...I guess. I mean, you have my vidlink number, so it’s not like it’s much of an extra step,” I said. “I don’t wear my interface when I’m working, so it’s not worth it to try between eight and five on weekdays. And I don’t really wear it when I’m home, so if you try to talk to me and I don’t answer, that’s why. So, really, you’ll only be able to talk to me over it like two hours a day, when I’m commuting or I’m in the gym.”

“Oh yeah, the new exercise thing you’re doing. Is it paying off?”

“Yeah, my arms are starting to get back in shape,” I said, putting a hand on my bicep. I didn’t tell her what I was doing, only that I was doing a new exercise regimen to get into actual shape, not just work off the donuts I eat at work.

I gave her my interface ID and she gave me hers, and I put mine on to log her ID into its contact list. That would let us communicate silently over our interfaces, almost like telepathy. We’d talk mind to mind through our jacks and interfaces, and the times I did it with Mrima, I’d found that it conveyed more than just words. Images, other sensory info like sounds and smells, and emotions could be transmitted through the link between two interfaces, which was also something telepathy could do. She did the same, and she contacted me over the interface as we looked at each other over the vidlink. *[Hearing me?]*

[Loud and clear, so now I know you didn’t give me a fake number to punk a neighbor.]

She laughed on the vidlink, and I got to feel her amusement over the interface as it conveyed her emotion. *[There are a couple of them I wouldn’t mind punking, especially plays loud music at three in the morning guy,]* she told me, a grin on her face over the vidlink. *[The walls in this place aren’t thick enough for his sound system. They don’t have sound dampers in them.]*

“Okay, this is weirding me out a bit,” I said, looking at her. “We need to pick one or the other.”

She laughed again, taking off her interface. “Better?”

“Much less confusing,” I said as I took off my own.

“You don’t use your interface much, do you?”

I shook my head. “I only have Mrija on my contact list, and she’s not the kind to just chat at me. She only calls me when it’s important. Though, I guess I’ll be chatting with her over our interfaces more in a few weeks.”

“I have to use mine for my job, so I’m used to juggling like five different conversations at once over the interface,” she chuckled. “You’ll get the hang of it with practice.” She gave me a look. “Why are you going to chat more with her over the interface?”

“I didn’t tell you yet. She got a promotion, and with it came a transfer,” I told her. “She’s going to Norfolk to head up the accounting office there. It’s where she wanted to go, since the Academy is right there in the city. She’ll be much closer to her kids.”

“I’m sure she’ll be happy, but you’ll be saying goodbye to your best friend,” she said compassionately.

“I’ll still talk to her every day, Sano, just over this,” I said, holding up the interface. “But I will miss her. She’s a great friend.” I chuckled. “She’s so worried about me, she tried to get me to go into the apprenticeship program for accountants so she could transfer me to Norfolk with her. I swear, sometimes I think she thinks I’m one of her kids.”

“She cares about you, Kevin. I could tell the times we were all together. Did you take it?”

“No, I’d be a terrible accountant,” I replied. “So I’m still stuck in the cubicle farm, at least for now. But her leaving did make me start considering where I want to go,” I said, sitting back down on the bed. “I’ll be honest, Sano. My job sucks. I’m a glorified data entry clerk, and my job has no upward mobility. I make more than enough to live in all this luxury,” I said dryly, motioning at the small room, “but it’s the kind of job where I’ll still be in that cubicle in twenty years if I don’t find another job. Her leaving made me start thinking about what I really want to do with my life. Since we were released from the farm, I really haven’t done anything. I just drifted through life for nine years, living off my payout. I worked a variety of similar dead-end jobs until I finally got enough motivation to take a training program, which put me in *this* dead-end job,” I said wryly. “It’s

almost silly. For a human, getting a job is ridiculously easy. Companies have to hire us first before they recruit from off world, that's the law. I could have any job I really want, if I take the training for it. But I'm working in a cubicle," I said, shaking my head. "I don't know what job I want to do."

"Easy. Find out what you like to do, and find a job doing it," she said. "I love movies and working with vidy, making my own viddies, so I work for the Federated News Network as a holo editor. I'm one of those people that prepares the vidy clips and holo graphics you see them run on news programs," she said proudly. "And I do my own CO viddies."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"I don't stream or do the big stuff like some people do, but I do like to post, you know, cinematic stuff," she said. "When I first started, we'd do little scenes, like ten-minute movies, and I'd edit them and post them. You know, like role playing. We had a lot of fun doing it, and I had fun making them."

"Oh, I've seen vids like that before," I said. "You still do them?"

"Not so much, raiding takes a lot of my time now, and editing those things is time consuming. Anymore, I just post vidy of locations I find in game that I find beautiful." She gave me a sly look. "I've been waiting for you to post some of your simsense feed recordings," she said.

"How did you know I record my game sessions?"

"You told me you do it, silly," she replied with a grin. "I'd love to see some of the things you do from your camera." A simsense feed was split into two major parts, the first-person view of the player and an external third-person "camera" that allowed someone to look around the player. Simsense recorded in a panoramic format, and the camera could be moved anywhere inside a four-meter sphere around the player, pointing in any direction, and its viewing range was line of sight. While I can't access that third person view from within the game, it won't allow it to prevent people cheesing some puzzles by giving them an external point of view, I can access that camera when I'm watching a recording of my game footage. I use it quite a bit, because it allows me to study boss monsters to learn their moves, the way pro sports players watch footage of their opponents. People

who post recordings of their play sessions enable their third person cameras so viewers can see what was going on all around the player, which made it a much better viewing experience. What I see in first person doesn't really do justice to what's going on. You can't see my footwork, you can't see how my swords move most of the time, because I'm not looking at them, and my point of view is jumpy and jittery from me moving my head and body. You can only get a true sense of what's going on, and learn from it, by viewing it from third person.

"I've kicked around the idea of doing that a few times, but I'm afraid to do it."

"Why?"

"Because the way I play, Sano, I can't let people know what I can do. It lets them plan on how to beat me," I answered. "Remember, I get attacked a lot out in the world when I come across other players. They see a lone player and can't resist trying to kill me for my gold. That's half the reason I explore so far from where other players are. In a game world as big as CO, it's easy to find a place where you don't deal with other people."

"Well, you can send some of them to me so I can look at them. After all, I've already seen what you can do, and it's not all that impressive," she said playfully.

"Is that so? I think a little duel might be in order, miss too much tail for her butt," I retorted, which made her burst out laughing.

"Only if we start fifty meters apart," she winked. "But seriously, you should think about it, or even streaming. You're like the *only* player who does what you do, Kevin, and I think people would love to see you in action. I've seen it, and believe me, it's *amazing*."

"Well, I could post a few things, I guess. Stuff that doesn't reveal all my tricks," I said speculatively.

"Do you have an account with a video host site, like YouTube?"

"Not really."

"You should get one, you can post your vids on your channel. I suggest The Arena, they're the best streaming platform. I have some vids up there.

And since you're a CO Champion, they'd probably fall over themselves signing you up."

"I've watched some tutorial vids there," I noted.

"They're great. Good support, they support both video libraries and live streaming, and it's easy to go pro there." *Going pro* meant playing games for money, either by selling advertising space in videos or by monetizing live streams, where people literally paid you money to watch you play. "CO Today is great for the articles the forums, but The Arena is where most CO players go to watch vids."

"I'll have to think about it."

"You should. Given you do something none of us does, you could probably quit your job and play CO full time and make even more money than you do now," she smiled.

"Until the excitement fades, then I'll be back in a cubicle."

"True, but think of how much fun you'd have until that happens," she winked.

I had to laugh. "True enough. And I hate to cut it short, but I have some stuff to do before bed. And eating dinner is at the top of that list."

"Yeah, me too. Oh yeah, just to warn you, I won't be on for a few days," she said. "It's what I wanted to talk to you about. My sister managed to get some shore leave, and I'm going to take a few vacation days."

"The ship captain?"

"Yup," she nodded. "She wants to surprise our parents, she's going to pick me up and we're going back to Shio to see them and my brother. My mother's affirmation day is in two days, and Mikano wants to surprise her with a visit."

"What's that?"

"It's hard to explain. Think of it as something of a second birthday. It's part of our religion," she told me. "The day you affirm yourself to our god is a very important day, so much so that we celebrate it every year."

“Ohhh, okay. Like baptism in Christianity...not that you’d know about that.”

“I live in Brazil, Kevin, there are tons of Catholics here trying to convert me to their heathen religion,” she winked. “I know what baptism is.”

I had to laugh. “Must be annoying after a while.”

“You have *no* idea,” she drawled, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I’ll try to call your interface when we’re connected to CivNet to keep up with things. I’ll send you some pictures of my home planet and my family.”

“I’d like to see them,” I told her.

“Then I’ll see what I can do. So, see you in a few days?”

“You know it.”

“And I’ll call your interface when I can to keep you up to speed.”

“Sounds good. Have a fun trip.”

“We will,” she smiled. “See you later, Kevin.”

Chapter 8

The Grand Crusade was almost over.

Two days after Sano warned me she was going to go visit her parents, I had gotten a new quest to come speak to King Gerin in Freeport. I'd spent those two days trying to find more treasure out in the ruins and exploring Citadel, which was both nerve-wracking and tons of fun, but I'd also taken her advice and started a channel at The Arena. I didn't put anything on it yet, but I wanted the channel just in case I decided to do it. I'd have that part of it ready. Outside of that, not much had happened since Sano had left for Shio Prime, outside of one thing. She'd sent me several videos showing her family, some interesting locations on her home planet, and her ancestral home, which surprisingly was a fairly big manor on a hillside overlooking a city, and she looked like she was having an absolute ball.

I was happy for her.

The big thing that had happened while Sano was gone was that I got a *skill crystal*. I found it in a treasure chest in a ruin, and I was stunned when I found it. I had no idea skill crystals were part of the loot table of the treasure chests...but I should have realized it. A treasure chest had bonus loot in it the same as the monsters around the chest, and skill crystals could drop from the monsters in the area.

And I didn't just get any skill crystal...I got a *thirty-point* crystal.

And what do you know, I needed 29 points to equip the bow Savar made for me!

With that major milestone achieved, being able to equip the doom bow that Savar made, it made me realize that I'd been remiss in my other duties when it came to Djinn form.

It was well past time to make myself a pair of swords.

I had a plan for it. I was going to wear my swords at my waist instead of over my back, because I'd need my back clear to carry my bow and keep

my hands free to cast spells. But then I remembered I could have all three weapons equipped at the same time. Equipped in the game meant actively wearing the item and having it at the ready, though a ranged weapon like a bow could be kept in item storage and still be considered equipped. We're allowed to have two one-handed weapons, or a weapon and a shield, or a two-handed weapon, and a ranged weapon equipped at the same time, even though we can only use one or the other. In human form, I do get the bonus stats for my Spider's Fang even though I don't have it out, because I have it formally *equipped*. We're allowed to do that because it's often very awkward to fight with a bow slung over your shoulder, and it's one of the few ways where the game *doesn't* faithfully adhere to reality as much as possible.

Dual wielding with a bow slung over your shoulder is even harder than using just one weapon, and I don't recommend it.

I'd do the same thing in Djinn form I did in human form, and that was carry the swords on my back. But I'd be doing it using a special magic item I've had for a while but never used, the Bandolier of Accessibility. The bandolier allowed you to carry weapons or a quiver over your back, but it allowed you to keep them in your item storage and recall them instantly instead of having to go through the item storage menu. I'd never used it in human form because I don't usually need to swap between my swords and my bow, but I'd be using both in Djinn form. I'd been trying to sell it for a while, and lucky for me, nobody had bought it. Using the bandolier, my swords and bow would stay in item storage until I recalled them, then they would appear either slung over my back or over my shoulder, depending on which I recalled, and let me draw them. The bandolier would let me attach both swords, my bow, and my quiver to it, which would let me go about with no visible weapon until I needed one, then allow me to recall them instantly when needed rather than waste precious seconds retrieving them manually from item storage. I still had to draw them, but that wasn't a big deal. The best part was, the bandolier itself was magical, so I could wear my vest over it without it interfering with the ability to recall my weapons and quiver, and I could hide the bandolier using illusion magic so it didn't break up my Djinn-themed attire.

So, the entire day was involved in making some *very* nice swords, something I'd put off for way too long. I invested the vast majority of what

money I had left in some very high quality mats, going with starsteel for the blades and dragon bone for the hilts, and I invested in extra materials that would create a specific theme for the swords. Since Djinn utilized lightning as a weapon, I decided that lightning would be the theme of the swords I made. What this trick did was ensure that if I got any bonus upgrades to the weapons while I made them, like a proc or a special ability, it would be lightning based. It didn't guarantee I'd get one, but if it happened, it would be attuned to the theme I'd chosen for the swords. I used every high-skill trick I knew as a blacksmith to make the swords as powerful as possible, since I didn't have to worry about keeping the minimum skill requirement down. My sword skill is over 3,000, my Blacksmithing skill isn't high enough to make a sword I can't equip with a Sword skill *that* high.

The result...*wow*. One of the swords had four bonuses, and the other had three, but one of those bonuses was *awesome*. Both had a minimum skill of 2,000 to use, which really didn't mean jack to me, and I used the same formula Savar used of focusing on spellcasting stats but also giving the swords a high damage rating and a good spread of physical stats so they could hit hard and give me sufficient physical stats to increase that damage. For the main sword, I got two bonuses to the damage rating, a bonus to Intelligence, and a special property. The offhand sword got a bonus to damage rating, a bonus to Mana, and a proc that caused the blade to deal extra electric damage from time to time.

But the special property on the main sword was what made me so proud. It was a rare special ability normally only seen on dungeon-quality loot, and an effect that complemented my Djinn form *perfectly*. It was called Spellshock, and what it did was cause the weapon to deal extra damage as electrical damage, and the blade had a proc that caused an electric "jolt" that would stun the target for a split second, which would interrupt spellcasting and skills and abilities that had a ramp-up sequence, requiring time to use. The blade had little arcs of electricity constantly dancing across the blade when it was drawn.

Remember that I am completely immune to lightning and electricity thanks to Touched by the Djinn, in either form. So having a sword that can deal bonus lightning damage meant it was absolutely no threat to hurt *me* if I used it in tight confines, or used it while in the water.

Needless to say, I was *entirely* satisfied with the result of a long day's work at the forge and anvil in my workshop. The swords would be *extremely* useful. Both swords had an electric-based theme thanks to my special preparations, with Spellshock on one and the electric shock proc on the other, which was perfect when in the hands of a Djinn.

The swords themselves were a little unusual physically. In the hands of my Djinn form, they were longswords, elegant weapons with a straight blade and a double edge, but I'd had to make them using a two-handed sword template, including their damage rating being that of a two-handed sword. For a three-meter-tall wielder, a longsword more or less *was* a two-handed sword, or maybe a bastard sword, for a human-sized wielder. I'd made them to mimic the physical characteristics of my Soulblades of Shatra Sha as much as possible for my Djinn form. They had the same proportional length, sense of weight, and balance in my Djinn form as the Soulblades did in my human form, which would make it very easy to use them. They wouldn't feel different to me between the two forms.

So, my Djinn form was now *officially* ready for combat, to be used as something other than purely a mode of transportation or a means to evade monsters. I had all the gear and equipment either made, bought, or looted, I could equip and use my bow, and now I had swords. I'd practiced enough with swords as a Djinn to feel fully comfortable with the exotic fighting style required when you never put your feet on the ground, and I'd fully adjusted to using a bow from both a hover and while on the move while flying.

I was ready.

But the fun came to an end when I received a summons from King Gerin to return to Freeport. I made my way there immediately after receiving it, where Gerin brought me into his study, where Prince Aldion, Admiral Rogers, General Brand, commander of the Freeport Army, and Spymaster Merria were gathered, then Gerin showed me a map of the southern marches of Arca. "We have confirmation of our worries, Champion," he said. "The Sahaugin and sea giants are going to invade at the Sea of Grass like we expected, and as we suspected, our spies have found out that the Kanlon won't be part of it. We were right, the Kanlon are going to attack Freeport. The objective is for them to capture two of the

largest seaports in southern Arca simultaneously, Freeport and Vistara. The sea giants and Sahaugin will be the main force invading the Sea of Grass. The Salamanders will then pincer the Amber Shire from the west and capture Vistara, securing the Kanlon supply lines to their allies as they attempt to take over the southern coast. While that happens, the main invasion force of Kanlon soldiers is going to try to take Freeport, with support from the Sahaugin. As Admiral Rogers feared, much of their movements in the south was designed to make us send our armies south and leave Freeport undefended. They intend to sail their navy right into our harbor and try to disembark their troops at our own docks,” he said darkly. “The other leaders of the faction are committing to the defense of Freeport, and to replace their troops in the defense of the Amber Shire, three of the factions of Netherim and the Moonshadow faction north of us have agreed to send troops, particularly Nazetar to counter the Sahaugin forces that will be assisting the Kanlon. The Grimstone and Bloody Skull factions of Netherim have agreed to assist the Amber Shire, while the Boiling Blood and the Dark Sun factions have pledged forces to aid the Silver Blade in repelling the Salamanders that emerge from the Smoking Mountains. The Black Fangs have committed troops to the defense of Freeport, which will be of great use to us. The Nazetar of the Moonshadow faction can attack the Kanlon ships from below, and the Drakkin can fly, which will allow them to assault the Kanlon ships before they reach the shore. Champion, we’re going to need you here to defend Freeport,” he told me.

“Actually, your Majesty, I can be in both places,” I told him. “You call me on your communication crystal, and I can be here in five minutes. I can even bring the other Champions of the Golden Lion with me. So we can be wherever we’re needed most. If the Sahaugin invade first, we can be there to help the others. But when the Kanlon arrive, we can leave that battlefield and get here within moments, using the scion hidden under the city.”

He gave me a bright look. “That’s the best possible outcome,” he said. “I promised your assistance to our Amber Shire allies to hold back the fish-men. This way you can honor that promise and still protect Freeport. At least if the Sahaugin invade before Freeport is attacked. I believe that they will, but not by very much,” he said, looking at the map again. “I believe the Salamanders will emerge first, since their plan requires them to reach Vissanu to pincer the Amber Shire. I think that battle will take place first,

and when our enemies realize we're ready for them, they'll order the attacks at the Sea of Grass and Freeport simultaneously. The Sahaugin and sea giants will get here first, so they will be the next to engage, and finally the Kanlon will reach Freeport."

"A sound assessment, your Majesty," I nodded. "I think you're right."

"As do I," Admiral Rogers nodded.

"I concur with his Majesty," Merria injected.

"We know what they intend to do, and thanks to the efforts of Spymaster Merria and the skill of her spies, we know *when*," Gerin told me. "The invasion is to take place fourteen days from today. The only thing we don't know for sure is which invasion will happen first. I'm confident the Salamanders will emerge from the Smoking Mountains first, but we don't have confirmation. As I said, that's my guess."

"I believe it's a good one, Father," Aldion told him.

"What that means for us is that we have to prepare Freeport for invasion," Gerin said. "Aldion, my son, the defense of the docks and harbor district is your responsibility. General Brand and the commanders of the armies of our allies will supply you with their best soldiers to hold the docks, as well as the aid of the Champions of our faction, the Moonshadow, and the Black Fangs. Organize fire brigades to combat Kanlon firebombs, raise barricades and towers, install barriers to prevent their Sahaugin allies from easily getting onto the docks, and build protected positions for our siege engines, archers, and crossbowmen to use to prevent the Kanlon from getting past the docks. Rogers, see to the preparations in the two sea forts defending the harbor entry and mobilize the fleet. Have our fleet gather behind Hook's Point, so they can pounce on the Kanlon troop ships as they try to approach the harbor. General Brand, issue a general call to arms and prepare our men for defense of the city. Call in every unit and militia member you can, we'll need every able-bodied soldier we can muster. The Prince will be responsible for the defense of the docks, you will handle the defenses throughout the rest of the city should the Kanlon breach the Harbor District. Bring in every gryphon you can from the outlying towns and villages and prepare them for war to reinforce the Drakkin airborne troops, they'll be invaluable to us in the battle to come. The Kanlon have no

airborne units that we know of, and we need to capitalize on that. I also want you to arm every man and woman you can find with a crossbow and have them ready to rain quarrels on the Kanlon when they try to land. In this battle, every able-bodied human being in Freeport must aid in the defense of our home, even the civilians. So distribute our reserve crossbows out to them and teach them how to use them.”

“It will be done, my King,” Brand nodded.

“I fear the allies from the neutral territories we’ve gathered to push back the Sahaugin can’t help us here, my friends, my son,” Gerin said grimly. “The Sahaugin and sea giants invading to the south have such numbers that we simply cannot divert any additional forces to protect Freeport. If the Sahaugin and sea giants gain a foothold, they can effectively destroy all three of the southern factions, even without the help of the Salamanders and Kanlon. The Golden Lion, and our Moonshadow and Black Fangs allies are all that can be diverted to Freeport to stave off the Kanlon. But I am confident in the courage of our people and the prowess of our allies,” he said with strong conviction in his voice. “Together, we will sink every Kanlon ship threatening our shores to send a message to the Kanlon to never try us again.” He was silent a brief moment. “That is all, my friends. We all have our jobs to do, so let us get to them.”

The others started filing out, but when I moved to follow them, the King stopped me. “A word, Champion,” he said. When the others left, he went to his desk and took something out of the drawer, then returned to me. “The clerics of the Powers have requested your presence at the Cathedral, Xen,” he said, offering me a small crystal bead. “The Powers have answered our prayers. They have agreed to aid us against the Kanlon threat. The Agents have brought you blessed equipment to help you against the Kanlon. Present this to the clerics at the cathedral, and they’ll give you what the Powers delivered to them. Use it well.”

I got a new quest in my log, which instructed me to report to the Cathedral. And the reward for it was another piece of Champion’s Raiment!

It felt almost like I was being given a handout. It was as easy as going to the cathedral and being given a chest, which held the next piece of my Champion’s Raiment set. And the next quest I was given in the quest chain

was to defeat the enemy invasion, which I'd bet wouldn't complete until all the battles had been fought.

There would be three battles against the Kanlon alliance, and I'd try to participate in two of them. The battle at the Sea of Grass against the Sahaugin and sea giants, and the battle at Freeport against the Kanlon and their Sahaugin allies. That made this event even more epic than the orc invasion, because it was multiple large-scale battles being fought across the entire southern coast of Arca.

I decided to take the chest home before opening it, so I'd have plenty of time to consider the options and choose the best special ability for my gear. I ultimately chose a pair of gloves in the same style as the four pieces I'd already chosen. The ability on them was called Hands of Steel, and what it did was significantly increase the damage I did using any unarmed combat skill involving my hands, and also gave me the ability to parry weapons using the gloves rather than a weapon. The gloves were invulnerable, could not be damaged in any way, and afforded my hands inside them the same protection, which meant that my hands couldn't be chopped off, mangled, crushed, the bones broken, or suffer any kind of damage thanks to the protection of the gloves. The gloves were soft and supple to me, quite comfortable, but to everyone else, they were indestructible and invulnerable.

That had some intriguing *defensive* applications. It meant that I couldn't have my hands targeted in melee combat to "sting" them and make me drop my weapon. And if the gloves were truly indestructible and rendered my hands invulnerable, I could use them almost the same way I could use Blademaster to block *spells*. If I could intercept a spell with my gloves, and the spell would only affect what it hit, didn't explode or anything, the invulnerability of the gloves would effectively eat the spell.

I liked it. It seemed like an ability that looked weak on its face but could be *damn* useful if I was creative.

It was pretty late, so I logged off after returning home to Citadel City. I checked the forums quickly before bed and saw that the secret was out... and I didn't have to reveal it. *Final Battle of the Grand Crusade on Methrian set!* was the headline on the site, and the article revealed that the battle against the Kanlon and their allies would take place in 14 days. Other

champions were getting the same quest I did, that was how they found out. The article revealed that there would be three battles and their locations, to give the players on the server plenty of time to get there and get ready for the fight. The server forum was absolutely on fire with excitement about the event, with people already trying to organize raids at all three battle sites and guilds committing to certain battles to ensure that all three battle locations would have sufficient players. There was also a bunch of players from other servers that were saying they were going to roll alts on Methrian just to participate in the battle, and I suppose they'd be useful. They'd have just two weeks to get some gear, work on their skills, and then manage to get to one of the battle sites, but they'd be bodies in the army holding back the enemy.

Actually, it wouldn't be that hard. They just had to roll on the faction closest to the battle they wanted to fight in, because all three battles were taking place either in a faction's territory or just outside of it. They'd have about twelve days or so to gear up and raise their skills, then give themselves two days to get to the battlefield.

Eh, I'd welcome them. The orc invasion was an absolute blast, and their idea would let them enjoy that kind of large scale battle on multiple servers if they wanted to, since each server would fight its battle at a different time dictated by how fast their champions did the quests. It would let players fight in all three battles by creating alts on other servers, so they could see everything.

It meant that the three southern factions were going to see a tidal wave of starting players. Freeport was going to actually have people in it and be jumping, for the first time ever, on Methrian.

Hell, I was used to sometimes being the *only player* in Freeport.

Work the next day was...momentous. And not the good way.

All the guys in the office could talk about the next morning was the game. Word had really gotten out, and they were all talking about rolling alts on Methrian to do the battle, which battle they wanted to fight in, which race they'd pick, and so on. I just did what I always do, avoid talking to them as much as possible and do my job.

What made it different was the two surprises I received just after lunch. I noticed the message light blinking on my interface, telling me I'd been left a message while I had it off, and put it on to check it. It was Sano! She sent a video message, her standing in front of a house with strange bluish-purple grass in front of it. "Hey Kevin! I'm on Shio right now visiting my parents, but I'll be coming home tomorrow. Mikki offered to stop over in Jacksonville for a couple of hours before taking me home. So, want to have lunch tomorrow? Get back to me as soon as you can, okay?"

That was *such* a relief, but also worried me in a way I wasn't expecting. I was happy that she was coming home, but she wanted to *meet me*. In person. I had no idea if I could manage that, it was very hard for me to deal with people face to face. I could deal with people in the game, and even over a vidlink or hologram, because they weren't *there*. But when I was in the same room with someone, it was like I felt I was chained up in a room full of rabid bears. And to meet face to face with someone I had feelings for? I may throw up on her the minute she got close enough to shake my hand.

I did want to see her. I just wasn't sure if I could have lunch with her and not make an absolute fool of myself. After all, she's *beautiful*, and I have enough trouble dealing with people who aren't drop dead gorgeous and in whom I have a romantic interest.

I wanted to meet her, but I was almost terrified I'd screw it up so bad that she'd put me in the "friend zone."

But I'm also not stupid. I messaged her back telling her I'd love to meet her, and to message me back with what time she'd be here so we could arrange things.

I worried over the impending lunch date all through lunch—Mrima was in Norfolk for the next week preparing to take over the accounting department up there—and found a priority message on my workstation when I got back to my cubicle, ordering me to report to my supervisor. My supervisor, luckily, was a human, Barry Jenkins. He was okay as bosses go, but what was most important, he'd learned early that as long as he left me alone, I outworked everyone else in the office. I walked down to his office and steeled myself for having to deal with someone face to face, blew out my breath, and knocked on the door. He opened it from the inside, and I

nearly froze when I saw a *Faey* in the room with him. It was a fairly tall Faey man, wearing a very Terran suit of dark gray that didn't go with his blue skin or greenish-blue hair very well.

"Come in," Barry said in a calm voice. I shuffled inside, my eyes locked on the Faey man standing behind his desk, that same nameless dread rising up in me any time I was put into a situation when I was face to face with a Faey. "I'd like to introduce you to Savin Devarre, Kevin. He's going to be your new supervisor. I've been promoted and I'm going to be leaving the office," he announced. "Usually we wouldn't have a personal meeting like this over something like a staffing change, but we're aware of your... history," he said delicately. "I thought it might be best if you two meet before the official announcement."

"I've looked over your performance reviews, Mister Ball, and they're more than satisfactory. You're the best database manager in the office," he said in fluent English. "It's my hope that the two of us can work together, because I don't want to lose you."

I looked at him, at his false smile, and all I could see, all I could hear, were the faces and laughter of the guards at the farm, laughing as I watched the light fade from the eyes of my best friend, my hands around his throat, hands controlled by the telepath that had taken over my body and left me nothing but a spectator inside my own head. I'd have a Faey around me all the time, behind my back when I was working, with direct power over me. I could almost feel my cheek burning, the scar there that represented everything that had happened to me, and everything that I'd become since then.

I didn't even have to think about it. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it. I'd be such a nervous wreck that it wouldn't be worth it. For my own health, for my own *sanity*, I couldn't stay here.

"I'm sorry," I said in a quiet voice. "I'm handing in my two week's notice."

The Faey gave me a long look, and his eyes were...*shocked*. "I'm so very sorry, Mister Ball. If your mental state right now is any indication of what it would be like for you here every day, then yes, by all means, I'll reluctantly accept your resignation."

And just like that, I was out of a job. Oh, I'd be there for nine more days, but when Barry left for his new job, I'd be leaving the company. I was sent up to the human resources office where they processed my resignation, set my final work day, even gave me a separation package and a promise that I'd be paid an extra week due to the *extenuating circumstances* of my departure from the company...but I wasn't surprised. As usual, all companies and governments were worried about was getting rid of people like me in the most expeditious manner possible. Here's your check, there's the door, good luck with the rest of your life, never bother us again.

Three years here, and in nine days, it would be over. And I had absolutely no idea what to do.

Nobody else in the office knew, and I didn't tell them. When I finally got back to my desk, I just did my work until quitting time, then I left without saying a word...which was normal for me. When I got home, I just sat on the edge of my bed for over an hour, trying to come up with my next step. I had to get a better job than working in a convenience store, because the rent here was too high for that. My training made my skills somewhat specialized, so if I got another job like my current one, odds were I'd have to move. I had the money for that, but it would mean a wholesale interruption in my life, in my routine, and people like me depended on their routines. Even after thirteen years off the farm, the need for *routine* that I developed there was still part of me, for the same reason that ex-convicts became entrenched into routine after spending many years in prison.

I sat there long enough for my absence to be noticed. My vidlink beeped with an incoming call, and I almost expected it to be Barry or that secretary in HR telling me not to come back. Instead it was Sano, the room behind her looking like the stateroom of a ship, and her smile faded quickly when she saw my expression. "What's wrong, Kevin?" she asked intuitively.

"I just quit my job," I told her woodenly.

"Oh no! What happened?"

"My boss is being replaced with a Faey. I...can't work there now," I said, looking down at my hands. "So I handed in my resignation. I've spent the last hour trying to figure out what to do next. I can't afford to just get an odd job, and if I get another job like the one I have now, I'll probably have

to move. I don't know what to do," I admitted, then I sighed. "It's my own fault. I should have never gone to work for a Faey company, but...I thought I could do it. I thought if I worked in a place where there would be Faey, I could learn to be around them. Learn how to not be afraid of them. But I was wrong," I said quietly. "At least I can say I lasted three years, I suppose. But, enough about me. How was your visit?"

She gave me a nearly hot look. "You don't drop something like that on me and just say *enough about me*," she told me. "You said you don't know what to do, but are you ready to handle being out of work for a few takirs? A month? Can you cover your bills?"

"Of course I can," I said, sitting up and looking at her. "I have enough money saved up to live on for a good three months, Sano. I *do* make enough not to live in a place like this, I just choose to because it suits me," I told her. "And I can afford to move if I have to, I just don't want to. I've lived in Jacksonville for six years, and I don't want to leave. I did enough aimless wandering with no home and no direction already. I want to live here, but I'm facing the possibility that I may have to move to find another database management job. We're not exactly in demand," I said. "Only the megacorps that run SCD series model 12 or better mainframes running MDS database architecture suites need database managers like me, and there's only two other companies in Jacksonville that do. If the others don't have any job openings, then I'll have to move to where there's a corp that does."

"If you have the money to hold out, have you considered training for a job that's there?"

"I—not really, but I guess I could," I said, leaning back on my hands. "Maybe this time I could train for a job that's not so specialized, I suppose. That has market value beyond the megacorps. Mrima's an accountant who knows Terran tax laws backwards and forwards, she can get a job anywhere on this planet," I mused. "Maybe I could get a job in TEL programming, or IT management. Those are generic enough for me to get a job nearly anywhere, and they're always in demand."

"There, see, all you needed was a more positive attitude," she said with a smile. "Just don't panic. Take a day or two to calm down, then start looking at your options. Remember that you have money saved up, so you

don't have to make a hasty decision. Look at your options, weigh them carefully, and choose the best one. So just take a step back, take a deep breath, and *relax*. It's going to be okay."

I sighed, then chuckled. "Now why didn't I think of that," I said, looking at her.

"Because men are incapable of living by themselves," she replied cheekily. "Terran men, Faey men, Shio men, you're all the same. Completely hopeless," she winked.

"Hey now, those are almost fighting words," I retorted.

"I've seen your tricks in game, Kevin, I can take you in a duel," she said with a playful smile.

"You haven't seen all of them, *Savar*," I threatened. "I took Emelda in a straight up fight, I can take you. I know how to deal with ranged attackers."

"Oh ho, that sounds like a challenge to me," she grinned. "You just wait 'til I get home and I can log on, and we'll see if you can outrun my arrows."

"That reminds me, you do need to log on. You can get your fifth piece of Champion's Raiment once you catch up to where the rest of us are," I told her. "And the final battle of the Grand Crusade is now set. Thirteen days from today. So get home and get caught up so you can finish your quests."

"Oh really?" That sounds awesome!" she said brightly. "Where, the Sea of Grass?"

"There's going to be three different battles scattered across southern Arcavia," I told her. "Each faction is committed to a specific battle. We'll be fighting in different ones. You'll be at the Sea of Grass, but I'll be at Freeport. I'm going to try to be at both, but if the Kanlon attack Freeport first, I'll have to commit to that one. If the Sahaugin invade first, I can fight there until King Gerin recalls us to Freeport."

"Freeport?"

"The Kanlon are invading Freeport. You'll find out when you finish your quests," I told her.

“Well, I’ll be there in about an hour, so you can fill me in on what’s going on,” she said. “We just came out of the Stargate when I called. I was going to see if you wanted to have dinner, Mikano said she can drop me off there in Jacksonville and then pick me up and take me home when we’re done.”

“Well, sure,” I said, excited at the idea but nervous that I’d mess things up. “We can talk about stuff face to face over dinner at Bermuda Jack’s. It’s my favorite restaurant in town.”

“Sounds good to me, I like Terran food,” she smiled. “How about an hour from now? I’ll meet you at the restaurant.”

“Sure. So, what’s that like traveling on a ship? I’ve never been on a ship before.”

“Well, you don’t really ever feel like you’re moving, the inertial dampeners on these ships is pretty strong. As far as Stargates go, if you blink, you’ll miss it. It’s jumping hyperspace that sucks,” she said. “I remember when we had to do that when we were evacuated here to Terra during the Consortium War.”

“I’d heard about that.”

“As far as this ship goes, it’s *amazing*,” she gushed. “The stateroom Mikki put me in is almost as big as my apartment,” she laughed. “And she took me on a tour of the ship. I couldn’t even take my interface, I had to use one meant for visitors on the ship, one that won’t allow us to take pictures. But Mikki *did* let me take some pics of the ship, and I can show you those. You know, the non-security places like the galley and my stateroom and such. These Karinne ships are *incredible*, Kevin. They have tech in them I didn’t think was possible. They’re *way* beyond everyone else. This one has actual *scars* on it, from like real battles,” she said in a quieter tone, like she was divulging a secret. “Mikki said that they leave one scar from each battle. It’s a tradition on this ship.”

“That’s an odd tradition,” I said.

“This is the oldest ship in the Karinne Navy, Mikki told me. It’s called the *Defiant*,” she told me. “This ship is like a thousand years old, and she said it’s a major honor in the Karinne Navy to serve on this ship. It’s one of the ships the *original* Karinnes built. Mikki said that on a ship this old, a

ship that's seen so many battles, it's not *supposed* to look shiny and new. This is a warship that's been in service longer than some empires have been in existence, and it's survived dozens of battles, so it shows its scars the way a warship should." She glanced to the side. "I don't exactly know what that means," she said, her face a bit puzzled.

Her statement struck me, as I put my fingers almost unconsciously over the scar on my left cheek. I know what her sister meant. I could have this scar removed, and all the other scars on my body, but I don't. They're a reminder of everything I went through on the farm, an eternal testament to the suffering and abuse that we all suffered at the hands of the Trillanes. I wear this scar as a reminder of the hell from which we were delivered, and to honor those who didn't make it. The reason they don't take all the scars off their ship is the same reason my body is crossed over with multiple scars, to show the world that *I survived*, and that survival came at a price. On that ship, the cost was in destroyed equipment and lost lives. For me, it was my destroyed life and lost friends.

"I do," I said quietly, running my finger over the scar.

She gave me a compassionate look. "I'll be there in an hour or so, okay? We can talk while you introduce me to your favorite restaurant," she said with a gentle smile.

"I'd be happy to," I told her with an honest, wan smile.

I spent the hour waiting for her to arrive doing what she suggested, making a plan of action. And it made me feel a hell of a lot better than just sitting there worrying. I would put in my applications at the other two companies that use the system I was trained on, and I'd also look into training programs for humans in the city, looking for something computer related where I'd be working in an office like I was now—I like working at my own desk, even if it's in a cubicle—and something that had broad use. I'd made the mistake of taking a training program that was too specialized, and that had more or less painted me into a corner. If I had to retrain, I'd pick a career that would let me stay in Jacksonville but gave me many options when it came to jobs.

I was human, and here on Earth, companies have to hire us first. It's the law. That meant that I could get almost any job I wanted, if I was willing to

work for it. I just had to find a job I *wanted*.

I felt a lot better by the time I was sitting in Bermuda Jack's, which is a small but very good restaurant on the beach here in Jacksonville. I almost felt the room light up when I saw Sano come in and get pointed in my direction by the seater, wearing a tank top and a pair of shorts, looking very much like a tourist. She was much taller than I expected, maybe a tiny bit taller than I am, but she was just as beautiful. I stood up and took her hands in greeting, and she kissed me on the cheek before we sat back down, and she picked up the menu. "Alright, let's see what these American chefs can do," she said in a tone that almost made me laugh, like she was about to go to war.

It was very different being in the same room with Sano, but she was the same person I'd come to know over the weeks, and that made it much easier. I got less and less nervous as she got me to just talk, and amused me with her critique of the food served here, as if she were looking for something to be wrong with it and being a bit mad that she couldn't find anything. I explained the plan I'd made while waiting for her, and she approved of it. But she suggested something different. "After you do all that, you might want to look into putting up some vids on the Arena, Kevin," she said. "If you agree to let advertisers put ads in your vids, you can make money at it. You might make enough money to help you stretch out your savings, and that will give you more time to make sure you find exactly the job you want," she suggested.

"I thought about doing that, but I'm still not sure."

"Look at it this way, Kevin. Methrian is such a small server, and your skills are so insanely high, I wouldn't want to try you even though I *already* know what you can do," she said with a smile. "I wouldn't want to *because* I know what you can do. I'll admit, you could beat me in a duel, because you can parry my arrows. I can't really counter that. I don't think you're going to have as much trouble as you think you are. What you do, what you're known for, is *soloing*. Being out there by yourself, far from everyone else, and that means that you're not going to have all that many people messing with you."

"I...suppose," I said after thinking a moment. "I mean, I guess it wouldn't hurt to put a few vids up, some of my fights against overworld

boss monsters and such. And I've always kicked around the idea of putting up a tutorial on how I do it. It's not as easy as just walking up to the boss and whacking it with your sword, after all. There's a methodology to it, not to mention the dying dozens of times learning what it can do so I can come up with a strategy."

"Now that, I'd love to see," she said with a smile. "I saw part of what you did against the sea giant prince, and I was so impressed that I almost forgot that I needed to kill the boss for my own quest," she winked.

I had to chuckle. "Your assistance was much appreciated, and that was the first time I ever killed a boss monster on the first attempt solo. Well, mostly solo," I smiled.

"Well, glad to be of service, sir," she winked. "I think you'd be very popular on the Arena. Some of the highest viewed vids we put up on our guild channel are the ones that have you in them," she laughed. "We put up vids of the sea giant raid. Actually, we put up vids of most of our raids. We're certainly not giving away any secrets given most servers have already cleared those raids, but we get a good amount of views on our channel. About the only real drama we have in the guild is over allowing ads on our vids. Some people want them, but most of us don't. Felik doesn't want any drama over how we split up the real-world money the vids might earn. That's why I agree with him."

"But let me guess, some of your guildies have their own channels where they do allow ads."

"Yup, and I'm one of them," she admitted. "I post up some of my own vids on my channel, but there's a rule in our guild that we don't put up raid vids on for-pay channels. Guild raids are off limits, but what we do outside raids is fine, even if we're in an all-guild group."

"You make much money?"

"Not really. Not enough to quit my job, that's for sure," she laughed. "I make about seventy or so credits a month. So, enough to go out to a really nice restaurant once a month. For a Shio, that's a big deal," she winked. "I put up edited vids that I try to make cinematic, you know, like epic fights and such, and I used to do little mini-movies role-playing with my friends, but I don't do those as much anymore. Raiding takes up a lot more time

than it used to. But those are lots of fun to do, so I've considered getting back into it."

"Well, that doesn't sound that bad. Does it take you long?"

"Nah, but then again, I'm a professional video editor," she chuckled. "So I have tons of great software for it and I know what I'm doing. And speaking as an editor, if you do do it, make sure you mute out comm channels where you talk about private things," she said.

"I don't really talk to anyone when I play," I told her. "Up until recently, that is."

"Well, keep in mind that you can. I'm not sure you want anyone watching to access your friend chat. I'm sure you and Mrima talk about things you don't want the world to know."

"I resent that bit of innuendo," I said primly, which made her burst out laughing.

"What I usually do is mute all conversations, unless they're important to the video's subject, and narrate the videos where it's required," she told me. "Not much, though. If someone does something weird or crazy, I'll explain why and such. I usually just let the action speak for itself."

"Sounds like you'd rather be a director or producer than a video editor."

"Would I," she agreed. "I *love* viddy movies, I'd jump at the chance to do something more than sew together stuff other people make the way *they* want it to be."

"I'll think about it. So, what's it like to work for a news network?"

We drifted into other topics, and again, I found it an absolute delight just to sit and talk with Sano. She was so smart, and charming, that I always lose track of time when we talk. She has a great sense of humor and I'd come to learn that she's just a touch naughty, which means she borders on raunchy for a Shio. She showed me the pictures she took of her trip to Shio Prime, getting animated when she described who the people were and where they were. Her sister Mikano was wearing her KMS duty uniform and her brother was wearing what looked like a school uniform, and I noticed that everyone in her family was very attractive physically. Her father and brother were very handsome, and all three of the Strongblade

women were beautiful...and it was very clear that Sano and Mikano got their good looks from their *stunningly* beautiful mother.

I know it would get me kicked if I said it out loud, but Sano's mother was more beautiful than either of her daughters. But that in no way meant that Sano herself wasn't absolutely *gorgeous*. It just meant that her mother was pan-galactic supermodel level gorgeous.

I also learned that the grass on Shio Prime isn't green. It's kind of lavender purple with hints of green in it.

Who knew?

We talked so long, Sano got in trouble with her sister. Mikano called her interface three times to make her come back to the ship, then issued an ultimatum to either return *now* or get left behind. "I'm so sorry, Mikki said she's been called up by her HQ and she has to go somewhere," she told me, standing up. "She said if I don't get back to the ship in fifteen minutes, she'll leave me behind."

"Can you make it?"

"Sure, it's not far from here, and besides, she has a zip ship sitting outside waiting for me," she smiled. "I'll log on as soon as I get home and we'll go do something, okay?"

"You're behind on your quests, so I'll help you get them up to date."

"That sounds fun," she smiled as I stood up. She surprised me a bit by stepping over and giving me a quick kiss on the cheek, patting my shoulder. "See you in game in an hour or so."

I watched her leave, and when I checked the time, I was almost shocked that nearly *two hours* had passed. We'd been sitting there talking for hours! It sure didn't feel like it, it felt like we'd only been here for like half an hour.

I put a healthy tip down for the poor waitress that had to put up with us tying up a table for that long, then I headed home, looking forward to seeing Sano again, just in her furry alter-ego, Savar.

I wasn't too surprised when I got into the game, because Emelda was there. She was in my shop, clearly waiting for me, when I came down in

Djinn form to stock it before I went out with Savar to help her get her Grand Crusade quests up to the rest of us. “Avrazzi, is Xen home?” she asked hopefully.

“Upstairs, miss,” I answered. “He only just arrived. If you’ll wait for me to finish stocking the shelves, I’ll take you up to him.” That was subterfuge, however, since Emelda knows I’m the Djinn, that I use it to stock the shop without being hassled.

“Sure.”

My relationship with Emelda—Rita—had gone very far in just a few days. She’d stopped by the shop every day since our fight, and I’d let her come up to the apartment and we had a few talks. She was everything I suspected, a fragile woman clearly suffering from PTSD from her ordeal as a slave, who clung to the game and her friends in it as an escape from the reality that had done so many awful things to her. Since she knew I was a picker, she was much more honest with me than she probably was with her own family, because she knew I understood things far better than anyone else possibly could. After all, I lived through it myself. More than anything else, though, she wanted a friend, a friend she could be honest with, and I was about the only one that could fulfill that role. I wouldn’t judge, I could empathize with her, and I knew how challenging it was to try to build a life after an ordeal like that, even after nearly fourteen years since it happened.

Some scars never fade.

Savar was a bit surprised when she came out of the guest bedroom and saw Emelda sitting on the couch beside my comfy chair, the viewing crystal tuned to CINN, the Confederation Intergalactic News Network, a brand new channel on the viddy lineup that dealt with news from the Confederation, which now included news from other *galaxies*. The Confederation had spread beyond the Milky Way, with multiple members having established territories in two other galaxies. “Em!” she said, coming to a stop. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I’ve been visiting since we made up,” she replied, giving Savar a slightly nervous smile. “He told me you know he’s the Djinn.”

“Yes, I do,” she chuckled. “I made the bow he uses in Djinn form, so he revealed it so I could get proper measurements.”

“Em offered to help you with your quests,” I told her, giving her a steady look where Emelda couldn’t see it.

“And I’d love to have you,” she said after glancing at me, coming over and sitting on the couch beside her. “Xen told me that almost everyone is at the same point, with the next quest being the battle.”

She nodded. “I think you’re the only one that’s not, but hopefully we can fix that today.”

“Well then, give me a minute to get ready, and we’ll go out and take care of it,” she smiled.

It didn’t take long. Emelda offering to help Savar with her quests was her way of extending an olive branch to make up, and Savar was gracious enough to accept it. The two of us helped her do three quests to catch her up to the rest of us, two of them just “run around and deliver messages” and the third a fairly tough fight against Sahaugin raiders to get intelligence from them. It took us about four hours to complete, and Emelda really cut that time down because she knew the location of a scion that I didn’t that put us all but twenty minutes from where we needed to go. And with Emelda helping us, we tore through the quest to repel a Sahaugin raiding party much faster than it would have taken me and Savar by ourselves...but it was still a pretty tough fight. Emelda has to be the most powerful mage archetype on Methrian, but from what I saw in that fight, she might be one of the *best*. She always knew exactly which spell was the most useful in any situation, and she used them with surgical precision.

But it was more than that. Savar asking Emelda along was their chance to reconcile, and I could see it during the fight with the raiders and the quests before and after it. By the time we returned to Citadel City, the two of them were giggling and carrying on, as if nothing had ever happened... which was what I expected. Emelda may have been terribly hurt by what Savar and the others did, but they were *family*, and she couldn’t stay mad at people forever who she saw as family. By the time Savar set down a large feast on the dinner table to celebrate her catching up on her quests, Emelda and Savar were friends again. and I hoped it would foster the reconciliation of the former members of the Dragon Knights, now spread across four guilds.

They wouldn't get back together as a guild, but there was a good chance that they'd form an alliance to knock out the final raids and get ready for Citadel together.

I'd gotten to know Emelda fairly well over the last few days, and I could be honest...I *liked* her. And not just because she was a sister. The side she showed to those she considered family was very different than others she saw as outsiders, and I could understand why many people thought she was a bitch...because to outsiders, she *was*. In her mind, and the mind of many pickers, the world is boiled down to *them* and *us*, and *them* are the enemy. If you are not family, you are a threat. But if you could get in, if you could get past the defenses she put up to protect herself from the outside, she was a warm, caring, surprisingly gentle soul that only wanted her friends—her *family*—to be happy. And she'd do whatever it took to make sure her family was happy.

"Xen told me what he's planning to do with his Djinn form," Emelda said around a mouthful of sungrazer stew. "I think it's a really smart idea."

"I do too," Savar agreed, sitting down at the table with us...finally.

"It's going to have to wait...a long time," I said dryly. "I almost completely wiped out all my savings buying Succor and making my Djinn swords and setting up a research library is a very expensive proposition. Even with my shop bringing in steady income, it may take me a month or two to raise the gold to buy the stuff I need to set up a decent library."

"It'll pay off in the long run, though," Emelda said. "I make absolute tons of money scribing spells, on top of what I make off my tailoring shop in Alaria. I have some extra supplies you can use to get a start on your research library, Xen. You'll replace it all fairly quickly, but it can get you started."

"I'd appreciate that, Em, thank you," I told her with a smile and a nod.

"Can you scribe Teleport yet?" Savar asked Emelda curiously. "I know you were working on it."

"Not yet, I'm nearly fifty points away from being able to scribe it," she replied. "I've devoted too much time raising my scribing skill in Evocation so I can scribe my combat spells for our new mage guild members. I really

need to work on it, though. I could make insane amounts of money if I could sell Teleport scrolls. Everyone, like *everyone*, wants that spell.”

“I don’t think anyone on this server can scribe it,” I said. “I almost never see it for sale in any of the major player markets. And when I do, it’s always a loot drop spell.”

“How can you tell?” Savar asked.

“Player scribed scrolls look different than loot drop spells,” Emelda answered for me. “All drop spells are on the same type of vellum. If it was scribed by a player, it would use different paper and different ink.”

“Ah, okay. I don’t mess around with magic enough to really know any of that,” she said. “I think my highest spellcasting skill is like two hundred.”

“Just high enough to cast Create Shelter,” I noted.

“You guessed it,” she laughed.

“Where are your magic skills at, Xen?” Emelda asked.

“Mine? My highest is Evocation, but that’s purely so I can aim Magic Missiles,” I answered. “I worked on it for weeks to get it there. One too many annoying fights with Sylphs using the crossbow cheese tactic,” I growled. “Evocation is at 1,564. My next highest is Abjuration, it’s 1,486, just fourteen away from a threshold. The rest are around twelve hundred or so except for Illusion, that’s only 893. I’ve had bad luck getting Illusion spells, so I haven’t really had any reason to raise it. I had no spells that required a high skill to cast and didn’t have any Illusion spells worth using a whole lot,” I shrugged. “Well, outside of Improved Invisibility.”

“Those aren’t high enough,” Emelda told me. “Evocation and Abjuration are, but not the others. You need to get them all to fifteen hundred *minimum* if you want to do consistent damage as a mage. As it is now, you’ll be able to use some strong Evocation spells, but the problem is it locks you into one school. If you come up against an opponent that has high resistance to Evocation magic, you’re screwed.”

“I figured,” I nodded.

“But I can help you out. No doubt I have way more spells than you do. I’ll scribe you some that you can use now, as well as some you’ll be able to use once you get your skills up to around thirteen hundred. A mage is only as good as her spellbook, so you need the biggest spellbook you can get.”

“That’s very kind of you Em, thank you,” I told her, being careful not to decline her offer. That would have unraveled a lot of the progress we’d made over the last few days. She was offering to help, and as a picker, I wouldn’t, I *couldn’t* reject that offer. That’s not how we did things. “But you don’t have to go out of your way for me. No need to tie yourself up for days scribing spells I can’t use yet.”

“I have some of them made already, and the others will just take me a couple of hours to scribe,” she assured me. “It’s not a bother, Xen.”

“Alright then.”

We chatted for a while during and after dinner, then Emelda logged off for the night in my other spare bedroom. Savar sat with me on the couch after she was gone, searching for a shiziki or baseball game for us to watch. “Savar...thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For everything you’ve done over the last couple of days,” I replied. “I really did feel better after you helped me come up with a plan for what to do after I quit, and you were the soul of grace with Emelda. I really appreciate it.”

“I’m glad she seems better now,” she said. “Almost back to her old self. And now that I know what I know, I can’t be mad at her. I had no idea she was so...so...messed up,” she sighed. “She hides it well, but she’s just not right.”

“I don’t think any of us are, truth be told,” I admitted. “Outside of the game, I’m an introvert who’s scared of anything and everything. I don’t like being in public, I don’t like talking to people, and having to look someone in the eye all but induces a panic attack. The only people I’ve ever been able to talk to out there are other pickers, Mrima, and you. Sometimes I just don’t understand how I can be so different in here compared to out there.”

“Because this isn’t the real world, and you know it,” she replied. “Em uses the game as an escape from the real world. And in a way, I think you do too,” she told me honestly. “Here, you can be what you were meant to be, not what the farm made of you. I think that if you’d never been put on that farm, Xen is the person you’d be outside the game.”

I gave her a long look, both a little afraid of how close she was and uncertain of what it meant to our real-life relationship. She scooted over a tiny bit, enough to be shoulder to shoulder with me, and then took my hand in her furry paws and pulled it into her lap. “Now hush, you silly thing. The game’s on.”

That gesture allayed all my worries. And I had no idea what happened at all during that game. The only thing I remembered was how warm and soft her furry hand was, how the pads on her palm and fingers were both rough and soft at the same time, and wondering what it would feel like to hold Sano’s hand in real life.

I still had no plan of action on the job front, but I was at least not in a panic over it.

Over the last week, I’d been spending more time at work perusing training programs than doing my work, but nobody really said anything. The entire office knew I was quitting, which surprised them, which led to the progression of the other guys in the cubicle farm awkwardly coming over to say goodbye, realizing they had almost nothing to talk to me about because they didn’t know me at all, and going back to their own desks. But most of them knew why I was leaving, because it was now common knowledge that a Faey was coming in to take over our department. No doubt they all thought I was being a drama queen...but I don’t really care what I think. All I care about is my life would become total hell if I was working in an office where I had to see a Faey *all the time*.

I hadn’t found anything yet that appealed to me, but I did have a couple of possibilities. I was giving the idea of going into TEL programming more scrutiny, because it was a generic skill that had lots of job opportunities here in Jacksonville. I’d seen a lot of listing for programmers on the city job boards. But, I’m not sure I’d like programming. I really have no idea what’s

involved in it, but I would guess that it has the same requirements as database management, which is sitting at a desk doing a lot of data entry. I figure programming is just putting your *own* stuff in the computer.

The fact that it's similar to my job is one reason I hadn't gone for it. My job isn't all that exciting or interesting. I don't want to go through the training for programming just to find it as unfulfilling as database management.

So, I was still riding the fence in the real world, but in the game, I'd made some progress. My Djinn form was now fully geared up, and thanks to Emelda, I now had 14 new spells in my arsenal. Twelve of them were combat spells, a wide variety of them that dealt both single target damage and area of effect damage, but the other two were very useful utility spells. She'd given me her Reverse Time spell, the one she uses to reverse damage to herself, as well as her Blink spell, which teleported her about 20 meters or so in the direction she was facing. It was a very fast casting defensive spell that mage archetypes used to get out of reach of enemies using melee weapons, or to break line of sight or otherwise mess up an enemy spellcaster.

Blink is *very* useful.

However, the week wasn't taken up with magic, it was taken up with sword training. I had a new sword skill, Blademaster, and while it was extremely useful to me, it was far, *far* more useful to my Djinn form. That form had a much lower Armor Rating, which meant it would take much more damage from physical attacks. Blademaster increased my armor rating based on a proportion of my skill in Blademaster, so getting it as high as possible as quickly as possible was critical to making my Djinn form far more survivable.

In a way, it made a kind of sense, in a realistic way. A master swordsman could be naked and be far more protected from lesser skilled opponents so long as he had his sword, and was so skilled that he could mitigate some of the injuries he sustained by knowing how to move to lessen the impact of a weapon or protect his vital points, which is what I think the skill was trying to emulate using in-game rules.

I'd had a week to get everything set up, but I hadn't really done much of anything except try to rebuild my cash reserves after wiping them out and engaging in suicidal fights with the weaker monsters around Citadel City to raise Blademaster. I didn't want to wander too far from home with the final battle coming up, mainly because I'd been spending almost every evening with Emelda, Savar, or both. I'd go back to my usual exploration when the Grand Crusade was over, but until then, I was going to stay close to home. Besides, I needed the time to rebuild my money, because I felt very, well, vulnerable having no gold. I spent most of my time either taking care of my shop, keeping it well stocked, crafting items to put into it using my tradeskills, or roaming Citadel City and Freeport hunting for bargains that I could resell in my shop for a profit. I did fit in some sword training and a few treasure hunting runs here and there, but I didn't find anything impressive or valuable.

And I found out in a hurry that Emelda was right about my ability to do damage with spells in Djinn form, that my magic skills were too low to be a viable threat to high-skill monsters or players. I tried killing monsters using the "stay high out of reach and pound them with spells and arrows" cheese tactic, and it was almost laughable. I could barely *scratch* Citadel monsters with my spells, but I did somewhat better using Imbue Arrow and regular archery damage, thanks to the awesome bow and arrows Savar made for me. But it still wasn't enough to kill anything. When monsters realized they couldn't attack me back, they would seek cover and force me to come down into range of them in order to continue to do damage. Monster AI was *not* stupid. If they couldn't reach their opponent, they would either run or use tactics that forced their opponent to get within reach of them. But one thing I did do was exploit the faster skillup trick here on Citadel by casting or shooting arrows at monsters from high in the air, using them as target dummies for skillups and getting that accelerated skill up rate, then I'd just find another monster to annoy when my current target sought out cover. I just had to be careful, because I didn't want to accidentally attack a monster that might be on an NPC faction and therefore wreck any chance of raising it later. I picked only the monsters that didn't look like they were organized, like predatory animals and such.

We were starting to establish ourselves on Citadel. I wasn't the only one treasure hunting in the ruins around they city, and as the pieces of loot we

found started to get sold, mostly to the top guilds, that geared them up enough to where they could start killing the weak trash monsters just outside the city. We'd established a tenuous foothold in that respect, and soon, in a few weeks I estimated, there was going to be a group geared enough to start doing the introductory quests in Citadel City. It was going to be a group from a top guild that held a lot of Champions, who already had Citadel-level gear thanks to Champion's Raiment, and I suspected it was going to be Savar's guild that got there first.

Well, really, they were already there. Savar said her guild had gone monster hunting a few days ago, and they did well enough to get a piece of gear to drop, which Savar got.

I still couldn't kill anything one on one, but I had high hopes that I just might very soon. I now had five pieces of Champion's Raiment, my weapons, and the belt I'd found in a treasure chest. I figured that if I got just one more piece of Citadel treasure chest loot, I'd be able to take on the passive animals. And if I got two more, I might be able to kill the weaker monsters around the city by myself. And once I was fully equipped in Citadel loot (including a necklace and two rings, which were usually *only* available from players with Jeweler skill. Those items almost never dropped as loot, and when they did, they were truly special), I might be able to take on some of the slightly stronger monsters around the ruins closest to the city. But that would require Jewelers being able to make Citadel-level stuff, and the tradeskill recipes for them were locked behind quests they had to do on Citadel.

I got a curious message from Savar that she needed to talk to me as soon as possible, so I told her to meet me in game after work. I went through the motions for the rest of the day and headed home, and instead of doing my usual two hours in the gym, I went straight to my apartment and logged in. She logged in about half an hour later and came out of the guest bedroom and hurried right up to me. "I have a lot to tell you," she said quickly.

"About what?"

"I was visited by someone today. The Grand Duke of the Karinnes."

"Really? Wow. Did your sister set that up?"

“Sorta. He wanted to ask a favor of me. He wanted to ask me to arrange it so you could meet him.”

“Me? Why me?” I blurted, honestly taken aback.

“He asked me to organize a meeting between you,” she told me quickly. “He wants to talk to you about something they found out about the game. The game’s having an effect on us in the real world, Xen. He said players are able to use some of their game skills in the real world, and that it happened to you. He said you fought off a mugger using your game skills. And you never told me about it!” she finished accusingly.

I was nearly stunned. They *did* know it was happening! But why did they want to talk to *me* about it? Did they want to make me a guinea pig for experiments? “Well, yeah, it did happen, but it wasn’t a big deal,” I told her, noticing her unhappy expression. “I wasn’t in any danger, that’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Well, don’t do that,” she ordered. “But there’s more to it. He said he’s not happy with how the U.N. is treating the farm survivors, and he wants to talk to you about that, too. He wants to find out how much they’ve helped you, and I guess he wants to find out himself instead of asking someone to do it for him. Mikki said that the Grand Duke is like that, he’s very hands-on, as you Terrans say. So he wants to know if you’d be willing to meet with him in the game. He had the devs make a character for him.”

“Here?”

“He said it might make you feel more comfortable,” she told me. “He said he wanted to meet you in *your* territory.”

I could tell that Sano believed what she was saying, but I couldn’t fathom that someone like the Grand Duke would want to talk to someone like me. The Karinnes had abandoned Earth almost right after the house formed, and more or less left people like me at the mercy of the U.N., who did *shit* for us. So, I wasn’t entirely enthusiastic about the idea of talking to someone from the Karinnes. No doubt it was some flunkie from his office, not the Grand Duke himself, who would pretend to be interested, pretend to care, and then forget about us the instant he walked out the door.

Just like everyone else did.

“Well...alright, I guess. I mean, I don't really understand why he wants to talk to me. If it's even him.”

“Oh, it's him alright,” she said. “I know what he looks like, and it's *definitely* the man that visited me earlier today.”

“But will it be the same person that meets us in game? He'll be an avatar, not his real self. It'll probably just be some aid or secretary from his office.”

“I guess we'll see,” she said. “Let me send a message to the number he gave me to let him know you agreed. Hold on a second.” She zoned out, separating herself from her merge to send a message in real life, and a moment later, she started moving again. “He said he'll meet us tomorrow afternoon at four your time, and he'll come here,” she announced.

“How does he know where here is?”

“He has contact with the game devs, Xen. They made a character for him on the game, after all. They know you own this house, so he knows.”

“Oh. Right. Didn't think about that,” I mused.

She chuckled. “So, what's on the agenda for today? More training?”

“Yeah, I'm gonna work on sword skills outside the city,” I told her. “What about you?”

“We're free to do what we want until the battle,” she replied. “Think we could go on a bit of an expedition to Netherim and hunt darkclaw raptors on the Ashen Expanse? I need mats off of them to restock our guild's supply of stat food,” she added. That meant the food would be magical and would raise the stats of whoever ate it for a short period of time.

““Sure. I've never been there before, so it'll be a chance to see something new.”

“I'll go too!” Emelda called as she came into the parlor from the guest bedroom I assigned to her. “Why not use a recipe from up here, Savar? I know you have some”

“The three of us couldn't kill the animals that drop the mats we need for that food, not in the amounts I need to restock the guild's pantry. Besides, the other materials I need for those recipes are expensive,” she frowned.

“Even the recipes are ridiculously expensive. Most of them are around ten thousand gold a piece.”

“Everything up here is expensive,” Emelda noted. “I think they use Citadel City as a gold sink, to take gold out of the economy.”

“It worked on me. The Citadel unlocked, and two weeks later, I’m flat broke,” I declared.

Savar laughed. “Our guild and most of us in it are wiped out as well, after buying our HQ building.”

“We are too, we just bought our guild HQ yesterday,” Emelda nodded. “It took everything the guild had, and each of us had to contribute to make up the difference.”

“You mean you fronted the majority of the difference,” I corrected her. Emelda was one of the richest non-merchant baron players on the server. She had nearly seven million gold saved up, she’d admitted to me, and she made almost all of that gold from her tailoring skill. She had the highest tailoring skill on the server, so she could make the best cloth equipment available for sale.

She flushed a little. “Well, we needed it. And I don’t mind if it’s for the guild,” she said demurely. “Baron said the guild will pay me back, so it’s all good.”

“Well, Citadel is supposed to be the endgame, and I guess that means the endgame for the economy as well,” Savar chuckled, equipping her adventuring gear, her bow appearing slung over her shoulder. “Soon as you two are ready to go.”

The three of us had developed into quite a team, and that made us scary efficient. Emelda used Teleport to get us to the Ashen Expanse using a scion I’d never used before that was right in the middle of the expanse—but I could now. It was a broad, flat plain on Netherim that almost constantly had a haze of gray ash hanging in the air, which was also infested with monsters called darkclaw raptors. They were large dinosaur-like creatures that looked like velociraptors, but they were three meters tall, very aggressive, and they moved and hunted in packs. They were the top predator on the expanse, but there were so many of them it almost felt like they were herd animals. Once we were there, we went hunting, making a

competition out of who could gather the most meat in two hours. And since darkclaw raptors weren't very high skill monsters, it let us mow through them with such efficiency that we nearly triggered the environmental protection system by depopulating the plain around the scion of raptors. I think I mentioned that the game reacts if players deal too much damage to an area and killing everything in sight for kilometers in every direction was one of the ways that system could be triggered. What it did do was trigger automatic emergency respawning of the mobs, and when we saw that happen, we wisely dialed it back. If we'd have gone after the respawned mobs, then it would set off the system and we'd have something like a pissed off dragon spawn on top of us and kill us.

But it got the job done. After three hours, we had so much darkclaw raptor meat that Savar could easily restock both her own guild and Emelda's guild with stat food.

The rest of the day went by without incident, us just sitting around my house talking as Savar used my kitchen to prepare the food, and the day after was even more uneventful as I worked on Blademaster and got help from Emelda setting up the beginnings of my research library using the supplies she lent to me, but the day after that was quite eventful. Not long after I logged in after work, my guest arrived. Emelda and Savar were there, us sitting in the parlor planning out the rest of our day, when he knocked on the door to the apartment. I allowed him in, and a moment later, a *Jagaara* strode into the parlor. I honestly wasn't expecting that. He was wearing a black cloth shirt and dark gray leather vest—which was purely ornamental—a pair of stout black cloth pants and had on leather bindings around his feet that served as “boots” for Jagaara. He wore a metal circlet over his eyes that was probably his equipped head piece and had leather wraps around his wrists with no gloves. This...this wasn't just some character the dev whipped up for him. The way he was dressed, the way he moved confidently despite having a tail, whoever was behind that avatar had experience with it.

“Thank you for allowing me to see you,” the person behind the avatar said, his tail slashing a bit behind him. “I'm sure Savar told you who I am and why I'm here?”

“She told us who you’re supposed to be, but I find it hard to believe that you’re the Grand Duke,” I answered.

“He is, Xen, he came to see me in Sao Paolo a couple of days ago,” Savar assured me. “I know it’s him.” She must have recognized his voice. While we look different in the game, most of the time, our voices are the same.

“I asked Sano to arrange this meeting,” the Jagaara said as he moved to the open couch and sat down, curling his tail around to keep from sitting on it. That too told me that he had experience with the form. “I know she told you that her sister is in the Karinne Navy. I asked her sister to talk to her, she agreed, we met, and Sano agreed to talk to you for me.”

“Why? Why go through all this subterfuge?” Emelda asked directly.

“I thought it would be easiest on all of us, and more comfortable, if we met here,” the Jagaara answered. “I’m here to talk to both of you, and this way, all three of us can talk without us having to travel in real life to a single place.”

“Us? Why us?” I demanded.

“Because both of you are farm survivors, and there’s something going on in the U.N. government that I don’t like,” he answered. “I wanted to talk to you about your experiences dealing with the Farm Services Department. But there’s another reason I want to talk to you, and I’ll get into that a little later. So, both of you, how easy have you found it dealing with the DFM?”

That really threw me for a loop. That was what he wanted to talk to us about? About our experience dealing with the DFM? I...I didn’t know what to think. It was the first time anyone *ever* asked me about that. Was he for real? Did he really care?

I listened as he talked to Emelda, starting from right when she was released from the farm all the way up to today, and the questions he asked...they seemed like he did care. He asked the right questions, and he made sure to ask how she’d *felt* about her dealings with the DFM. It almost seemed like he did care. He then asked me many of the same questions, and I was unsure enough of his sincerity to still be guarded, but I did answer the questions honestly. I made sure to make it clear that the DFM didn’t give a damn about us, and if we all dropped dead tomorrow, the DFM would be

absolutely overjoyed about it. They hated us, they absolutely hated us, and that attitude was evident every time they talked to us.

When he went back to Emelda, asking more questions about what had happened over the last year, it was enough to upset her. Both me and Savar had to hold her hands to calm her down enough so she could finish answering the questions, and that seemed to make this Jason Karinne *mad*. Not mad at Emelda, but mad that her experience was so bad that it made her upset to talk about it

That inclined me towards him.

“This was *not* how things were supposed to work,” he said in a clearly outraged voice, strong and determined. “And I promise both of you, I’m going to fix it. And I’m going to fix it *fast*.”

“I’m so very glad to hear that, your Grace,” Savar said. “Xen and Rita are my dearest friends, and I want them to be okay.”

“Oh, they’re going to be okay, I promise you that,” the Grand Duke said adamantly. “Tomorrow morning, both of you are going to receive a package from a courier at precisely nine o’clock in the morning your local time. It’s going to hold a certified voucher representing the money that you were entitled to but weren’t paid,” he told us, which made me blanch a little bit. Was he...was he trying to buy us off? Was I wrong about my first impression of him? “Take it to your bank and they’ll take care of it. And by lunchtime, both of you will be contacted by the DFM, and they’re going to give you a comprehensive list of all the services that you should have been receiving all along. Look over the list and choose whichever services you feel will help you. And if the DFM gives you any grief, or they refuse to render those services, I want you to call me *immediately*. I’m going to give both of you a contact number for my office. It will connect you directly to Chirk, my executive secretary. You tell her what problem you’re having, and she’ll bring it to me. And I’ll fix it. Just be warned, guys, she’s a Kizzik, so if you’re using video comm, be ready. She doesn’t appreciate it very much when people who call her scream.”

Whoa. Maybe he was for real, because he certainly sounded like he meant every word he said. And if he was going to give us a contact number that went directly to his office...then he *did* mean business.

Maybe I could trust him. God, I hoped I could.

“Thank you, your Grace,” Emelda said, looking over at the Jagaara.

“Just Jason will do, Rita,” he answered, a gentle smile on his face.

“Now, as to that other thing I wanted to talk to you about. Kevin, we noticed that you’ve discovered that you can use your in-game skills in the real world,” he said, which made me gasp.

“You mean you *knew* it was happening?” I asked quickly.

“Of course we did, the game was programmed that way on purpose,” the Grand Duke answered calmly. “The game had to be done that way to allow people to use their real-world skills inside the game and be able to improve them. That has to work both ways, so it means that the skills you learn inside the game, you can use in the real world. Well, some of them. Skills that rely on the physics that exist inside the game don’t really work in the real world, but the others will. So, it’s not a bug, or a fluke, it’s the way the game was designed to work. But we did notice something very interesting, and it involves you. It seems that the third generation simsense is having an interesting side effect on you. It’s sped up your reaction speed and reflexes, in effect, it’s trained you as if you were an athlete or a martial artist. You have reflexes so fast that it very nearly makes you superhuman, and we’re positive that it was the simsense rig that did it. With your permission, we’d like to investigate that a little further. We’d like your permission to access your Medical Service records, so we can try to find out why only certain players seem to be affected by this.”

Wow. *Wow*. Was that why the guy with the knife seemed to move so slowly? I could see every little detail, I could see the slightest shifting of his weight. It was like he was moving in slow motion. And that was because of the game? Because the simsense had trained my reflexes to the point where I was as fast as a professional fighter?

“You’re not going to shut down CO, are you?” Emelda asked with honest fear in her voice.

“Oh good lord no, we see this as a good thing,” the Grand Duke soothed. “There’s nothing wrong with the game helping you achieve your full potential, and we’ve already determined that this side effect is not harmful in any way to those who are being affected by it. We’re just trying

to track down why some players are being affected and some aren't, and we need access to the affected players' medical records so we can start looking for a common denominator. So, Kevin, you think you can give us permission to access your files?"

I went over that fight in my mind, again and again, almost ignoring the others. "It was like he was moving in slow motion," I said quietly. "I could see everything. Every little move he made. The shifting of the angle of the knife. Everything."

"That's why. Your reflexes have been affected by the third gen rig you use and honed by the game to make you faster than Bruce Lee, Kevin," Jason told him. "I dare say it's one reason why you're such a fantastic player, on top of your impressive skills. You have the reaction speed of a soldier or a professional athlete, Kevin, not a desk jockey. The game taught you to fight, but the simsense rig helped you develop the reflexes to use those skills to their maximum potential."

That was...*insane*. The game had taught me to fight, but it had also *trained* me to fight. From the sound of it, I had the reflexes of a professional athlete, or a boxer. But it fit. What happened with the guy with the knife...it fit. I couldn't deny he was right.

And...and I *liked* it. It made me feel even more safe, knowing that not only did I have the skills to protect myself, I had the reflexes to hold my own against someone that tried to hurt me. If what I was going to face were people like the knife guy, people that moved so slowly that I could see every tiny move they made, then I was confident I could protect myself from them.

"You said other players are being affected too?" Savar asked curiously.

The Jagaara gave a nod, which was definitely a human thing. "We're not sure how many, the game devs are running tests while players are logged in and trying to find them. What we do know is that people who are very sensitive to a simsense rig, you know, the ones that have to turn up the limiters to prevent sensory overload, they're the ones that are being affected the most by this side effect. And we're not really planning on telling them about this, because we don't want to frighten them, and it's not hurting them in any way. We see this as a good thing, an unforeseen and beneficial

side effect of a third gen simsense rig, and like I said, I have no problem with the rig helping people achieve their maximum potential. If it's helping them, I'm all for it continuing to help them. I'm telling you, Kevin, because I'm confident that we can trust you with this, that you won't blow everything out of proportion and cause a panic. But I promise you, all three of you, we'll never ask you to do any tests or experiments. We're fully aware that the time you spent on the farm may make the idea of that very frightening, and I'd never ask you to do anything you find uncomfortable," he told us in a strong voice. "All we want is access to your medical records, so we can try to find out why you're sensitive to a simsense rig. That's *it*."

I considered what he was asking, but I was also absorbing what he just said. If he cared enough to understand that making us go to the Medical Service and do tests would be hard for us...maybe he did understand. Maybe he *was* on our side. I was getting more convinced of it every moment, mainly because of the little things he was saying like that, which always kept our well-being in the forefront. "I...okay. You can have the access," I decided. "Do I have to do anything?"

"I'll send you a form that you have to authorize and send to the Medical Service," he replied. "And now that the business is out of the way," he said, leaning forward as if he were very eager to say what he was about to say, "I'm gonna pick your brain a little bit."

"Over what?"

"I play the game too, and I'm a lot like you. I play by myself most of the time. That's because my job is very demanding, and I can't commit to a schedule, or even be assured I won't be interrupted two minutes after I log on and have to log off. I've been told that you're one of the most experienced solo players in the entire game, so I want to learn a few of your tricks. I have a goal, I want to learn how to beat overworld boss monsters solo so I can try to get Lone Wolf, and you're the only player I know of in the entire game that can kill them so consistently. So, I want to learn how you do it," he said with a smile.

"You *play*?" I said in surprise.

"This isn't just some random character the devs whipped up for me to come talk to you," he said, patting his chest. I was right! That character was

too, too, too *lived in* just to be something the developers created for him to use in the game! “This *is* my character. My avatar’s name is Blackfang, and he’s a magician archetype. But, since I have real world fighting skills from my training as a rigger in the Karinne military,” he trailed off, pointing to the sword hilt over his left shoulder. Left shoulder? Was the Grand Duke left-handed? Interesting. “They copied my character off the server I play on, and I’m going to be allowed to keep any loot or spells or items that I get while over here and take it back with me when I go home,” he chuckled. “So, when the battle happens at Freeport, I’ll be here and I’m gonna fight in it. And I’m looking forward to it. I did the orc invasion event last year, and I’ve been hoping that they’d do something like that again.”

Finding out that the Grand Duke played really broke the ice, with all three of us. He asked me a bunch of questions about soloing, and he spoke using *game terms*, meaning he knew what they meant. It was abundantly clear that he wasn’t just a player, he’d been a player for a long time, and that made him much more, well, *real* to me. And to the others. Here wasn’t some nebulous ruler, but a regular guy that just had a really important job, and like the rest of us wage slaves, he liked to escape from the stresses and weight of that job by playing CO. It was one of the ways he decompressed...in a way, he was escaping from his life of making dreadfully important decisions by playing the game the same way me and Rita escaped from lives that sucked by coming to a world where our lives were much better. Emelda hitched on him saying he was a mage to talk about spells with him, and I asked him a bunch of questions about how he used his real life skills in the game, how he learned how to fight with a sword and how well it translated to playing. We got so into it that over an hour passed by, and it got to where we were laughing at his jokes and chatting with him like he was just another player.

And I think he liked that. He didn’t seem like the type that loved people fawning over him...but I don’t know why I got that impression. I just did.

What he wanted to talk about most, though, was how to beat boss monsters solo so he could get Lone Wolf. I explained my methodology to him, from the intentionally dying dozens of times to learn the boss monster’s abilities and powers, and once I was confident I had it figured out, stocking up on the consumables I needed to take it down.

“Huh,” he said absently. “I never thought consumables could be that powerful.”

“You don’t know the right enchanters,” I told him. “The NPC enchanter that makes the consumables I use can make almost anything. I tell her what I need it to do, and she comes up with something. It may not be perfect, or as powerful as I need it to be, but it always helps. And if you’re gonna take on a boss monster solo, you need every bit of help you can get.”

“I’ve seen some of the consumables he’s used, and yeah, they’re pretty crazy,” Savar agreed with a laugh. “The NPC merchant he buys from must have an insanely high enchanting skill.”

“I have enchanting skill, and it’s at 1,093,” he told us. “But I can’t make anything like some of the things he described.”

“Then I guess you’re just not high enough yet,” Emelda ventured reassuringly.

“Well, gives me a reason to keep working on enchanting,” he agreed. “I practice it mainly to help out my guild. I’m the only enchanter we have.”

“You’re in a guild?”

“On my normal server, yeah. It’s made up of most of the kids and our friends around my neighborhood that play the game. My 17-year-old neighbor is our guild master, and she’s very good at it,” he said.

Wait...they had 17-year-olds playing on Karis? But only adults can play on Terra, because only adults can have jacks! How did teenagers play on Karis, did they have different rules? Or did they use a different kind of jack that allowed teenagers to get one without it hurting them when they grew and the jack didn’t? Curious.

“I’d have thought that you’d be the guild master,” I noted.

“I don’t have the time to commit to the game to handle that kind of responsibility,” he said honestly, and it was a response I almost expected after talking to him for so long. “If I get to play for three hours in a takir, then I’m lucky. I’m even luckier if those three hours are uninterrupted.”

“I guess you’re really busy, running a planet and all,” Emelda observed. “And I can’t believe I’m sitting here talking to someone that does.”

“Us planetary rulers are still people, Rita,” he grinned at her.

“We’ve heard stories that you just walk around on your planet like everyone else,” I said.

“When I can. My guard captain sends guards with me if I’m going to a potentially unsecure place, like when I come to Terra, but I don’t really need them at home,” he affirmed. “I shop at the store, take my kids out to the park, and go to baseball games like anyone else. I don’t even live in a mansion, or on an estate, I live in a colonial on the northwest side of Karsa. The only way my house is really different from anyone else’s in the neighborhood is there’s a guard barracks behind the house for the Ducal Guard that protects my family, and there’s a security fence that encloses the neighborhood where I live to give the guards control over who comes and goes. But that fence isn’t around my house, it encompasses the entire neighborhood. I wasn’t born into this nobility crap. I was born and raised a normal person, and I like to be a normal person as much as possible. I find all the primadonna superiority complex bullshit the others have to be super annoying.”

We laughed, and that confirmed my suspicions. The Grand Duke Jason Karinne may be a ruler, but he was just a regular guy too. “My sister said you’re too good to be a Grand Duke. Now I see what she was talking about,” Savar told him.

“Mikano’s been talking about me, eh? I’m gonna have to get her for that,” he said playfully, which made Savar chuckle.

“You know her personally?” Emelda asked.

“I know all my ship captains personally,” he answered forcefully, as if it meant a lot to him. “And Mikano also happens to be one of my wife’s best friends. They hang out together all the time.”

“Mikki’s told me about that much,” Savar said. “She’s told me some pretty wild stories about Duchess Jyslin.”

“They’re most likely true. And even if they’re not, Jys will claim that they are just to make her look cooler,” he said lightly. He was quiet a moment, his eyes turning distant in the way when someone was getting bothered by someone in real life, then his eyes became lucid again. “And speaking of work, it just called,” he said with honest regret, standing up.

“Afraid I’m gonna have to go, guys. Thank you for the game advice, Kevin, and thank you for giving us access to your medical file. Remember, both of you, a courier is going to come to you tomorrow at nine o’clock your time, so make sure you’re either at home or at work. And I promise you, I’m going to get to the bottom of what’s going on with the DFM and I’m going to make sure that all the farm survivors get everything they were promised,” he told us with sincere concern in his voice. “I made you guys a promise when I took over Terra from the Trillanes, and I’m gonna make damn sure that that promise is kept.”

“Thank you, your Grace,” Emelda told him. “It’s been so long since it felt like anyone cared about us.”

“I always have, and I always will,” he assured us. He shook our hands one by one, and then he asked me to escort him to the door downstairs. I did so out of curiosity mainly, walking with him down to the door to the alley outside. He turned to me after opening the door, looking down at me with strong, steady eyes. “Thank you for all your help, Kevin,” he said, offering his hand.

“Thank you, Jason. For helping us, and for caring about us.”

“I should have never let it get this far,” he said in a growl. “I should have been paying more attention to the DFM. I made you guys a promise, and I failed to uphold it. But I promise you, *all* of you, I will fix this *fast*,” he said in a powerful voice. A text message uploaded to my vidlink, to which the vidlink alerted me in game. “I just sent you and Rita a contact number and sent you that form you need to authorize and send to the Medical Service. That number connects directly to my office on Karis, to my executive secretary Chirk,” he told me. “If the DFM gives you any grief, you call me immediately and I’ll step on them.”

“I will, thank you,” I told him.

“And remember, nine o’clock tomorrow. Be somewhere the courier can find you, either at home or at work. Don’t be on a transport.”

“I have to be at work at eight, so I’ll be easy for him to find,” I assured him.

“Good. I hope to see you in game again, Kevin. I’ll be at Freeport for the final battle. Maybe we can kick some Kanlon ass together.”

“I think I’d like that very much,” I told him with an earnest smile. “We are on the same faction.”

“That we are,” he nodded.

After he said his goodbye and hurried down the alley, no doubt towards the inn so he could log out, I went back up to the parlor. Emelda and Savar were already talking about the visit, and from the sound of it, both of them were very much inclined towards Jason Karinne. And so was I.

“I liked him,” Emelda declared. “He did seem to care.”

“Mikki said that he has a big heart,” Savar said.

“How much has she told you about him?” I asked.

“Not a whole lot, but what she has said has always been good. I hear more about his wife, than him,” she laughed. “Mikki and Duchess Jyslin *are* good friends, and Mikki’s told me about some of their wilder adventures together. She seems like the kind of friend that ends up in the jail cell with you the morning after.”

I had to laugh. “She must be wild.”

“His wife is Faey, so yeah. Mikki said it was the biggest culture shock of her life having a Faey woman as a best friend,” she laughed. “Shio aren’t anything like Faey.”

“Well, I guess not all Faey are bad,” I said absently. “And you’ve been keeping secrets.”

“Mikki asked me not to bandy about what she tells me,” she replied soberly. “But I will say one thing. Mikki once told me she would *die* for Jason Karinne. I think now, after talking to him in real life a few days ago and again in here, I understand why she said it. He’s quite a man, isn’t he?”

“I like him,” Emelda agreed. “I really think he cares about us.”

“I think he does too,” I agreed. “I just hope that he cares about *all* of us, not just the two of us he met in here.”

“I think he will,” Emelda predicted. “He seemed so mad when we told him how the DFM treats us. If he can make them help us, help *all* of us, I’d die for Jason Karinne too.”

And I knew she meant it.

I almost forgot about the courier.

She showed up at *exactly* nine o'clock the next morning, but to my surprise, it wasn't FedEx or a shipping service. It was a *Kimdori*, a race I'd never seen before in the flesh, but I've seen pictures of them on the viddy and on CivNet to know what they look like. It was a very young Kimdori female carrying a small case with her, and she was escorted to my desk at exactly 9:00. She approached me and put her hand on my neck—I'd read that was some kind of ritual greeting they used—then she seemed to nod to herself as she leaned over my desk and put the case on it. "I have something for you, Kevin Ball," she said without preamble. "The Grand Duke ordered I give it to you personally."

"He told me you were coming," I answered.

"If you'd put your thumb here to confirm your identity and certify that the package was delivered," she prompted, pointing to a thumbprint scanner on the case. I did so out of curiosity, and that caused the case to open. A biometric lock? The Grand Duke wasn't playing around. Inside, in a bungee strap to keep it from sliding around inside the case, was a single envelope. "If you'd open the envelope and confirm it holds what you expect?" she prompted.

I did so, taking it out and pulling out a very official looking piece of...it wasn't paper. It was like some kind of supple metal, silvery in color, soft to the touch and flexible, and it had writing etched into it rather than printed upon it. It said *Certified Voucher* at the top, and under that it said *First Bank of Moridon*. Below that it read: *Certifies that the owner of this voucher, Kevin R. Ball, is entitled to transfer from account K3956B37385662-0001 the amount of C517,835 at any financial institution registered to the Moridon Financial Services Network. Biometric identity level two required to authorize fund transfer.*

Holy...*shit!* *FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND* credits! That was a fortune! It was a fucking *king's ransom!* I almost swallowed my tongue reading that amount!

Holy God above, Jason Karinne was now my new best friend!

Along with it was a handwritten note: *This is for the fourteen years that you have NOT been getting the assistance and support you were entitled to under the agreement I made with the U.N., it said, written in Faey. Don't go crazy with it, Kevin. Make a plan, and this money will last you the rest of your life. And I hope it's a good one.*

“My task is complete,” the Kimdori declared. “The case is yours to keep, Kevin Ball. I suggest you return the package to the case, for only you can open it. And don't lose it,” she prompted. I gave her a glance, then hastily did as she suggested, putting the metal slip back in the envelope, putting it back in its holder, and closing the case. “Good day to you.”

She then left, left me swimming in shock and excitement. Holy shit, I didn't have to worry about losing my job now! C500,000 was a *lot* more money than the old dollars we used to use, it was like being a millionaire before the subjugation! With that, I could buy a house in the upscale neighborhoods of Jacksonville, a luxury hovercar, a luxury skimmer, and have enough left over to hold me over for a whole year before I had to get a job! And if I saved that money and used it wisely, I never had to work again! I could live off the interest it earned for the rest of my life, as long as I lived modestly!

I had options. I had so many options!

But I also had a job, and I'm not a dick. I gave my two weeks' notice last week, I had four days to go, and I wasn't just going to skip out on them now that I no longer needed the paycheck from those last four days. But my mind was completely scattered, so I didn't get much done that day. I spent the day feverishly considering how I wanted to use the money, if I would buy stuff or just stay in my apartment and live off investment interest, and I kept that case in my sight *at all times*, not even eating lunch because I didn't want to risk taking it into the cafeteria and somehow losing it or forgetting it. I even took it to the bathroom with me.

I was almost trembling with both excitement and anxiety when I took the voucher to the only place I could think to go, and that's my bank, Moridon Municipal Savings. MMS is more or less the go-to bank for most working class and lower middle class people, because they have very modest fees and they offer a bunch of useful services for people who work for a living, from auto and home loans to retirement plans. I was glad it was

a Moridon bank, because that meant they'd honor the voucher. The teller, a Terran, was a bit surprised at the voucher, and called in a Moridon supervisor to authenticate it. "This voucher is valid," the super-tall Moridon said, looking down at me with those eerie glowing red eyes. "It requires level two biometric identification, Mister Ball. A thumbprint and a retinal scan. If you would kindly look at the camera here," he prompted. After I confirmed who I was, he brought me to his desk in a small office off the lobby. He deposited the money in my account, then he suggested that with this much money, I might want to think of moving the money to a bank for people that catered to upper class people. But his most urgent advice was also good advice. "I must stress that your first action should be to get in touch with a professional financial planner, Mister Ball," he told me. "Most people who have never had this much money have no idea what to do with it, and often, they mismanage or waste it. I can refer you to a fully licensed and bonded Moridon financial planner that can help you decide on a plan for this money and then put it into action."

"That's...that's a good idea," I agreed. "You can give me a contact number?"

"Several," he replied. "But my recommendation is you contract with a financial planner that works for a Moridon bank. They have no personal stake in the plan they make, so they are always objective. And that is why you should consider opening an account with a more...prestigious Moridon institution," he said modestly. "They have financial planners on staff that can assist you for free, as part of the bank's offered services."

"I think I'll stay here until I decide what to do," I told him. "You guys have always been very good to me, and I'm just fine with the money staying here while I figure things out."

He gave a nod of thanks for my compliment. "We do offer a variety of short-term investment certificate options that carry no risk, that will earn that money a modest return while you decide what to do," he told me. "With investment periods as short as two takirs. It would be wise to let that money start working for you as you decide what to do with it."

"Two takirs?"

He nodded. “By the time you contract a financial planner and have a plan ready, the money will be available for investment.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea. It’ll let me look over the options and decide what I want to do.”

“A wise choice,” he said in his calm voice.

The one thing I’ve learned, and that everyone knows, is that the Moridon *do not cheat people*. They tell you exactly what they’re going to do, they explain everything in great detail, so you know exactly what’s going on, and they always do exactly what they say they’ll do. When he said he could put that money in a no-risk 20-day investment that would give me a return of .0035%, that was exactly what I got. That rate of return was slightly higher than the usual rate on a normal account (they didn’t have separate checking and savings accounts here, just a “transaction account” that was both rolled into one), which would let that money earn a slightly higher return while I decided how to use it. It did lock up the money for 20 days, which was why I only put C500,000 into it, and not all of it. That gave me C17,000 or so available in case I wanted to splurge a little bit, but also kept me from getting crazy by putting most of the money in a time locked safe, as it were.

When I logged on, Emelda was already in the parlor, and she rushed up to me. “Did you get five hundred thousand?” she asked breathlessly.

“A little over, but yeah,” I told her.

She gave a squeal of delight, took my hands, and literally jumped up and down. “I can’t believe it!” she said. “He did take care of us, Kevin! I can buy a house, buy a car! I can travel! I can quit my job!”

“Did you get contacted by the DFM?” I asked.

“Not yet, you?”

“No. I guess he hasn’t gotten that part arranged yet. But I’m sure it’s going to happen.”

“Me too!” she agreed. “He does care about us, Kevin! He cares about us pickers! Ohhh, I hope the others get as much as we did!”

“Me too,” I said, putting my hands on her shoulders to calm her down a tiny bit.

We talked about our good fortune until Savar logged on, and then told her the good news. “That’s wonderful!” she gushed. “I think both of you deserve every credit of it! Have you made plans to invest it yet? You really should talk to a financial planner, both of you,” she urged.

“My bank suggested that, and I’m gonna do it,” I nodded. “He gave me several contact numbers of more upscale Moridon banks and some independent financial planners. I have no idea what to do with the money, so I need to talk to someone with experience.”

“You think I should?” Emelda asked.

“It would be the smart thing to do, Em,” Savar told her. “My family’s fairly well off,” she said modestly, which was an understatement. I’ve seen pictures of her parents’ house back on Shio Prime, it’s a freakin’ *manor*, “and the first thing you learn when you have money is that you need to have a good plan on how to manage it. You’d be surprised how fast it can disappear if you don’t have a plan. If you make a good plan, Em, you can have the money to do whatever you want to do and never have to work again. You could start your own business, you could travel, you could just lay in bed and play CO all day every day, but you need to talk to a planner to make sure that you have a plan to make sure it happens.”

“Okay. You’ve convinced me, Savar,” she said. “I’ll talk to the bank about finding a financial planner.”

“Go to a *Moridon* bank, Em,” Savar stressed. “They won’t ever cheat you.”

“Okay.”

“You used Moridon banks when you lived on Shio?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, the Moridon have had banks all over the sector cluster for hundreds of years,” she answered. “And we learned quickly that a Moridon bank never tries to smooth-talk you into making decisions that benefit the *bank* more than they do *you*. So both of you, put the money in a Moridon bank and hire a Moridon financial planner to help you make a plan for it. They’ll do what’s best for you.”

“Glad to have some confirmation,” I chuckled. “I’ve had good experiences with my current bank, and it’s a Moridon bank.”

“MMS?” she asked, and I nodded. “They’re great, aren’t they? They offer so many services and they don’t charge much at all for them.”

“I bank at First Republic Bank, a statewide bank here in Texas. I wasn’t sure about putting my money in a bank run by people from another planet,” Emelda admitted.

“They’re trustworthy, Em.”

“If you say they are.”

We didn’t get much done at all in game, sitting around the house and discussing our massive windfall, and talking about what we were going to do with it. While we were doing that, both me and Emelda got a text message from the DFM, asking to talk to us over vidlink. We both logged out to do that, and I found the entire exercise almost amusing. The DFM worker was both a little flustered and a little annoyed, as she clearly had to talk to someone that didn’t come groveling to her begging for her help, but clearly afraid of what might happen to her if she screwed up the meeting. It was apparent that the Grand Duke had probably made some very angry calls to the DFM and forced them to reach out to us, and the DFM was sulky about it. She explained a bunch of programs that I had no idea existed that were supposed to help us, and my first and most obvious question made her literally scowl at me: “why wasn’t I ever told about this stuff before?”

“I guess because you didn’t fully read the guide that was handed out to you when you were released from the farm,” she retorted snippily.

“Yeah, someone with *these* was supposed to carefully read a big book right after being released from a death camp,” I snapped back harshly, pointing at the scar on my face.

It didn’t get much more polite from there, and I wasn’t about to let her get me mad enough to hang up on her...and it almost seemed that that was what she was trying to do. It was like she was being deliberately combative to try to stop me from using any of the services she was being forced to explain to me.

Despite her pissy attitude, a couple of the programs she told me about sounded good, like the stipend program and the business assistance program, where they would help me start a business of my own, and I made note to go down to the DFM office personally once I finished my two weeks' notice and look into them. The stipend program explained to me where all that money came from. It seemed that I was supposed to be getting a payment every month to help supplement my income, and I'd never been told about it. The Grand Duke said I'd be paid every credit I was owed, and it must have been from that program. The money I got was like getting back pay, it was all the credits I should have gotten from that payment program over fourteen years. And I could get on that program and get those monthly payments, because that program was supposed to last for the rest of our lives. We were supposed to be getting a monthly stipend until the day we die.

And with the big payment the Grand Duke gave me, maybe I could start my own business...though I had no idea what kind of business I'd want to own. But it was an option, and since I doubted I was going to get another job after I finished out at 2M, it would be an option to keep me occupied. I may go to skill training just to learn how to run a business of my own. Or maybe I could go to the Academy and take business, since I found out from prissy bitch's briefing that pickers had automatic acceptance privileges at the Academy. If I wanted to go to the Academy, I was guaranteed to get in.

I didn't want to move to Norfolk, though. If I did it, I'd take courses at the satellite campus here in Jacksonville.

That idea appealed to me. Maybe I *would* take some courses at the Academy. I could take computer science courses and business courses, and maybe start my own computer company. I do like computers, and I liked the idea of having something to do. Much as I love CO, I know that it's important to stay involved in real life and having my own company would keep me very much engaged in real life.

Or maybe I wouldn't. But the one thing I had now, which I never had before, was the time to decide what I want to do without having to worry about money. Or a place to live. Or *anything*. Thanks to Jason Karinne, I felt very secure about my future, that I would be financially stable and that there were indeed people out there looking out for people like me.

For the first time in a long time, I felt optimistic about the future.

Chapter 9

This was it. *The* day.

The final battles of the Grand Crusade were scheduled to start today, though we had no idea which battle was going to start first.

Freeport was crowded, more crowded than it had ever been before. There were thousands of players in the city, and most of them were recent rerolls from other servers who had come here to get in on the battle. They were easy to pick out in the crowd, with whatever gear they'd managed to scrounge up in a couple of weeks and looking quite excited, and they vastly outnumbered those of us who played on the server. There were maybe only about 400 players from Methrian in Freeport, with the rest of them being rerolls, and most of them were from the other factions. The Black Fangs faction held the Drakkin, so there were a ton of Drakkin players, but the Moonshadow faction held the Nazetar, and they were also a significant presence in the city. As for us Champions, we weren't down on the streets milling around with the players and NPCs, the twelve of us from the three factions participating in this fight were on the highest tower of Falcon's Roost, which gave us a commanding view of the bay and ocean beyond.

The four races of the Black Fangs faction were all reptilian, which made it one of the most *homogenous* factions in the game. Simply put, there were the flying lizards, the big lizards, the fast lizards, and the magical lizards. Supposedly the four races were all related, were descended from a single race, but they didn't look very much alike. The Drakkin were lean and tall, their frames built for carrying their wings. The Saurkin were very big reptilian bipeds, the "physical" race of the faction, who topped out at nearly three meters tall and had the highest base Strength stat in the game. The Kadekin were the "magical" race of the faction, a slim, elegant race of reptilian bipeds that looked a great deal like the sabax, but they had mottled tan scales that helped them blend into their desert home more easily. The last race was the Silakkin, which were the "Savasa" race of Netherim. They weren't very tall, whip-thin, extremely fast and agile, and like the Savasa,

they could run at high speed on the ground. The champions of the four races were up on the tower with us, along with the Moonshadow champions, which didn't take up nearly as much space. The Kuato, a race of canine bipeds who supposedly were born human but were cursed with an animal body, the "werewolves" of CO, were the tallest of the four races of their faction, and they were only slightly shorter than Jagaara. The Nazetar were more or less just water breathing humans with green-tinged skin, so they were normal size compared to us. Dark Elves were slightly shorter than humans and much more willowy, shorter than High Elves, Underdwarves were a tad shorter than the Mountain Dwarves that were part of our faction, but more heavily built. The Saurkin champion, the Kuato champion, and Hinasa took up the most space up on the top of the tower, and the Drakkin champion, Sebirk, was perched on the parapet so his wings didn't get in anyone's face. We'd decided to meet up here on the eve of the battle so we could discuss strategy, organize who would be in which raid party, and where in Freeport we'd be, so we had maximum coverage of the docks and a Champion could respond to any part of it within two minutes.

Much to my displeasure, Savar wasn't with us. She had her own battle to fight on the Sea of Grass, and my plan to be there to help until the Kanlon attacked Freeport fell through. Kanlon ships had been sighted last night, so King Gerin ordered us to stay in Freeport. He was worried that the Kanlon would attack Freeport first...and he just may be right.

There was nothing to do for us but wait. No doubt the event wasn't going to trigger until enough Champions were in all three battle locations, and since all of us were in Freeport, it had to be at one of the other battles that they weren't ready. That, or the event was set to start at a specific time, a time we didn't know, so all we could do was stand around and wait.

I didn't really contribute to the conversation, just listening, because as far as I was concerned just about everyone there except for Emelda, Braggan, and Hinasa were future enemies. The Champion title would remain after the Grand Crusade, and that meant that the Champions would still be hunting each other to complete the quest for the flying mount. That was why my plan was to more or less ignore Citadel and go back to exploring the Twin Worlds for a while to stay out of sight.

But I couldn't deny that I was happy to see so many people in Freeport, even under these conditions. The city had been transformed from an open, inviting city of clean white stone to a warren of blockades, fortified positions, and dead ends meant to confound and slow down Kanlon invaders if they got past the docks. Entire houses were torn down and their materials piled over the streets to block them, to force invaders into one route that would be a gauntlet of crossbow fire from positions on the roofs of the buildings flanking the route. Drakkin warriors, gryphon riders, and mages on flying discs were in the air patrolling the city, and the harbor was filled with Nazetar in their iconic scale mail armor, armor made from the scales of a magical fish called a shieldflank rather than metal, the scales very light, but also nearly as tough as iron. There had to be *thousands* of players in the city, and that was on top of tens of thousands of NPCs.

I was glad I didn't sell my house here in Freeport. The Golden Lion Champions had been using my house as a base of operations for the last week as we got prepared, so I'd gotten to know Braggan and Hinasa well enough to consider them almost friends, friends enough to allow into my house. Hinasa had a subtle sense of humor and spent most of his time "in character," he was a major role player despite being a raider and good enough to be the Jagaara Champion, and Braggan was down to earth, a little raunchy, and surprisingly funny. The four of us were grouped with two healers from the Golden Crusaders and the Dark Riders, both High Elves, players I didn't know, so I was more or less staying quiet in chat as much as I was on the tower. All twelve of us were in the same raid along with guild members from all the top guilds and some other high-skill players from the lower tier raiding guilds, a fully maxed out raid of 200 players. Our raid was being commanded by Felik, who the other guilds trusted to do a good job.

"It's got to start soon," Sebirk grunted, standing up and opening his wings a bit as he looked out over the harbor. "We've been in position for over an hour."

"They made us wait before," the Saurkin Champion said. His name was Kavak, which I thought fit a Saurkin to a tee. "I just wonder how long we have to stand on the dock and wait for the ships to get there. The fliers, Nazetar, and the guys on the ships are going to get the first shot at them."

“Yeah, they have to fight their way through the Freeport Navy to get into the harbor,” Braggan agreed.

“I’ll be out there, I’ll let you know,” Sebirk said.

“So will I,” I finally said.

“Mage disc?” Hinasa asked.

I shook my head. “Feather Light,” I answered, pointing at my boots. “I thought it wasn’t going to be all that useful when I chose the boots, because I needed the boots for the stats more than the effect. But it’s come in damn handy.”

“I’d say it will,” the Dark Elf Champion mused. Her name was Alandra, and she was probably more like me than anything else in how she’d set up her character. She wore the trademark light, supple Elven Chain armor, which was dyed black, and like me, she dual wielded a pair of elegant longswords, but that was no surprise. Dark Elves got Dual Wield for free (which is a *big deal*, the prerequisites for Dual Wield mean it usually takes at least two months of skill training after rolling a character to be able to take the skill), a damage bonus when dual wielding, and they also got a bonus to the damage rating of short swords, longswords, and daggers. Her dual wielding a pair of longswords was her being smart and using her racial advantages to the fullest. “Now I wish I’d gotten the boots out of the set.”

“Just be careful, there’s going to be Sahaugin out there,” the Nazetar champion warned. His name was Tarven, and he wore the iconic fish scale armor of the Nazetar and carried a trident as his Champion’s weapon. “They’ll take shots at you as you run across the surface.”

“I know,” I assured him, then all twelve of us turned and looked when a horn sounded from the north fort. The two forts guarded the entrance to the harbor, and there was a significant number of troops stationed in both. Admiral Rogers was certain the Sahaugin would storm the forts to take them and let the Kanlon ships get into the harbor unmolested. I agreed with him. The horn sounded again, then other horns in the city joined in.

That was the signal. The Kanlon fleet had been spotted, and the battle was about to begin.

“That’s it,” Emelda said. “They’re coming.”

“I think that means our battle starts first. A few of my guildies are at the other battles, and they said they’re still waiting, the Kuato Champion said. His name was Fang (meaning he was one of the first players to roll on Methrian to get a name like that), and he wore plate armor and carried a really, really big two-handed axe.

“First horn,” Felik called over raid chat. “Everyone get to your assigned positions. They’re coming.”

“I’ve gotta go, I’m in the advance force,” Tarven said.

“So am I,” Emelda mirrored.

I turned and jumped up onto the parapet, then gave a shrill whistle, two fingers to my lips. A moment later, an armored gryphon flew from the aerie on the other side of Falcon’s Roost. I jumped onto her back as she flew past. “No fair!” Braggan laughed.

“I can use army assets, remember?” I called lightly as the gryphon carried me towards the docks.

I landed with the other gryphon riders who were lined up along the docks, urging the gryphon up to stand beside the captain of the Skyriders, who was mounted on a similarly armored gryphon. “That explains why Windclaw wouldn’t take a rider,” he noted dryly.

“You’ll have her back when she gets me out to the ships,” I told him, patting the gryphon’s white feathered shoulder. “I’ll be doing my best to disrupt the ships from the decks, attacking the helms and rudders to make the ships unsteerable. It’s where I can do the most good.”

“A dangerous plan.”

“But if it works, it’ll be worth it,” I noted, glancing at him.

The horn sounded again, and that made the captain stand up in his stirrups. “Everyone get ready!” he shouted. “We take off at the third horn! Get your crossbows ready, make sure your quivers are full! And be ready for anything!” he warned. “We don’t know what the Kanlon have up their sleeves!” In front of us, the Nazetar all dove and started out of the harbor, to get into position to intercept the Sahaugin as they tried to reach the forts, and behind us, thousands of Drakkin landed along the rooftops along the edge of the docks, getting their crossbows ready.

The third horn sounded. “That’s it, men! Take off!” the captain boomed, clapping his visor down and dropping back into the saddle. “Razorbeak, up!”

It was quite majestic, I figured, the players seeing the gryphons of the Freeport Army, the Drakkin, and the mages all take off from the docks and start to ascend, gathering into organized formations. I rode just behind the captain’s formation, which was in the vanguard, with Drakkin all around me, including Felik and Sebirk. “You be careful down there, Xen,” Felik warned. “You’re going to be completely surrounded at all times.”

“I can handle myself, Felik. I’m used to being outnumbered,” I told him calmly. “I’ll do my best to cripple as many ships as I can, that should keep them from reaching the docks.”

Tarven called over raid chat. “We see the Sahaugin. Holy shit, there’s *thousands* of them! This is gonna be a total war!”

“Be careful down there, Tarven,” Felik called.

“If there’s one thing a Nazetar knows how to do, it’s kill Sahaugin,” he replied cheekily. The Sahaugin were the main enemies of the Nazetar much the same way the lizard men were the sworn enemies of the Jagaara, their starting quests all revolved around beating the Sahaugin back away from their home city. Given the Sahaugin’s taste for human flesh, it was no surprise they hunted the Nazetar so single-mindedly.

A few minutes later, the Kanlon fleet came into view, and there were *thousands* of them! I had no idea there would be so many! It was a complete armada of several different ship types, from sleek rakers to massive dreadnaughts, and the biggest ship of all was almost the size of a small town! It was so big it was built on a triple hull design, like a trimaran, with a giant platform built over them upon which the main body of the ship rested. If I could disable *that* thing, I could get us one big step towards winning this battle!

“By the Powers,” I heard the captain mutter. “There they are, men, ready your weapons and prepare to dive!” he called.

“Look above the ships!” someone called. “By the point! They have airborne troops!”

I used a quick spell of Far Sight, and I gasped aloud. There were hundreds of small winged reptiles with red scales, each of which were carrying two Kanlon, one controlling the beast and the other armed with a heavy crossbow. My God, those were *drakes*! Drakes were much smaller cousins of dragons, not nearly as smart, but very nasty and very dangerous!

They'd managed to tame *drakes*? I didn't think that was possible in the game, for either players or NPCs!

We'd never seen any of them when we did the recon of Skull Rock and the other Kanlon bases! Where the *hell* did they come from?

"Those are drakes!" I shouted to the captain. "Two riders on each one, a pilot and a crossbowman. Captain, those drakes have *breath weapons*!" I warned.

"Damn it all, this just got a lot harder," he growled. "Change of plans, men! We engage those drakes!" he screamed. "They have breath weapons, don't let them get close to you! Pass it down the line! Robertson, turn back and warn the King about the drakes!"

"Aye sir!" one of his men called, and his gryphon turned back for Freeport.

"All airborne units engage those drakes!" Felix called over raid chat. "We can't attack the ships with those things trying to roast our asses! Tarven, can you spare men to attack the ships from below?"

"I might, but it's a total war down here, Felix!" he answered. "I've got Sahaugin all but stapled to my ass!"

"Do what you can, Tarven!"

"Captain, I'm sending Windclaw back so she can pick up a rider," I called as I unhooked from the saddle and stood up on her back. "I'll do what I can to disable the lead ships. With luck, the ships behind will ram once they can't steer anymore."

"Are you nuts, Champion?" the captain barked.

"I'll be fine!" I shouted, then I took a small step and jumped up enough to let the gryphon fly out from under me, then let myself freefall towards the ocean below.

“Did you do that on purpose Xen?” Felik asked over raid chat.

“Yup, doing my part. Go sic those drakes, guys. I’ll try to slow down the lead ships by cutting their rudder chains. Hopefully that’ll jam up the entire armada as they try to avoid colliding with them.”

“Good idea, Xen. Good luck,” Felik said as he flew over me high above and getting higher with every second.

I landed lightly on the surface of the ocean and was almost immediately attacked by a Sahaugin. A spear head erupted from the water between my legs and tried to spit my unmentionables, which I avoided just *barely*. I then had to all but dance across the water as I avoided more spears, then I had to deal with a volley of arrows and crossbow quarrels fired from the lead ship. I parried several of the missiles, but one hit me in the upper arm, dealing some damage as it grazed over my arm and thankfully didn’t lodge in my body.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

It was certain death to stay on the water’s surface, so the idea of going around the ship and attacking the rudder chain was out. I ended up having to board the Kanlon raker at the bow, using Feather Light to vault up onto the bowsprit, then fight my way across the deck to reach the helm. Above me, visible when I glanced up, I could see that the airborne units of both sides had engaged, and it was total chaos up there. Gryphons and Drakkins and drakes were banking and circling and diving and climbing, and the air was thick with crossbow quarrels, spells, and even fire from the drakes’ breath weapons. I was nearly killed by the body of a Kanlon drake rider when it slammed into the deck not half a meter from me as I struggled to reach the helm, very nearly killing a Kanlon Marine as well.

The going was much easier on the ship than on the water. These Kanlon NPCs were not high-skill or heavily geared, so I was able to kill them without much effort...but the problem was, there were dozens of them due to them stacking the ships with infantry to invade Freeport, and they were working together. I got stalled just in front of the steps up to the steering deck by a coordinated quartet of Kanlon Marines who had better weapon skills than the others.

A shadow fell over us all. I spared a quick look up and saw the dead body of a drake falling right at us!

“Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit!” I screamed out of reflex as I turned and dove away, as the four Marines tried to do the same, but they weren’t fast enough. The body, which was nearly five meters long and had to weigh a ton, tore effortlessly through the rigging and hit the deck so hard it shattered it, sending wooden pieces of shrapnel in every direction as the body fell to the deck below, went through *that* one, went through the third deck, and then hit the hull of the ship at the bilge. The entire ship shuddered and listed heavily to port from the impact, and I could hear rushing water below us. The body had breached the hull, and the ship was doomed to sink. How fast it sank was anyone’s guess, but it was destined to be décor on the bottom of the sea. I slid across the deck as the ship nearly threatened to capsize, grabbing hold of the rail to keep from going over into Sahaugin-infested water, but many of the Kanlon weren’t so lucky. They were launched out over the rail and into the sea. The ship nearly corkscrewed around the point of impact as the stern rose up out of the water, then the ship slammed back to the surface and rolled back to starboard. The bow almost immediately began to settle deeper into the water.

Holy *crap* this was getting intense, and it *just started*!

I needed another approach here. Despite me being in the raid, I knew it was time to reveal my deepest secret, because I wouldn’t survive to reach the next ship otherwise. I’d get skewered by the Sahaugin trying to run across the surface of the water. I sheathed my swords and took a breath, exhaled, and did the deed. I jumped from the rail of the doomed vessel and took Djinn form the instant my feet came off the rail, and recalled my bow and conjured a single arrow as I accelerated up to my full speed just out of reach of the spears of the Sahaugin, coming in low over the surface so fast that Kanlon archers would have trouble aiming at me. I came right at the bow of the next raker in the formation, rising up over the deck as I slithered through a hail of arrow and quarrel fire, then drew my bow as I passed by the stern of the ship.

I practiced this. I practiced shooting the bow moving, so when I loosed, my arrow was on target...and it was on target because I used Imbue Arrow, removing my need to lead my target, allowing me to aim directly at it. A

lance of lightning erupted from my bow as the string snapped forward, the arrow at the head of the lightning bolt, and the bolt carried the arrow straight and true to my target.

Not the captain, or the helmsman, but the *helm*.

The lightning bolt did the trick, given it hit with the formidable magic of Imbue Arrow stacked on the damage rating of the bow, which was nothing to sneeze at. It struck the wheel and made it explode, sending wood and brass shrapnel flying into the face and body of the helmsman, making him stagger back and fall. Without a wheel, and the wheel mount holding the chain that connected the helm to the rudder being broken and on fire, the ship was disabled.

I slowed to a stop directly behind the ship and used a spell Emelda gave me, her spell that protected her from non-magical arrows and missiles for five minutes at my skill level. I needed it, else I'd get whittled down by their arrows and eventually killed. The only drawback of the spell was that it had a cooldown. I couldn't cast it again for the same amount of time it was in effect, so if I ran it the full five minutes, I had to wait five minutes to cast it again.

"Holy crap, another of your exotic consumables, Xen?" Felik spared a moment to ask me over raid chat.

"Something like that," I answered. "But I don't have long, maybe five minutes. I'll do as much damage as I can before I run out of time."

Under the protection of that spell, I managed to do some damage in the five minutes I had. I took out the helms of six ships, the ones in the lead, but my idea to create a traffic jam didn't really pan out. The ships were still moving forward, powered by the sails, and the other ships were giving them a wide enough berth that they weren't doing very much to slow the fleet down.

I did this too soon. I should have kept it in reserve and used it just before the ships tried to enter the harbor, when their ability to turn would really matter. I screwed it up.

Damn it!

I was about to curse aloud, but I ear-splitting *BOOM* nearly startled me out of my skin. I looked in time to see a Kanlon ship's mast fall to the deck, then I looked the other way and saw the Freeport Navy about two kilometers away and closing, firing their forward cannons as they charged. The Navy was engaging!

It became total chaos. The Freeport Navy was going to stop the Kanlon fleet no matter what it took, and given they were so heavily outnumbered, their tactic was to sail right down the throats of the Kanlons and engage them almost at point blank range, making it so a Kanlon ship couldn't easily fire on a Freeport vessel without potentially hitting one of their own allies. It also accomplished what I'd been trying, forcing the Kanlon fleet to slow down and spread out to avoid ramming Freeport vessels. It was a crazy tactic, nearly desperate, and it was going to get a ton of Freeport ships sunk, but this was not the time to be playing it safe. If the Kanlon fleet got into the harbor with even half of the ships they had, they'd unload more than enough troops to threaten the city. But it wasn't as crazy as I thought as I watched and lined up to attack another ship. The Freeport Navy had cannons and the Kanlons did not, they used ballista and catapults, and at such close range, the cannons were much more effective. That close, catapults were almost completely useless, and their ballista were having problems penetrating the thick hulls of Freeport galleons and frigates.

"Sahaugin are coming ashore at the forts!" someone shouted over raid chat.

"Keep them off the walls!" Felik barked in reply. "Tarven, can you cut them off?"

"Not right now, we're barely holding onto our asses down here!" he replied urgently.

"Xen, get to the forts!" he ordered me. "You'll do more good there!"

"Got it!" I answered, veering off and accelerating to my full speed as a Djinn.

I didn't get back unscathed. A drake dove at me as I made my way back, me barely avoiding its breath weapon and I had it chase me all the way back to the forts. It was faster than me, but I had much more maneuverability, so I was able to keep from getting bitten in half by

zigzagging, avoiding both the drake's jaws and the arrows of the riders. I took out the pilot with an imbued arrow, which made the drake veer off before the second rider could take the reins. I played tag with it almost all the way back to the forts, until a crossbow quarrel hit the drake in the head from above and it crashed into the ocean barely a hundred meters from the north fort. I looked up to see the Skyrider captain salute me before veering off to go after another drake, already in the act of reloading his crossbow.

The Sahaugin were scaling the wall of the north fort and had already established a foothold atop the wall when I arrived, and when I landed and changed back to human form, I was much more in my element and much more effective. I joined the defenders, helped rally them, both players and NPCs, and we stiffened our defenses and pushed the Sahaugin off the wall, sending them crashing onto their allies on the rocks below. We fought for nearly a half an hour at the fort as we watched the naval battle and the sky battle get closer and closer, saw more and more Freeport ships go under, and they weren't taking nearly enough Kanlon ships with them.

"We're losing the south fort! Sahaugin are inside the fort!" I heard someone call over raid chat. "Felik, we need more people here!"

"Anyone on the docks that can get there, go!" he barked. "Emelda, send a couple of mages to clear the wall and give them a chance to take it back!"

We heard a sudden crashing sound from inside the south fort, and I saw the harbor chain that was pulled across the two forts to prevent ships from getting past it shudder and then fall into the water. "They cut the chain!" someone barked over raid chat. "They cut the chain!"

"Damn it!" Felik growled. "The south fort isn't worth holding! Everyone in the south fort regroup at the dock or the north fort!"

Someone else had the same idea. A moment later, fire appeared in the windows of the barracks area in the south fort, and that fire started to spread. Someone had set fire to the fort...but who? A player? An NPC? The Sahaugin?

After twenty more minutes, the last of the Freeport ships went down, taking a Kanlon raker with it by ramming it, and that allowed the Kanlon to reset their lines and start making for the harbor. I moved from the north fort to the docks to stand with Prince Albion and the other Champions not

already engaged, because from Tarven's reports, it was Sahaugin we'd have to fight first. They were massing up just outside the harbor and were preparing to come in ahead of the Kanlon ships, to tie us up and prevent us from meeting the Kanlon landing parties at the quays. The Nazetar had been blocked off from the harbor by the Sahaugin, pushing them back to prevent them from reinforcing the human city. But that only worked up to a point. Felik had the bright idea of having Emelda and the mages put out the fire consuming the south fort, and when that was done, the Nazetar came ashore and climbed up the and over the wall of the south fort using the same ropes the Sahaugin set, then diving into the harbor on the other side and swimming to the docks. Nazetar were more than capable of fighting on dry land, and to try to stop the Sahaugin in the harbor, outnumbered and cut off from reinforcements, would be suicide.

"I guess they wanted to make it hard," Braggan said with a grim chuckle as he readied his axe. The first of the Kanlon ships was now clearly visible between the harbor forts, about five minutes from passing between them and entering the harbor.

"We almost lost the orc invasion fight too," Hinasa reminded him. "They pushed us all the way into that hill dwarf town and destroyed it before we got the upper hand. We'll just have to do it again."

"This is not a fight we are going to lose, Champions," Prince Albion said in a calm, implacable voice, adjusting the pauldrons of his plate armor. "If we lose, we lose Freeport. And I will not allow that to happen."

"We're not going to have time to discuss it," Alandra said, drawing her swords and pointing at the water. "Here they come!"

She was right. We saw bulges in the water as the Sahaugin came close to the surface.

We had plenty to do just a moment later. What seemed to be uncountable swarms of Sahaugin broached the surface at the docks and started climbing up, *all over* the docks, and the ones climbing the pilings under and behind us were trying to cut us off from the harbor district. But they were met by absolute hordes of rerolls, players in starter gear and what skills they could grind in two weeks, and that balanced it out. The docks all up and down the shoreline were a mass of intense fighting, and bodies

started piling up on the wooden quays, both Sahaugin and defenders. We held the dock we felt was the one most likely to be used by the Kanlon to unload their troops, to bottleneck them as best we could, and since four of the twelve Champions were there with Prince Albion, a high-skill, elite NPC, we held our pier solidly against the push. Me, Alandra, Hinasa, and Braggan stayed by Albion's side as he fought from horseback, and we were joined not long after the Sahaugin started climbing by Tarven. We held our pier for a good half an hour, and the others had done magnificently stalling the Sahaugin at the docks, holding the line and not allowing them to push us off, which would give the Kanlon an unresisted place to unload their troops. But they were coming, and there was no way for us to stop them.

And the first ship that came into the harbor was that absolute behemoth, which just *barely* managed to scrape between the walls of the harbor forts and get into the harbor. It slowed, raising its sails as it approached the docks, and we'd been correct that it was coming to our pier, the only pier with which it could feasibly dock. Arrows and spells lanced through the air in both directions as the ship approached, the Kanlon recklessly killing their own Sahaugin allies in the arrow storm as they tried to push the defenders back away from the piers, as their own archers and mages tumbled from the rails of their giant ship and fell into the water, felled by the crossbowmen set up along the edge of the docks in elevated positions, using the superior range of their weapons to fire on the ship. The volley of spells from the ship proved that the Kanlon did indeed have magicians but had not engaged in the fight until now. The ship didn't turn its side and drifting up to the pier, it instead came straight forward and let the pier run between its center and port hull, then it ran aground and came to a stop. Almost the instant it did, long planks were lowered from the deck above, clattering to the quay not ten meters from where we were.

"Here they come!" Braggan barked, pointing with his axe.

And who was the first Kanlon to come off the ship and walk slowly, confidently towards us? A *raid boss*. His NPC icon held the symbol that identified him as a boss monster. He was a good half a meter taller than an average human, wearing a sailor's waistcoat in Kanlon red, a red Admiral's hat with a long white feather, and sturdy black leggings and black boots. He drew a cutlass and a main gauche, which was a fencer's dagger with a stout blade and a wide basket hilt to protect the hand, then pointed his cutlass at

us. “Time for your degenerate curs to prove to us why you deserve not to be exterminated,” he said in a sneering voice. “Fight with everything you have, near-humans, and we may allow you to live as slaves to the *true* humans of Arca.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Braggan grunted.

“You just had to say that they weren’t going to make this easy for us,” Alandra growled as she took a single step back, her swords in a ready position.

None of us were expecting a raid boss encounter right off the bat, and we weren’t ready for it. The healers in my group were out of position, and the Sahaugin were pressing in on us too heavily for us to redeploy to deal with this guy. I knew if we engaged him, we’d get murdered, but we also couldn’t just let him advance, he’d chase our asses all the way back to the harbor district.

There was only one thing to do.

“Get Albion out of here! Reset at the barricades!” I shouted, then I took a single step forward and activated Sword Blitz. The Kanlon reacted to my sudden rush, intercepting my swords with his cutlass and dagger, and his NPC icon changed to indicate he was engaged in battle.

I specialize in fighting overworld boss monsters. It’s what I do, and without bragging or anything, I’m good at it. But I was in no way prepared for *this* raid boss. He put me on my heels almost immediately, and I took five hits from his cutlass and main gauche before I had the chance to think about what I’d just done. But my job wasn’t to kill him, it was to stall him to give the others a chance to set up so they could fight him. I activated Blade Barrier and absorbed ten more strikes, my swords moving in a defensive blur as I rapidly parried his attacks, then I stepped inside his thrust, pivoted, and slashed him across the upper left thigh, scoring a hit. I followed it up with a stomp to his right foot, an unarmed attack, slithered aside as he tried to stab me with his main gauche, and scored a hit on the inside of his left arm when he overextended his lunge. I stepped past him, getting under him and behind him, and I almost tauntingly smacked him across the butt with the flat of my sword.

I didn't want him to take his attention off of me, I had to hold him there and give the others as much time as possible, and a good old fashioned taunt often did wonders to keep an AI's attention.

It certainly did the trick. He whirled on me with rage twisting his face, and I lost my fear and reservation as he came at me. I was going to lose this fight, I knew that, but I figured I could hold him here a good five minutes before I either died or was forced to retreat. That would give the others time to set up to fight him.

I'd never been in a fight like this before. This guy was faster than I was, and his attacks hit like a Mack truck. If it wasn't for the extra defense I get from Blademaster, he probably would have finished me off in about fifteen seconds. But I held firm, cycling through my defensive Ancient Skills to hold him by the gangplank as his troops rushed past us with weapons drawn, none of them helping the raid boss or interfering. But I wasn't just hiding behind my swords, I was hitting back, and I'd managed to take a visible piece off of his health bar...at the cost of nearly half of my own. But, the amount of health he was taking off of me slowed as I started to understand his attack style, started to see his moves and began to predict the next. His style relied on his speed, but it wasn't very complex, as if he went too fast even for his own ability to plan his next attack. He used set motions, almost like practiced forms, and when I started to see them repeat, I began to be able to predict what was coming. Like many AIs, and many players, he had a defined style that made him predictable to an enemy that took the time to analyze his movements. His eyes widened when I parried a complex series of slashes and thrusts of his weapons, not using any skills at all but my basic Sword skill. He tried again, using a series of thrusts with his main gauche that I knew would end with an overhanded slash of his sword, and countered that as well without him scoring a single hit.

"All you have is speed," I said when we tied up, struggling against each other. "Let's see how you fare when that advantage is taken away." I kicked off of him, slid to a stop, then crossed my swords, lunged forward, and activated Blade Dance.

The tide turned. He had no counter to the haste buff I gained using Blade Dance, and I tore into him with a lightning fast series of slashes, each one linked because I had to actively continue using those forms to keep

Blade Dance up. Each hit barely scratched him, but I hit him so many times, so fast, that his health bar visibly began to drop. His eyes were almost frenzied as he struggled to parry my attacks, but when I matched his speed with my own speed, his form seemed to degrade as he got flustered, flailing at me as I just plain outfought him while in Blade Dance.

He depended on his speed. Take that speed away, and his fighting style wasn't nearly as dangerous, because he was so used to being faster than his opponent he hadn't properly trained to deal with the situation where an opponent matched his speed.

That was his weakness. All bosses had a weakness, a programmed weakness that players could use to beat them, and that was his. His defenses weakened when facing opponents that could match his speed. If the raid against him was hasted, they could take him down. They needed to cycle through primary attackers using a haste buff, have them pull back and let Fatigue fall off as another wave of front line fighters took their places, keep him constantly engaged by hasted front line fighters to keep him from gaining momentum.

"Haste!" I cried urgently over raid chat. "He's weak to haste! He can't handle opponents that match his speed! Keep the front-line fighters engaged with him hasted and his defenses weaken!" I told them as my form faltered when he finally managed to parry enough of my attacks to break Blade Dance. I had to burn my most powerful defensive Ancient Skill, Wall of Steel, when he came at me like ten kinds of pissed off bitch, his eyes enraged and his movements even faster. I was knocked from my feet when he backhanded me with his left arm, sliding across the deck and rolling back to my feet barely half a meter from the edge of the quay. "Tell me when you're ready to engage him, he's kicking my ass here!"

"Just hold him another moment, Xen!" Braggan replied quickly. "Just another moment!"

He didn't try to slash me, he surprised me by *kicking* me, kicking me off the pier!

Oh *hell* no!

I changed almost the instant I came off his foot, my gear and swords disappearing and replaced as I changed to Djinn form, and I brought my

other swords out of item storage using the bandolier as I brought myself to a stop, ascended up over him, then dove right back at him with my swords leading. The look of surprise on his face was *most* satisfying. I scored multiple hits on him as he seemed stunned by my sudden change, until he shook himself out of it and started fighting back...and when he did, he was much more tentative. I guess he'd never fought someone taller than him before, or someone whose feet never touched the ground. I switched instinctively to the fighting style I'd developed for myself in Djinn form, since my feet weren't on the ground and I relied on my flying for power and leverage, and it put him on the defensive. I had reach on him with my longer arms and weapons, and most of my body was out of reach of his cutlass and main gauche, he was only really able to swing at my arms because I wasn't allowing gravity to dictate my movements. I was literally upside down fighting him, keeping the majority of my body out of reach of his weapons, which no doubt looked quite unusual to anyone watching. It forced him to swing and stab *upwards*, against gravity, while gravity assisted my downward attacks. But that changed quickly when a few arrows fired from the ship came at me, since I was an open target up in the air like that. I showed off almost every move and trick I'd worked out for Djinn form in a bare moment, exploiting the fact that my feet don't touch the ground to pull off sweeping circular and screw attacks, getting low to the dock by turning my body sideways and going after his legs with my swords, going high and going after his head, arms, and shoulders, and generally flowing into and out of a vertical fighting base to prevent him from easily guessing what I was going to do. Djinn could move in three directions, and I had taught myself how to *fight* in three directions using my swords. Djinn did not obey the laws of gravity, and thus there was no obedience to gravity in my fighting style. They were exotic moves, unorthodox, and they had the intended effect of confounding the Kanlon admiral or whatever he was.

I bought us the time we needed. "Disengage, Xen! We're ready for him!" Braggan called over raid chat.

"Not yet," I replied, trying to take his head off, but he managed to parry the blow at his neck. "I think I have him figured out. I'll do as much damage to him as I can before I pull back, make it easier for the rest of you." I slid back and crossed my swords, then rushed forward and went into another Blade Dance.

And that *hit hard*. He struggled mightily to protect himself against the combination of my haste while using Blade Dance and my Djinn fighting style, even though the attacks I used in Blade Dance were the same. Me being in Djinn form concealed the fact that it was the same attack routine as before because it came from a different angle, else he might have recognized it and parried enough blows to break Blade Dance. I held Blade Dance for nearly thirty seconds, a relentless onslaught of lightning fast slashes and thrusts that completely overwhelmed him. I took nearly 10% of his health with that Blade Dance sequence, and I only had to break it because his minions got involved. Six Kanlon Marines charged in and engaged me, forced me to disengage from the raid boss, which ended Blade Dance. The admiral dropped to one knee, panting hard, and to my chagrin, his health started *going back up*! One of the magicians on the boat behind him was a healer!

Damn it damn it *damn it*!

“He’s got adds and a pocket healer!” Braggan boomed over raid chat. “Xen, pull him away from the ship! Bring him to us! I need a squad to cut off the pier to keep those healers from getting close enough to heal him once we have him here!”

Sending my swords back to item storage, I chanted the words of power to one of the few Illusion spells I knew, Dark Cloud. When I was done, a black cloud formed around the raid boss, which broke the line of sight of the healers and prevented them from healing him any further. The cloud couldn’t be seen from the inside, so I had no trouble seeing the raid boss as he got back to his feet, his six helpers pushing me further and further away from him. I ascended out of their reach and recalled my bow, conjured an arrow already nocked, and drew and used Imbue Arrow in a smooth, practiced motion. My target wasn’t the six Marines, it was the raid boss. My lightning bolt hit but didn’t hit very hard at all...but it did the job of making him focus on me. I made him come after me, chase me along with his six adds, drawing him to the other Champions. I changed form and landed beside Braggan and Hinasa, who had their weapons ready as the raid boss charged us with his adds. “Alright, lads, let’s kick his ass!” Braggan boomed, raising his axe, pointing it at the raid boss, and charging.

It was the first time I ever faced a full-on raid boss with a group, and much to my delight, they were using my strategy. As other raid members engaged the adds to keep them off us and keep the NPC healers out of range of him, four front-line fighters engaged the raid boss at a time, all of them hasted. When the haste buff faded, a fighter would withdraw and another fighter would replace him, which kept constant, relentless pressure up on the raid boss. But he had other tricks than what he showed me, which were no doubt pre-programmed actions he would use in certain situations, or when his health reached certain thresholds. We started the fight with six hasted fighters, had to pare down to four because whenever five or more fighters got within range of him, he would use an area of effect attack with his cutlass, like a scythe of pure air which both damaged us and drove us backwards. When the mages in the raid opened up on him, he used a defensive ability that reflected their spells back at them unless they came at him from behind, which meant the mages had to constantly move and shift to stay in his rear arc, and the four front line fighters had to stay in front of him to keep him from turning towards the mages. He would still randomly turn towards the mages, however, to keep them from getting too complacent back there. He called in waves of reinforcements every time his health reached a 10% threshold, and the lower his health got, the more reinforcements he called to assist him, and those adds kept the rest of the raid tied up.

We had him under control...for 90% of the fight.

When he hit 10% health, he went absolutely crazy. He gained a haste buff of his own, his damage almost doubled, and he called in the surviving drake riders to assist him, to blast the entire dock to hell and back with their breath weapons. That drew in the mages, Drakkin, and Skyriders still fighting the drakes, turning the dock and the sky over it into a complete maelstrom of fire, spells, arrows, quarrels, feathers, scales, and fighters. He killed over half the raid before we had him down to 5%, and when we had him down to 2%, he finished off all the other front line fighters...leaving only me and the mages that were out of his reach. And he finished them off by ignoring me and going after them, but not before they had him down to 1%.

One *freakin'* percent!

“As it began, so it ends,” he said confidently as he walked towards me, his reinforcements flanking him. “With you and me. And you will fall to me as all your allies did.”

“I fought you to a standstill before, I can do it again,” I countered, holding my swords out and low as I stared him down.

“I salute your prowess, subhuman,” he said calmly. “You would have been a worthy gladiator in my stable. A pity I must kill you.”

“The fall of all fools is overconfidence,” I told him, taking a deep breath, then raising my swords.

He only had 1%. I had to find a way to hold up against him and his reinforcements and score enough hits to take that last 1%. But that wasn't going to happen if I charged at him like some crazy fool. I'd never score enough hits with my swords to take the last of his health before he or his adds killed me. And he'd just deflect any magic I used at him right back at me, since he'd always keep his face to me.

This required trickery. And I had a plan for that.

I leaned forward, and then I all but vanished as I activated Sword Blitz, screaming across the dock. My target wasn't the raid boss, it was the minion directly in front of him. I hit him full on, driving him backwards and off his feet, and I jumped him as my path to the boss became unimpeded. He didn't retreat, he raised his cutlass and main gauche and met me head on. My swords were already crossed for Blade Dance, and I went into it the instant I was in range.

But this time it was different. He was under the effect of a haste buff himself, so he parried every attack as his lackeys closed on me from behind. But I didn't falter, I held Blade Dance, not letting his parries knock me out of it, moving from strike to strike in the sequence with absolute concentration. This was the third time he'd seen it, and he was predicting the moves, parrying every blade now that he had the speed to do it...which was exactly what I was counting on. He began to riposte, hitting me for more than ten percent of my health with every attack, but I held Blade Dance, I held it like a man who had nothing else and was absolutely determined to make it work.

When his lackeys were on top of us, swinging at my unprotected back, I put my plan into action.

I sheathed my swords and rolled backwards in on smooth motion, going under the swing of a cutlass that might have finished me off, then came up holding a small wooden barrel in one hand and a crude wooden bow with an equally crude arrow already nocked in the other. The barrel came from my item storage, the bow and arrow conjured. I threw the barrel at the raid boss, which he intercepted and knocked to the ground, where it split a seam and spilled a little bit of its contents out onto the dock.

I then vaulted into the air, going impossibly high thanks to Feather Light, which got me out of reach of the raid boss' lackeys to keep them from finishing me off. I drew the bow back even as I ascended, and the man's eyes widened when he realized I wasn't aiming at *him*. I was aiming at the barrel seeping a mysterious grayish-black powder onto the deck under his feet.

He had never seen gunpowder before. The Kanlon didn't know how to make it. He didn't understand the danger he was in...until it was too late.

I activated Imbue Arrow and released the arrow, firing very nearly at point blank range. An incandescent bolt of lightning lashed from the bow, carrying the arrow along with it, and it struck the barrel at the raid boss' feet. And when the intense heat of the lightning scorched through the wood, it ignited the gunpowder within.

The explosion wasn't as big as it could have been if the barrel were larger or fully sealed—it was the compression of the accelerant that created an explosion—but it was enough. The barrel exploded right under the raid boss, and I saw his body rise up out of the fireball and get flung a good four meters back towards the harbor. The adds and me were caught up in the explosion as well, knocking all of them down, killing the ones that had taken a lot of damage from the rest of the raid, and taking all but 4% of my health and sending me against the wall of a warehouse facing the docks.

When the raid boss hit the wooden planks of the dock, he was dead. The explosion and fire damage took his last 1%. My ploy worked.

Enough of the lackeys survived, getting up and looking in my direction, which told me that laying on the ground and within their reach was a deadly

proposition. I scrambled to my feet and pulled a healing crystal out of my Bag of Carrying—healing totems heal for more, but they can only be used out of combat—then crushed it in my hand even as I turned and vaulted upwards again. It restored 20% of my health, which got me out of the danger zone, and I put a foot on a window sill on the side of the building and vaulted up again, then again at the next one, until I was on top of the building. There were several NPCs and players up there, all wielding crossbows, and the players were giving me huge grins as I rolled out of line of sight of any archers on the ground and went to one knee, pulling a full healing totem out of my bag and wait out the ten seconds of no combat activity that would clear my combat condition, so I could use it.

“That was pretty slick,” one of the players said approvingly.

“It was the last trick I had,” I said modestly. “I picked up that barrel of gunpowder when I was defending the fort, I thought it might be useful. I’m just amazed it worked.”

“You got him, Xen! Awesome!” Braggan praised over raid chat. “Now get some people down there to hold the area so we can get back to our bodies and regear!”

“I’ll do what I can,” I assured him.

“Dude, I’ve never seen anything like that!” another player said. “You went toe to toe with a raid boss for over a minute!”

“Yeah, then he kicked my ass,” I retorted, which made many of them laugh.

That was one small victory in a battle that was not going our way. The Kanlon ships managed to tie up to the dock in greater and greater numbers, ships tying up to the ships at the docks and unloading their soldiers across them before pulling back and sailing out of the harbor, and once they fully joined with the Sahaugin raiders, it pushed us out of the dock area and fully into the Harbor District. We were driven back, and back, and back, further and further from the docks, halfway across the Harbor District, and it forced the Champions to spread out to try to hold them back at multiple important chokepoints. I was right in the middle of it, but it was not very encouraging. I could kill the Kanlon soldiers and Sahaugin in windrows, but they just seemed uncountable. For every one I cut down, three took his place, and it

was that sheer force of numbers that forced me and the other Champions to pull back, and pull back, and pull back, until we were at the edge of the Trades District. We were losing the Harbor District!

Damn it all, *my house* was just four blocks from here!

But we did get reinforced. The Drakkin and mages finished off the last of the drakes, and they along with the Skyriders began pounding the invaders from the air, slowing their advance. The Trades District also held many more civilians on the rooftops with crossbows, which would also help slow them down if they broke out of the Harbor District.

“We have to hold the line!” Albion screamed from his horse behind the front lines, waving his bloodstained sword in the air. “We can’t let them into the Trades District! Fight on, men and women, fight with all your heart!”

The speech was impressive, but it didn’t help. For over an hour, we fought a constant, slowly retreating war against the invaders, slowly pushed back from every street, overwhelmed at every chokepoint, until we had our heels at the edge of the Military District and we were in range of the archers and mages stationed atop Falcon’s Roost.

We were losing Freeport!

“We’re running out of room to retreat!” Emelda said desperately, then she cast a spell that obliterated like 30 Kanlon and Sahaugin in one fiery explosion. “If they take Falcon’s Roost, we lose Freeport!”

“I know!” I told her. “Is there anyone from your guild you can call in to back us up!”

“No, the other battles have all started!” she told me. “Everyone’s engaged!”

“Damn it, we need help!” I snarled, cutting down another Sahaugin. “We need—” I cut off with a gasp. “I think I know where I can get some major firepower to help us out! Em, hold the line! I’ll be back in a few minutes, I don’t have to go far!”

“Xen! Kevin!” she called as I used Djinn Form, then rose up and flew inland as fast as I could. But I didn’t have to go far, my destination was just on the other end of the Golden Stand from Freeport.

Near the coast.

I landed and returned to human form just outside the abandoned farmhouse and rushed in and quickly pulled the secret lever in the chimney that opened the stairwell going underground. I ran through the tunnel as fast as I could, then slid to a stop already on my knees at the ledge that overlooked the Guardian of the Golden Stand, Selvaron.

“Lord Selvaron!” I shouted, which caused his eyes to open and raise his head. “Lord Selvaron, we are in dire straits and desperately need your help! The Kanlon and their Sahaugin allies have nearly taken Freeport! We are going to lose the city!”

“You of all mortals should know that I am forbidden from interfering in your affairs,” he replied in a stately voice. “The Seven Stands are not concerned with the temporary kingdoms of the mortal races. We protect something much greater.”

“But Lord Selvaron! If the Kanlon take Freeport, they’ll find the ley line, and they’ll try to take it for themselves!” I pleaded, trying to reason with him. “The Seven Stands may protect something greater than transitory mortal kingdoms, but the ones that will take our place will be your enemy, not your ally!”

“Nevertheless, my oaths forbid me from taking action. However, my oaths do not prevent me from doing a favor for a mortal who has proven himself to us,” he said, rising up to a sitting position. “I cannot assist you. My oaths forbid it. But my oaths do not prevent me from asking others to assist you in my stead.”

“Thank you, thank you, Lord Selvaron! I will be in the debt of the Seven Stands for this!”

“A debt that we will see repaid,” he warned flintily. “The dragons of the Stands are bound by oaths that we cannot break. But I know of some who are not constrained by our oaths, whom may be favorably inclined towards you, Xen. I will call to one of them now.”

He turned his head, his eyes glowing with bright yellow light, and a viewing portal appeared. On the far side of it was something...something I had never seen before. It was a beautiful blue sky that stretched on into infinity, but in the foreground was what looked like an Arabian palace. And

at the forefront of the image was a tall, muscular, very handsome human-like creature with blue skin and dark purple hair.

A Djinn. It was a Djinn!

My *God*...was I seeing into the Elemental Plane of Air?

“Sultan Sadran,” Selvaron said with a nod.

“Mighty Lord Selvaron. How may the humble Djinn assist the Dragons of the Stands this day?”

“I am contacting you on behalf of one who has earned the respect of the Seven Stands, Sultan. This mortal,” he said, turning his gaze to me.

I stayed in my kneel, looking up at the viewing portal. “Mighty Sultan of the Djinn, I beseech you on behalf of my king and my nation, King Gerin of the humans of Freeport,” I said. “We are in desperate need of aid from enemies that attack our city. It will fall by sunset if I cannot find powerful allies to assist us in driving them out of the city. Lord Selvaron has contacted you at my request, my Lord, so I might entreat the Djinn to come to our aid.”

“So, you petition the Djinn to help you?” he asked. “An audacious thing to do, human, given how many of you and the other mortals of the Twin Worlds hunt my kin.”

“I have no defense for the actions of the others, nor do I have a defense for those humans who have also done so,” I said with my head down. “I can only offer penance for our crimes against you, if you find it in your heart to help us now.”

He gave me a long look, silent. “You are different from the others,” he finally said. “I can...sense something about you, even across the planes.”

“He carries the magic of the Djinn,” Selvaron told him. “It is why I contacted you, Sultan. He is touched by your magic, and he has gained great control over it.”

“Indeed?” he asked, his voice quite curious. “Show me.”

I took a breath and stood up, then changed to Djinn form. I then bowed deeply and stayed there. “I have also mastered the magic of the Djinn, Sultan. I can conjure objects and can imbue my arrows with lightning.”

“Delightful!” he said with sudden animation. “Only one mortal can carry the touch of the Djinn, and it is you! Outstanding!” he smiled. “But you don’t understand what that magic means, do you, mortal?”

“No, Sultan.”

“There are four races of genies, mortal. We Djinn live in the plane of Air, the Efreeti live in the plane of Fire, the Dao live in the plane of Earth, and the Marid live in the plane of Water. Each of our races has sent our magic into the Twin Worlds, seeking a mortal to join to it. We do this because it is the focus we keep in your world, an anchor of magic we can use to pass back and forth between the Twin Worlds and our home planes. Without a mortal touched by our magic to act as our anchor to your world, we are locked out of the mortal plane and lose access to the treasures and goods that we can get from there. Without you, mortal, we would have no access to the stone that builds our palaces or the gems and metals that makes our jewelry and swords, items we cannot conjure with permanence,” he told me. “You are our anchor into your world, but that also means that *we* are your anchor into *ours*. You are the only mortal on the Twin Worlds capable of entering the Elemental Plane of Air, which is a power I believe you have yet to unlock as you explore our magic.”

I gaped at him. I had *no idea* there were even more Djinn powers!

“I see that your mastery of our magic has not reached that point,” he smiled. “But if you have learned to take the form of a Djinn, then you are very close to it. Very close indeed.” He was quiet a moment, then he clapped his hands. “Well, if our mortal anchor is in need of our aid, we must aid him! It is a prime opportunity to cement an alliance with the mortal race that will best represent us in the mortal world,” he declared, which made me almost immediately drop to one knee on the stone ledge. “Come now, mortal, a Djinn never puts his feet on the ground, not even in obeisance to his Sultan!” he said jovially.

“Apologies, my Lord,” I said, hovering back up into the air.

“Now explain this threat to your kingdom.”

I forced myself to calm down and gave him most of the backstory of the Grand Crusade, telling him about the battles raging across Arcavia as the Kanlon and their allies sought to invade the continent. “The force attacking

Freeport is vast and powerful, my Sultan,” I told him. “They have destroyed our Navy and invaded the city. The heart of our city, the fortress known as the Falcon’s Roost, is in dire peril of falling. If they take Falcon’s Roost, they take Freeport, and it will allow the Kanlon to invade the rest of western Arcavia almost unchallenged.”

“I see. A most dire situation indeed,” he said. “But nothing that can’t be solved with courage and a healthy dose of Djinn magic!” he declared. “Return to your city, mortal, and stay directly over this fortress you name Falcon’s Roost. My magic will find you, and once it does, I will send you the aid you require to protect your city from these Kanlon ruffians.”

“I am in your debt, Sultan Sadran,” I told him humbly.

“A debt your people will repay to us, mortal,” he warned. “But we’ll discuss that matter with your king when you are victorious against your foes. For now, mortal, go to your fortress and wait for my magic to find you.”

“As you command, Sultan Sadran,” I acknowledged. “And *thank you*. Your aid will save my kingdom. I am grateful beyond words.”

He smiled. “To hear such a heartfelt thanks tells me you very well may be worthy of our magic, mortal,” he told me. “Now go and go swiftly. Time is short and precious.”

“At once, my Lord. Lord Selvaron, thank you for your aid,” I said, bowing to him.

“Go, Xen. Quickly, as the Sultan commands.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

I flew back down the tunnel, squeezed through the staircase, almost afraid to change form for fear that the Sultan would lose his connection to me, and raced back to Freeport. I flew out over the city and saw that the Kanlon had pushed into the Military District in the short time I was gone, and there were savage battles raging on every street that led to Falcon’s Roost. The defenders were making the Kanlon and the Sahaugin pay in blood for every step forward they took, and pay dearly...but that high up, I could see the thousands and *thousands* of Kanlon soldiers coming up

behind them as more and more ships unloaded their troops at the harbor. They had the manpower to take Falcon's Roost.

If the Djinn didn't help us, we would lose Freeport!

I got into position about fifty meters directly over the center of Falcon's Roost, which seemed to me to be the best place to be, and all I could do was wait. I had no idea what the Sultan was going to do, or how long it would take, so I held my position. "Xen, what are you doing? Get back in the fight!" Emelda chided over friend chat rather than raid chat.

"I got help, Em, and they told me to wait right where I am," I answered over raid chat.

"Help from who?"

"From the Djinn," I answered. "They said they'd send help and told me to wait right where I am until it gets here."

"How in the hell did you arrange that?" Felik asked.

"I told you before, Felik, I have a lot of friends. They're just all NPCs," I answered. "I really put my neck on the block to get this favor, and I'm sure as hell gonna pay for it later. But that doesn't matter. If we lose Freeport, the entire Grand Crusade may fail. And I *will not* be the guy that causes us to fail the Grand Crusade," I said fiercely.

"Something's happening!" Emelda said.

I looked up, and sure enough, there was a magical distortion high in the air directly over me. That had to be the Sultan's doing! It expanded, got brighter, and then it got more organized, going from a chaotic mix of magical aether to a swirling whirlpool of magic. A beam of azure light erupted from it and washed over me, going down to hit the tallest tower of Falcon's Roost, and I felt...something. Something strange, something powerful, but not something *dangerous*. This was powerful magic, but it was connected to me, like I was a part of it.

It was Djinn magic, and I was in Djinn form, that's why.

Seconds later, there were hundreds and hundreds of Djinn around me, forming three rings that expanded outwards from me. There were both men and women, all wearing Arabian-style clothes similar to my own. They

raised their hands and faced me, chanting words of power the likes of which I'd never heard before. Sultan Sadran descended to join the ring, and when he reached them and raised his hands as well, all of them began to glow. "The anchor offers himself to our magic," he called in a voice that nearly hurt my ears, which I bet was audible in the fortress below. "We shall grant him and his people the boon of the Djinn. May the mighty power of air, untamed and free, infuse you, join to you, and aid you in your time of need. *Sadro Mograth Adrun Sova SHATRA!*" he boomed in a voice that shook the very air itself, clapping his hands, and the beam coming down around me suddenly turned blindingly bright.

I could...feel something. Something was happening. The magic of the plane of Air was traveling *through me*, from the vortex above, through me, and into the stone of the fortress below. I was the focus of this spell, like I was a bridge between the magic of the plane of Air and the material world. In my Djinn form, I was both Djinn and human, infused with the power of Air but also mortal, and the duality of my existence in Djinn form allowed the magic of the Djinn to manifest into the Twin Worlds.

I was the anchor. I was the focus. And if I moved out of the beam of light, the spell the Sultan cast would fail.

Below me, the entire city of Freeport began to, to *glow*. The glow started at the tower of Falcon's Roost and quickly spread down through the fortress, through the courtyards, over the walls, then out into the city. It spread so quickly, startling the Kanlon and Sahaugin and making them retreat from it until it passed over them. The streets, the grassy parks, the buildings, the walls, everything was eventually glowing with a faint but visible aura of magic. But what was more, the azure radiance was passing under the Kanlon, Sahaugin, and non-human allies fighting them, but the humans of Freeport were limned over with the azure glow. And when the azure radiance stopped, just beyond the city walls and just beyond the harbor forts, the entire city began to *shake*. I could see it. It was an earthquake, the Djinn had set off an earthquake! But there was more to it than that. Every human down there that wasn't a Kanlon began to glow with azure radiance, the same radiance surrounding me, and some of them started rising into the air!

What the hell was going on?

The earthquake had stopped the battle. The Kanlon and Sahaugin were stopped dead, looking around, and some of them pointed at the beam of light and tried to spur the others to rush Falcon's Roost to stop what was going on. To my surprise, the humans infused with the azure magic began to rise up off the streets and rooftops! It was very slow but very noticeable, as if gravity had been turned off for them, slowly rising up over the ground or roofs or wall tops where they were standing. The humans of Freeport looked quite shocked to be rising into the air, some of them trying to hold on to rooftops, non-floating people, or other grounded objects, but they lost that fight and started to rise into the air.

But then, there was a sound like nothing I'd ever heard before in my life. It was like the sound of breaking rock, but so loud, so constant, it was a cacophony in my ears. The city below me shuddered violently, several buildings collapsed from the jarring, and then the entire city *lurched*, it jerked upwards by a small but very noticeable amount.

What the hell were the Djinn doing, shaking the city down to save it from the Kanlon?

No. Oh my *God*, I couldn't believe it!

They were *floating the ENTIRE CITY!*

I could see it! I could see the water violently displace around the docks and rush towards the forts that formed the harbor entrance! The city was rising out of the ground as if the earth and stone upon which it was built had turned into something lighter than air! The entire city of Freeport, from just outside the city walls to just outside the north and south forts defending the harbor, was rising into the air! I could not believe that this was happening! My God, what kind of power did these Djinn possess that they could levitate an *entire city*, one as big as Freeport!

I watched in stunned disbelief as the tower of Falcon's Roost below me rose up towards me, then the magic pushed me upwards as the vortex of energy high above began to ascend, pulling the entire city of Freeport up with it. The Djinn were pulling the city out of reach of the Kanlon by lifting it into the air! The Kanlon ships trying to get into the harbor were driven back by the massive rush of water as the harbor's water emptied back into the ocean, flushing every Kanlon ship out of the harbor along with the

torrent of water. The ships tied to the docks tore out the pilings to which they were secured, ripping the docks apart, and the ships smashed to pieces at the harbor mouth when dozens of ships crashed into one another as they were pulled by the water to the only place it could escape. The giant flagship was the last ship to hit the bottleneck, and it obliterated all the other ships, then struck the wall of the south fort and broke apart, the pieces pulled through the harbor mouth to fall to the water below. The harbor's bottom becoming visible, leaving the docks and piers high and dry. Below, the Kanlon ships trying to get into the harbor to unload their troops were also caught up in a sudden rush of water as the ocean tried to fill the crater left by the city when it tore free of the ground, the ships tumbling over the edge and into the massive pit to be torn apart as they were swept down the irregular cliff face left behind.

Higher the city rose. And higher. We were fifty meters above a crater below rapidly filling with seawater. We were a hundred meters above. Two hundred meters. And still we rose! The other factions were holding onto anything they could, the Kanlon and Sahaugin were knocked to their feet, even more buildings collapsed from the shaking as the city rose. Five hundred meters! My god, a kilometer! We were a kilometer over the coast!

The city began to slow, and then it came to a stop a little over a kilometer above the coastline, and there it stayed, hanging in the air like some titanic balloon. But there was nothing holding the city in position, nothing anchoring it to the ground, only the magic of the vortex above casting its magic down into Falcon's Roost through *me*. But even that ended, as the beam of light shimmered and then faded, causing the azure glow infusing the city below to start to slowly fade, the vortex above remained. It reduced in size, shrinking down to a tenth of its original size, but it remained.

The humans that had been floating over the city came to a similar stop over the rooftops and streets below, and the glow around them also faded... but they remained hovering in midair. Just about all of them looked mightily confused, some trying to swim through the air to get back down, but then they all very slowly and gently lowered back down to where they'd started.

Holy *shit*, this was not what I had in mind! But good *God* was it awesome! I was so glad I was recording my simsense stream!

“Your city is now safe from your shipborne enemies, mortal,” Sultan Sadran said to me with a slight smile. “Now let us see to routing what remains of this uncouth rabble from your streets!” he added, conjuring a really fancy and nasty-looking bow. “Brothers and sisters, let us aid our anchor’s king and kingdom by driving their attackers over the edges of the city!” he boomed, raising his bow.

Raid chat *blew up*. Nobody had any idea what was going on, everyone was confused, and rightly so. Many of them didn’t even realize the city was now hovering a kilometer above the ground, unable to see enough to make the connection. They thought it was just an earthquake of some kind. It took some convincing to make them believe the entire city had been pulled out of the ground, and I had to warn them that the Djinn were here to help, to not attack them.

This wasn’t over, there were still thousands of Kanlon and Sahaugin in the city, but the tide of the battle had turned decidedly in our favor. The Kanlon were cut off from reinforcements, which meant that there would be no more two soldiers replacing every one we killed, but since the Kanlon couldn’t retreat, it meant that they were going to fight like rabid wolverines when we pushed them back into the Harbor District. They were in the position of victory or death, and desperate men were much harder to beat in a battle.

We were able to push the Kanlon back thanks to the Djinn. There were now nearly a thousand of them high above the city, far out of reach of any Kanlon or Sahaugin weapon or spell, and they rained absolute *death* down on the Kanlon soldiers using their Imbue Arrow ability. Anywhere there were a large concentration of Kanlon or Sahaugin soldiers and no defenders close to them, the Djinn hammered them with lightning bolts, causing them to break their formations, scatter, and seek cover and shelter. Many got into the houses and buildings, and when the defenders pushed back to that point, they had to go in after them, which created savage house to house fighting as the defenders pushed back into the Trades District. I remained at Sultan Sadran’s side, raining lightning bolts down on the enemies rather than take

human form and fight with the army, which seemed to please him as he watched me use the Djinn racial power with skill and confidence.

But the hard fighting wasn't over yet. When we pushed them back into the Harbor District, another raid boss appeared, coming from what remained of the docks and joining his troops in the Harbor District. Felik took over at that point, getting us organized—and having me return to human form—as we prepared to take him on. The Djinn didn't interfere and didn't assist, which meant this was a scripted part of the battle, allowing us the honor of defeating the enemy army's commander and winning the battle.

I was too distracted to really get into the final boss fight, but I did my part. I was called in and pulled back by Felik several times as we engaged, felt out the boss, then he sent us in for real once he had an idea of what the guy could do. He was nearly three meters tall—many raid bosses are really big to make it easier for a large number of people to attack him simultaneously—and was wearing a chain mail hauberk, pauldrons, and plated shinguards. He was the Grand Admiral Ravatek, the commander of the Kanlon fleet, and he was the final boss of this event.

It took us nearly twenty minutes to bring him down, and while we were doing that, the rest of the invading army was dealt with by the other players and the NPCs. And while I should have been really excited to fight him, the final boss almost seemed anticlimactic compared to what had happened earlier, with the Djinn causing the entire city of Freeport to rise into the air, and it was apparent that it was going to *stay* there.

I've said before that our actions in the game can have a permanent effect on it, and I just couldn't get over the fact that my actions, seeking out help from Lord Selvaron, had resulted in, in...*this*. Freeport no longer being a seaport city but being a *floating* city. And I was starting to think about the ramifications of that. How the hell were we going to get down? How were the NPCs going to survive up here with no access to food or water? Had I doomed the city I'd tried to save? Or would the Djinn put the city back where it was once the Kanlon were all gone, and the city was safe?

I rather doubted it. After all, the crater where the city had been was filled with water now, along with the churning debris of hundreds of Kanlon ships that had been destroyed by the water filling the crater. If they tried to

put the city back, the tidal wave would flood the entire Golden Stand and probably destroy the city to boot.

But eventually, it was over. When the Grand Admiral went down, the final quest in the Grand Crusade updated to *Complete* in my field of vision, but the Grand Crusade quest itself, the quest that had been in my quest log since the very beginning, had yet to complete. That had to be because Savar and the others were still fighting their battles, so the campaign quest wouldn't update until all the battles were over, and we won them all.

And I had a lot of explaining to do.

All the Champions present met with King Gerin and Sultan Sadran in the courtyard of Falcon's Roost, where I introduced them. And I learned a whole lot more than I expected as Sultan Sadran explained a few things to King Gerin, mainly answering the burning question I'd had...how were the humans going to get down?

"Why, fly down, of course," the Sultan said easily, pointing up. "That is a vortex to the Elemental Plane of Air, and the power of the plane of Air infuses this city and its citizens. Your people, the people of our anchor into your world," he said, motioning to me, "have been blessed by the Plane of Air with a tiny bit of its magic. You have been granted the power of flight, which will easily allow you to get up and down from here," he announced. "But I dare say that you'll have to learn how to control that magic, and it may take you some time. The magic your people have been granted is wild and untamed, mortal king, and it will require much training and effort to bring it to heel."

"Wait, lord Sultan. Are you saying that I can *fly*?" Gerin blurted.

"Yes, mortal King," he smiled, almost mischievously. "Very slowly and clumsily at first, but as you master your connection to the plane of Air, your grace and speed will improve. The humans of Freeport are now connected to the plane of Air, and the vortex above will, in time, stabilize to form a permanent gateway to allow the free passage of beings both to and from the mortal world. This city will be the port of call for visitors traveling to or from the plane of Air, including quite a few Djinn," he announced. "Since you are connected to the Plane of Air, its gift to you is the ability that almost all of its natives possess, the power of flight. This close to the

vortex, you can fly indefinitely and easily, but the further away from the vortex you go, the more effort it will take to stay airborne.”

Holy...wow. So *that* was the new racial ability that would be granted to all humans at the conclusion of the Grand Crusade? *Magical* flight? I had to open my skill window and look for this new ability, hoping that I got it despite having Touched by the Djinn.

And I did. I had a new skill at the top of my skill window, where racial skills are displayed. It was named *Gift of the Djinn*, and my skill in it was 1,527. That was also my skill in Djinn Form...odd. But I wasn't complaining, it meant that I didn't have to learn it all over again.

“Quick, a human check your skill window and see if you have anything new in there!” Braggan called over raid chat. “The Djinn just said all humans just gained a new racial ability!”

“I see it! It's called *Gift of the Djinn*,” someone announced to raid chat, a male voice, before I could respond. “I have a skill of one in it. What does it do?”

“If I understand right, it gives you the ability to fly using magic,” Braggan told him

“Holy shit, seriously? Incredible!” the player erupted.

“I'm in the air!” someone else called. “Wait, my mana is draining! The ability uses *mana*!”

“How bad is it?” someone asked.

“My mana's draining one point every two or three seconds or so, then it ticks back up to full from my Mana Regeneration skill,” he answered. “My mana's regenerating faster than the skill is using it. So I could stay up forever.”

“Only here. The Djinn just said that the further from Freeport you go, the more effort it takes to stay in the air. I'd bet the mana drain is much higher like out in neutral territory,” Tarven said.

“That must be the cap they put on it so it's not better than the Sylphs or Drakkin,” someone speculated. “They had to put a time limit on it, but they

made it permanent in Freeport so humans can easily get up and down to the city.”

“Well, that takes care of us,” Gerin said, his voice nearly trembling as he tried to digest that life-changing news and still talk rationally with the Sultan. “But we’ll have to come up with some solutions to getting food and cargo up here so we can keep the city fed and supplied.”

“You have many mages among you, mortal King. I’m sure they can come up with something.” He drifted forward a tiny bit. “Now, we will discuss the debt owed to us for our assistance,” he said strongly.

“I listen to your proposal, Sultan,” Gerin said graciously.

“Since this city will be the hub for future travel into the plane of Air once the vortex stabilizes, we demand the right to build an outpost upon this floating ground, within your city,” he said. “For our merchants and travelers to use. I would also insist on a formal treaty of alliance between the humans of Freeport and the Djinn, and that you convince the other mortals in this world to stop hunting us for the treasures we carry.”

“I think that would be very easy for us to negotiate, Sultan,” Gerin said easily. “I would gladly accept an alliance with the mighty Djinn. And we will welcome you as honored guests within our walls. I’m not exactly sure where we’ll build your outpost, but we’ll find a place that both of us find acceptable.”

“Very good,” he nodded. “We can discuss it in further detail tomorrow morning. There are a few final matters for me to address before I can devote my attention to our negotiations.”

“You will be welcomed into the Royal Palace upon your arrival, Sultan,” Gerin said graciously.

That ended the official part of the battle. Sadran withdrew with his Djinn, going through the vortex above and returning to the plane of Air, and Gerin began issuing the orders necessary after a battle; policing the corpses, tending the wounded, and sending out survey teams to assess the damage to the city caused when it was lifted out of the ground. The Champions met the rest of the raid at the ruins of the docks so Felik could distribute the four pieces of loot that dropped from the two raid bosses we killed, then the raid disbanded, at least after arrangements were made to get all the non-flyers

either back down to the ground or to a scion so they could get back to Citadel City. I revealed the existence of the scion under Freeport, and I went down and set up a series of guideposts to direct people to the scion so they could get out of the city.

It revealed the First City of Tur, but I'd already explored it. I didn't mind if other people explored it now. Besides, it was such a cool place, I wanted other people to see it.

By sunset game time and around midnight real time, I was finally able to relax a little bit. So I decided to check my house in the Trades Ward to see if it survived the battle.

Much to my relief, my cozy little house nestled on one of the lesser traveled streets of the Trades District had survived the battle and the earthquake relatively unscathed. There were some broken windows and the plaster on the walls inside was cracked, but I could fix that without much trouble. The frame was sound, the floors and ceilings stable, and the chimney hadn't collapsed, which had been my greatest fear. I swept up some of the plaster and glass as I waited for word from Savar, or word from the battle in the Smoking Mountains, and a sudden bone weariness seemed to wash over me, hitting me out of nowhere. Maybe it was the crash after hours of being fueled by adrenalin, but it was enough to make me stop sweeping and sit heavily on the edge of the bed, closing my eyes and putting my hand over them. Savar finally got back to me, calling over friend chat just as I was about to get back up and finish. "It's over, Xen! We won!" she announced giddily. "And wow, what a battle! It was even more fun than the orc invasion!"

"Just wait 'til you hear what happened over here," I said ruefully.

"We heard bits and pieces," she replied. "They said Freeport was pulled out of the ground by the Djinn and it's floating now?"

"Yeah, it was pretty insane. Anything like that happen over there?"

"Nope, and now I feel cheated," she laughed. "We tried to stop them at the shoreline, got pushed halfway back to Half Dome Hill, then a raid boss appeared. After we killed him, we got the upper hand and pushed them back to the shoreline, then another raid boss appeared and pushed us halfway back to the hill again. It was a back and forth battle across the coastal plain

for like two hours, but we eventually managed to push them all the way back into the sea. When that happened, they abandoned the battle and retreated.”

“Wow, that sounds wild,” I said. “What word from the Smoking Mountains?”

“Far as I know, that’s still going on,” she answered. “Kade is there, and he keeps saying he’s too busy to talk to us. So that means they’re still fighting the Salamanders.”

“I guess. By the way, we finally found out what the new racial is they gave the humans. We can all fly now.”

“Whoa, seriously?”

“Yeah.” I explained that part to her, how it worked. “So we can fly all the time close to Freeport, probably within faction territory, but the further away we go, the more mana it burns to stay in the air. They probably did that so our new racial wasn’t more powerful than the Sylphs and Drakkin.”

“Most likely,” she agreed. “What about you? Did it nerf your Djinn form?”

“No, I still have Djinn form, and I don’t use mana when flying when I’m in it. But I do when I’m in human form. I already tested that out. But I did get a bit of a windfall out of it,” I laughed. “Everyone else’s new racial starts at one. My skill level in it is the same as my Djinn Form skill.”

“That’s because you already know how to fly,” she said simply. “It wouldn’t make sense for you to have to learn to fly all over again when you already fly by using magic.”

“Huh. I think you’re right. I didn’t think of that,” I mused. “But there’s more to it. I think they’re going to be releasing another expansion soon,” I told her. “There’s a vortex that leads to the plane of Air over Freeport now. It’s supplying the magic that’s keeping the city in the air. The Djinn said it’s not stable yet, so only they can use it. But when it is stable, we’ll be able to use it to go there.”

“Awesome!” she said elatedly. “So the rumors are true, the next expansion *is* the elemental planes!” she nearly squealed. “I’m so stoked to see it!”

“I’m curious how it’s gonna work,” I said, leaning back on the bed on my hands. “I mean, the vortex is in *Golden Lion* territory, and I mean it’s like directly over Freeport. How are other factions gonna get there without fighting a running war with NPC guards and then somehow finding a way to get to it? It’s like two kilometers off the ground,” I told her.

“I’m sure the devs have already thought of that,” she said. “Maybe mages will get a spell that will let them transport to the other plane. Maybe the scions get altered to allow them to connect to scions in the other planes. Maybe they’ll add more vortexes in neutral territory later as part of a pre-expansion event.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I’m so tired right now, I’m not sure I could tell you my last name,” I admitted.

She laughed. “Long day?”

“Wait ‘til you see the simsense feed I recorded. It’s like almost five hours of constant frenzied activity,” I told her wearily. “I think I’m on the adrenalin crash right now.”

“I think it’s time to log off and go to bed, Kevin,” she told me. “I’ll send you the simsense of my battle and you send me yours. I’ll check out your side of it tomorrow.”

“That’s a good idea. See you tomorrow up in Citadel City?”

“You know it. I’ve got sungrazer flanks,” she said enticingly.

“I love you, woman,” I told her, which made her laugh in delight.

I logged off and spent nearly ten minutes just sitting on the edge of the bed and recovering, trying to quell the dull headache that popped up—a common side effect of really long merges—then I checked *CO Today* to see what news there was on the battle at the Smoking Mountains. The top of the page was dominated by a picture of Freeport hovering in the air, the earth and rock under the city irregularly tapering down to a point, making it look like the city was sitting on an inverted mountain of rock. The headline was one word that summed up the whole experience: *UNBELIEVABLE!!!*

I had to read a little of the article. *The first server to complete the Grand Crusade gave us a show for the history books, ladies and gentlemen! As of the publishing of this article the battle in the Smoking Mountains hasn’t*

been completed yet, but the battle in Freeport was beyond epic in its conclusion. The battle ended in a Deus Ex Machina style plot twist when the Djinn came to the aid of the Golden Lion faction, and they did so by pulling the ENTIRE CITY out of the ground and causing it to permanently hover over its original position! The act destroyed the Kanlon armada, stopping the Kanlon reinforcements flooding into the city, and that allowed the players and NPCs to repel them and achieve victory.

The new human racial has also been revealed; magical flight! We've already tested this new racial out, and we've learned that it runs on mana, but its limitation is that the further from vortex over Freeport the human is, the more mana it takes to stay in the air. We did the math, and deep in neutral territory, a human's not going to be able to fly for more than five or six minutes before they run out of mana. It's clearly a limit on the ability to keep it from being more powerful than the Sylphs and Drakkin, but despite that, it's a powerful ability that will surely attract many new players to play humans!

The question we have, and many others have, is that if what happened on Methrian is going to happen on all the other servers. Given that the orc invasion had different consequences on different servers based on how the players on that server did, it begs the question if the Djinn intervention was a scripted part of the event, or if it was the result of the actions of the players participating in the battle that caused it to come about. We'll be anxiously awaiting the results of the battle on the Dothara server, who do their final battle in three days.

That was a question I was asking myself. Since the reason the Djinn intervened was because I have Touched by the Djinn, it's made me wonder what's going to happen on other servers. The player that has Touched by the Djinn on other servers may not be in the Golden Lion faction.

Unless... unless the Legendary skill was hard coded to *only* drop for a human. That was entirely possible. They might have selected the races that would carry genie magic long before that scroll dropped for me...and it made me wonder which races had the other three.

Well duh, naturally the Nazetar would have Touched by the Marid, they're the only aquatic player race in the game. And a subterranean race would have Touched by the Dao, but I rather doubted it would be the two

subterranean races on the Moonshadow faction, it would be unfair for two races on the same faction to have genie magic. And I'd bet a Netherim race would have Touched by the Efreeti, given Netherim was a blasted hellscape that was very hot, which only made sense for one of its races to be connected to the genie race that represented fire. In fact I'd bet that both the earth and fire genie magic would be Netherim races to evenly split the four between Arca and Netherim...that meant it would probably be the Pikk that had Touched by the Dao.

But I was sure Savar was right. This had to be part of the pre-expansion events that would open the Elemental Planes, which had been in the rumor mill for a long time...or was it? There was no telling how long it would take for the vortex to stabilize, and the Kanlon were a major threat to Arcavia. Maybe the next expansion was that continent...or maybe they'd do both at the same time. After all, it wasn't fair to the Netherim races for them to open a continent on Arca without also opening up new territory on Netherim, and we hadn't heard anything or seen any potential foreshadowing that was going to happen.

Or maybe we just weren't there yet. Maybe that was coming. There was no telling what was going on with the devs, and they did love to surprise us players.

No, I was fairly sure it had to be the elemental planes. Much as the Kanlon were a threat, from a content perspective, there wasn't much there. Any new dungeons and raids had to be a challenge for people who completed the Citadel (which hadn't happened yet, but some servers like Azjar weren't far from it at all) and I couldn't see some raid involving the Kanlon being that much of a challenge. If they made the Kanlon more powerful than the mythical boss monsters lurking within the Citadel...that would be ridiculous. If that were the case, we'd never have beaten them in the Grand Crusade.

I'm sure the devs had a plan, and given how great the game is, it would be a good one.

I had to take a moment to digest things, because my life was at a major crossroads. In real life, I was now unemployed, but I also had a *lot* of money in the bank, which meant I didn't need to find another job anytime soon...or ever again if I was smart about how I managed that money. My

last day was three days ago, and I'd spent most of that time in CO, getting ready for the final battle. I hadn't decided what I was going to do yet, but I knew I had all the time in the world to make that decision, and that gave me a whole lot of peace. I hadn't spent every waking moment in the game, but I'd spent a good chunk of it preparing for the final battle. When not doing that, I'd been practicing down in the gym and going over some information that my bank sent me about financial planners, so I could pick the one I felt would do the best job coming up with a financial plan I liked.

I was remembering that there was life outside of the game, and now that I was financially secure, the appeal of real life was starting to worm itself into my thoughts.

I had decided on one aspect of it, though. I was going to take about C100,000 and put it aside for some toys and other expensive things I could use or I'd always wanted, and the rest of it was going to be invested so I could live off the interest and returns for the rest of my life. I don't need much, I live a frugal lifestyle, and I was sure a planner could design a plan that would allow me to live off the interest of my investments once I bought all the things I needed or wanted. I may get a job in the future, or even start my own business, but that would be because I wanted to work, not because I needed money to survive.

The page updated with breaking news...the battle in the Smoking Mountains was over, with the players routing the Salamanders and sending them back into the Underdark. That incited me to log back in to see if the campaign quest for the Grand Crusade updated, and much to my delight, it did. The Grand Crusade was now officially over on Methrian, and we had won. The humans had gained a powerful new racial that would make them much more appealing to players, so hopefully we'd see many more humans in Freeport in the future.

The campaign quest of the Grand Crusade told me to go to the cathedral of the Powers to complete it, and I decided I had the time to do so...after all, I don't work anymore, so I don't have to wake up in the morning. I reported to the cathedral, which had some damage in it from the city being pulled into the sky, and it was an Agent of the Powers that greeted me. She congratulated me on my achievement, and then dropped a *huge* bag of gold at my feet...the 500,000 gold reward for completing the Grand Crusade! I

also got a nearly *obscene* amount of XP, enough to buy maybe 15 points in Translocation to get closer to being able to use Succor.

I could really use that gold, given I'd spent my entire fortune and then some over the last month. I reached down and put my hand on the bag, which made it vanish and put 500,000 gold worth of gems and trade bars into my inventory...which was still so heavy that it encumbered me to the point where I could barely walk. She then knelt down so she was almost at my eye level and offered me a tiny chest, and when I took it and opened it, it awarded me a piece of loot. It was a piece of Champion's Raiment, but this was a *ring*...and rings weren't usually loot that dropped off monsters or were rewards for quests! I wasn't given any options for this ring, and when I took it out of the cask, I found it almost plain. It was a simple gold band with a stripe of platinum running through the center, and there were tiny runes in the language of the First Ones inscribed on the inside of the band, in the platinum. I could read that and found that it simply read *Worthy*. I checked the ring's equipment window, and I found that it had similar stat boosts as my other Champion's Raiment, but it wasn't focused on any stat. It raised all my stats equally, which was *extremely rare* for any piece of loot or crafted equipment. Such "across the board" items were some of the most sought-after treasures in the game, and it was one reason why getting an across the board stat boost while crafting an item was such a big deal. But since it was a ring, one of our "bonus slots," it would help jack up my stats. The two rings I currently wore weren't really all that impressive.

The ring did have a special ability, like all other Champion's Raiment. It said *Key of the Worthy*...which meant that most likely, I had to have this ring to get into some room or building or place that only Champions were allowed to go.

Where, I had no idea, but I'd have tons of fun trying to figure it out.

"This ring shall forever mark thee as a Champion that completed the Grand Crusade," she told me with respect in her voice. "Even should thou lose, abdicate, or abandon thy title in the future, this ring exemplifies your accomplishments and your valor, Champion. Wear it with pride, for thou hast been found *worthy*."

Unexpected, but very welcome. A ring with stats like that was quite awesome, which served as a key to let me get somewhere that had to be

pretty cool. I took off my left glove, removed my old ring, put on the Champion's ring, then put the glove back on. "Thank you, my Lady," I replied modestly, bowing to her.

She gave me a darling smile, then she stood up, spread her feathery wings, and then vanished in a flash of golden light.

Well, that was certainly worth logging back in!

It was a long trip back to the house from the cathedral due to me being so encumbered, but I managed to conceal the fact I was laden with gold by flying at a bare crawl, which made me look just like dozens of other human players who were trying out their brand new racial ability. I'd have to ferry the gold up to my house on Citadel in chunks to keep from getting too encumbered, but I thought it might be a good idea to leave some here...and maybe invest it. I had the feeling that Freeport was about to become a major hub, and my little house in the Trades District was in a very bad place if I wanted to turn it back into a shop. Maybe I should invest in a new building, sell my old one and buy a new one, in a better location.

Not yet. I'd find out where the Djinn were building their enclave and buy my building *there*. That would let me snag the humans interested in the NPC Djinn merchants and the NPC Djinn coming to Freeport looking for things to buy. If I did it right, I could buy a building for maybe 400,000 or 500,000 gold and then convert it into a shop, which would let me get a piece of the new market that would represent the vortex to the plane of Air, when it opened anyway.

Boy, was it weird to be flying in human form.

Savar was still online, and I decided to pester her as I unloaded my gold into the house's inventory. "I told you to go to bed, silly," she teased over friend chat.

"I saw on CO today that they finished the last battle, so I logged back on to get the gold reward," I answered. "Did you get that yet?"

"No, I'm still on my way back to Savalda," she answered. "I'm about twenty minutes from the city. I've been running like a mad woman since we won the battle."

“Oh. Well, hurry up, woman,” I told her. “And be ready, when you get the gold reward, you’ll get encumbered.”

“It’s not just sent to the bank?”

“Nope.”

“Well that’s cheap,” she complained, which made me chuckle. “I’d better pick up a strength charm or a nullspace bag before I complete that. I don’t want to be doing the pickpocket waddle all the way to the bank.”

I had to laugh. “Yeah, I was a bit paranoid on my way back to the house.”

“You get anything else? Do we get another piece of Champion’s Raiment for finishing the Grand Crusade?”

“Not spoiling it.”

“So you *did*. What did you get?”

“Finish it and find out.”

“Jerk. I know where you live, you know,” she threatened playfully.

Emelda asked to form a group chat, so we brought her into our conversation. “I just logged back on, I saw they finished the last battle. Did either of you turn in the campaign quest yet?”

“Xen did, he won’t tell me what he got out of it,” Savar complained.

“The gold you get will encumber you, Em, so be prepared.”

“Seriously? Okay, I’ll get a nullspace bag to take with me.” Nullspace bags were a temporary magical object made by tailors that allowed someone to carry weight far beyond their encumbrance without slowing them down. The bags worked on volume, not weight, and could hold a volume of about a cubic meter, with whatever was within them having no weight to the owner. That was more than enough volume to hold the cash reward. The bags were very useful, but they only lasted one game day after something was put inside them, which made them most useful for people like the merchant barons to put their fortunes into them and then move that money somewhere else. They were cheap to make, but it took a high Tailoring skill to make them. “I have some in my shop in Astralar.”

“How soon can you get there, Em?” Savar asked.

“I can be there in a few minutes,” she replied. “I have Succor, and my landing point is my house in Astralar. Kade was at the battle in the Smoking Mountains, Savar, what did he say about it?”

“Not a whole lot, but he did say it was pretty wild,” she answered. “The Salamanders made a volcano erupt and nearly wiped out half the army. Kade said it totally caught them by surprise. But then those sabax that live in the Smoking Mountains joined the battle to help the players, and they held the Salamanders long enough for most of the people who got killed by the lava to run back from the graveyard and get their stuff back. Then they pushed the Salamanders out of the lava fields and back into the pass where they came out.”

“Good old Sinvadra,” I had to chuckle. “I knew he wouldn’t let us down.”

“They pushed them all the way back to the tunnels they used to come out of the Underdark, then they pushed back out with help from an army of sludglings and magmakin that came up from the Underdark to reinforce them. Then it was a back and forth war across the pass for a while, until the players finally got the upper hand and held it. They drove the Salamanders back into the tunnels leading to the Underdark and collapsed them to keep them from coming back out. And that ended the battle.”

“I’m gonna love watching the viddys of that,” I said eagerly.

“Kade’s gonna post his simsense recording on the guild site. I’ll send you a copy, Xen.”

“Cool, thanks.”

“Well, ladies, I’m gonna log off and go to bed. I’m very tired,” I told them. “You work tomorrow, Savar?”

“Yeah, so I’ll see you two tomorrow afternoon. Let’s meet at Xen’s house in Citadel City and celebrate our victory!”

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed. “See you two then.”

“Night, Xen. Sweet dreams,” Emelda offered.

“You too.”

I logged off, had the vidlink turn off the lights, then put it in sleep mode and unplugged the fiber. I then rolled over in bed and closed my eyes, fully intending to go to sleep that very moment.

And as tired as I was, it didn't take long to happen.

Chapter 10

Things were definitely never going to be the same again.

Hovering high above Freeport, a Freeport now floating a kilometer above the ground, I looked down and watched as a blitz of activity took place under me. Down there, the debris from the collapsed buildings was being cleared in preparation for rebuilding, and over in what used to be the Harbor District, the sudden large amount of empty space where the harbor used to be was being prepared to become the new enclave for the Djinn. But they weren't going to build on the mud-choked slopes that had once been the bottom of the harbor, what they were doing was taking the stone debris from the destroyed buildings and using magic on it to form solid platforms, then infusing those platforms with the same permanent levitation magic that held the city aloft. They would then build their enclave buildings on them. They set their platforms over the former harbor because there was plenty of open space around them, and when the people built new buildings down where the sea bottom used to be, they wouldn't build them so high that they interfered with the platforms.

At the speed the Djinn were moving, they might have the buildings of their enclaves done in a couple of weeks. They were raising them using magic, taking the stone debris and waste from the collapsed buildings and shaping it into contiguous constructions made of stone, buildings with no bricks or blocks, but with shaped stone that was formed by magic into the shapes required. It was similar to the way the high elves had built their city, Alaria, a city of trees and stone mixed together and fused by magic, where the buildings all but seemed to be grown from stone trees.

I'd taken advantage of that, and I wasn't the only player that did. I made a deal with the Djinn for them to form a small platform and build a shop with an apartment over it upon it on the edge of their enclave that was *mine*. I paid them for it by selling my old house in the Trades District, at quite a profit I might add, and I was here in Freeport to take possession of it now that it was complete. I paid the Djinn magicians doing all the work

handsomely for the service, that was for sure, but they were willing to do it for me because of who I am. Other players on the faction, primarily Jagaara and High Elves, had bought property in the Trades District and the Harbor District, to get a jump on what everyone knew was going to be the new hub of all activity in the Golden Lion faction. Freeport was going to become what the devs probably envisioned it to be when they designed the city, the most important and busiest city in the faction.

Emelda was one of those high elves. She had a new shop just behind the row of warehouses that had abutted what had been the docks, at least before most of them were washed out to sea when the city was pulled out of the ground, in a place she felt was going to see a lot of traffic from both Golden Lion players and the Djinn NPCs once the Djinn moved into their enclave.

They had to move fast, because the price of real estate in the city almost seemed to double every day, as the NPCs that owned the property began to realize just how valuable that land was going to be. Emelda had paid 300,000 gold for her shop in the Harbor District—not anymore, it had been renamed the Djinn District because that was where the Djinn set up their enclave—and just a month ago, she could have bought a very nice townhouse in the Military District for that. Now, that 300,000 gold townhouse was probably running more like 600,000.

The most interesting new investors in the real estate market were high elven mages from their magic society, the Nine Circles. Three game days ago, a large number of them arrived in the city and bought the largest building in the city they could find, which coincidentally was a warehouse just off where the docks used to be in the former Harbor District, and they'd razed the warehouse and started raising a new base of operations using magic. It was going to be a very tall, slender tower that would house the mages of the Circles, because they were going to stay here in Freeport and study the elemental air magic holding the city aloft. But King Gerin wisely didn't just let them move in for free. In return for the opportunity, they'd been tasked to come up with some kind of magical solution to getting non-humans and cargo up and down from the city, a task for which they were well suited.

I still wasn't used to this, flying in human form. I was used to flying, and was quite good at it to boot, but only in Djinn form.

And let me tell you, the dev plan to use flying as a lure to get more people to play humans *worked*. More of the rerolls than I expected that came here only for the battle had decided to linger, deciding to start an alt on Methrian to take advantage of the flying and the work they'd already invested into their characters. And there was a sudden flood of brand new human players out in the starting zones, rolling on Methrian to check out flying since it was the one of the servers that had it. Only about a quarter of the Terran servers had completed the Grand Crusade, and Methrian was currently a bit famous right now as the first server to complete it, which attracted players interested in checking out flying to the server. And there was a good chance that many of them would stay, to keep the character as an alt. That wouldn't help the server's raiding community, but it would definitely make the server feel more lively.

Of course, they couldn't do all that much with flying right now. At skill level 1, a human could barely move while flying, moving at the speed of a drunken slug. You had a chance of "losing your concentration" and having fly fail on you up until you got to 100 in the skill, which ensured that all new players stayed very close to the ground. There had already been quite a few falling deaths as overexuberant new players with no gear, and thus no health, went too high and then had the ability fail on them. You had to skill it up to 150 before you could fly faster than you could walk, and up to 250 to fly faster than you could run. But, it was also fairly easy to skill it up, because every time you changed speed or direction, or every fifteen seconds if you were hovering or moving in a straight line at a constant speed, it was considered a use of flight by the game engine that triggered a skillup check. A player could get it to 700 in about a week if he never put his feet on the ground and played about eight hours a day...and there were tons of players doing just that. And more doing way more than that.

I knew from experience that once you got it over 1,000, the maximum speed you could go increased in a non-linear fashion, and I'd posted some more in-depth information about flying on the forums two days ago. It was a moot point to do so, because there was no way I could hide the fact that I can fly so fast and with so much skill while in Freeport. The fact that the Djinn had revealed that I was infused with their magic and could take their form had also become common knowledge. So, I more or less outed myself to the server, posting about the aspects of Touched by the Djinn that were

common knowledge and explaining the basic mechanics of how the flying skill worked.

It hadn't come back to bite me in the ass yet, because Savar had been partially right. When the simsense feeds of the battle went public, when they saw me go toe to toe with a raid boss for over a minute, take 10% of his health bar *by myself*, very few people wanted to try me now. Well, except for those who wanted to duel me for the challenge I posed, but I don't see duels really as PvP, they're more or less just for fun. I don't classify PvP as fun. But duels, duels can be fun as long as you or your opponent doesn't get all butthurt at losing.

I didn't know exactly how Gift of the Djinn worked compared to Djinn Form, and there were some differences we'd already figured out. We learned that the mana drain on us wasn't based on our *total* mana, but as a *percentage* of our mana pools. The further we were away from the vortex, the greater percentage of our mana it took to power the skill. Around Freeport and out to the starter zones, it drained your mana at a rate so slow that even a low Mana Regeneration skill could refill it to allow you to fly indefinitely. At the edge of faction territory, out at Auger's Ford, the mana drain was fast enough to drain mana from those with a low Mana Regeneration skill in about 10 minutes, like players who had yet to leave faction territory, but allowed high skill players to stay in the air much longer, or still stay in the air indefinitely if they had Mana Regeneration over 2,000. But once you left faction territory, the mana drain increased almost exponentially. Just 20 kilometers beyond Auger's Ford, the mana drain was at the point where even someone with a super-high Mana Regeneration skill, like a Citadel-level player, couldn't regenerate mana faster than it was being used, and could stay in the air for about six minutes before his mana ran out. And if he used magic while in the air, that figure went down *very* fast. That actively discouraged human magicians from adopting the cheese tactic of attacking from out of reach of other players, because they couldn't do it for very long before they exhausted their mana and had to land.

Consumables could extend that. Mana potions, totems, crystals gave a player an instant amount of mana based on the power of the consumable, but not even those would allow indefinite flight because of the cooldowns associated with them. A player could use a potion that restored 50% of total

mana once every five minutes, a totem that replenished 75% of their mana every eight minutes (so long as they were out of combat, totems could only be used out of combat), and a crystal that replenished about 10% of the mana bar every three minutes. Using them at maximum efficiency, it was only going to let someone fly about 17 extra minutes before their mana pool was completely used up. There were charms that temporarily buffed mana regeneration rates as well, and those could also extend the time a player could fly before he used up his mana pool. Using the most powerful of those charms in conjunction with potions and crystals, assuming the player was doing so in a combat setting, a player could stay in the air continuously for nearly 19 extra minutes. That was nearly 25 minutes of flying time, so long as the player didn't use mana for any other reason.

But, just like the Sylphs and Drakkin, there was a way we could stay in the air much longer than that. If we went very high and stayed at a set speed and course, like setting autopilot's cruise control in a hovercar, it reduced the mana consumption rate of the skill to the point where we could stay in the air for hours at a time, even far away from the vortex. That was the "travel mode" version of the skill. It worked almost exactly like how Sylphs and Drakkin could fly long distances, so long as they stayed high in the air and didn't engage in combat, which required them to make a lot of turns and change their air speed. We'd figured out that we had to stay above 500 meters above the ground, not above sea level, for that mode of the skill to kick in. That meant that we had to pay attention to the topography of the ground below us and make sure we stayed above the line if the ground's elevation changed. While in travel mode, we couldn't do any fancy acrobatics, but we could fly as fast or as slow as we pleased. If we turned too many times too quickly, it kicked us out of travel mode and started burning our mana much faster, and it took nearly a minute to re-establish "travel mode" to reduce mana consumption. And if we descended below half a kilometer, the skill's "low altitude" mana consumption rate kicked in and put us on a timer. That would allow us to ascend or descend to stay above the line if the ground above us raised without kicking us out of travel mode.

That was more than enough time for us to both descend from travel altitude and land or take off and get to travel altitude before our mana ran out.

It did create a very interesting dynamic, however. If a player had a relatively shallow mana pool but a very high Mana Regeneration skill, it allowed them to stay airborne *much longer* than a player with a very big mana pool. That's because Mana Regeneration doesn't restore mana by percentage, but by a fixed amount based on the skill, where the flight skill drains mana at a percentage. In my human gear, my mana will go from 0 to full in a little over three minutes. But in my Djinn form, it takes nearly *nine* minutes for my mana to completely regenerate. That's because my mana pool in Djinn form is three times bigger than my human form. I have a much bigger mana pool that's being recharged at the same linear rate. That creates a mismatch in mana consumption versus mana replenishment due to how Mana Regeneration works that players could exploit to stay in the air longer, by *reducing* their total mana pool and using any consumable or item they can find that either restores mana or enhances the Mana Regeneration skill. For me, in human form, I could stay in the air far from the vortex for nearly nine minutes before my mana finally hit 0 and disrupted the skill because of that quirky dynamic between flight mana consumption, my maximum mana, and my Mana Regeneration.

How seriously were human players taking maintaining flight at low altitude? Some *spreadsheets* analyzing mana consumption had already been posted on the forums, and formulas for mana consumption had already been worked out by the math-inclined players, that other players could use to calculate *exactly* how long they could stay airborne. All they had to do was plug in their mana pool value, their Mana Regeneration skill, and any modifiers like Charms of Mana Collection or gear they had that enhanced their Mana Regeneration skill, and the formula worked it out. They were taking it *that* seriously.

That was going to make Charms of Mana Collection very, very popular among human players, because they temporarily boosted the effect of Mana Regeneration, and they could last upwards of three hours if made by a very high skill enchanter. They were a staple item used by mage and healer archetypes in dungeons and raids to buff their mana regen to allow them to cast more spells before running out of mana, letting it passively regenerate at an accelerated rate, but now they were going to be even more popular, because it would allow humans to fly much longer away from Freeport. And that was going to drive the prices up even more.

I needed to tell Lucilia about that...and put in an order for some of her strongest charms.

I'm not entirely sure the mana pool quirk was intentional, but I think it was. And it was going to cause human players to carry around an entire set of gear designed around that quirk, to reduce their mana to allow their Mana Regeneration skill to refill that smaller mana pool much faster, and thus let them fly longer.

We'd also learned that Gift of the Djinn was like Touched by the Djinn in that it unlocked new child skills when you got it to threshold levels. Some crazy fool out there had already raised his skill past 1,000, and he gained a new child skill at each threshold. At 500 he got a skill called Wind Breath, and it allowed him to blow out a stiff breeze. It had no real combat value that anyone could figure out, but it was a pretty neat little trick that had a lot of potential just as a fun toy. But at 1,000, he got something much more substantial, a skill called Storm Lord, and it increased the damage he dealt using lightning. Any kind of lightning, be it from a spell he cast or an item he used. It also increased his resistance to lightning attacks, reducing the damage it did to him. Now that ability had real potential, and when people found out about it, there was a sudden run on a consumable called a Lightning Rod, which was a one-use consumable that unleashed a lightning bolt attack. Storm Lord increased the damage of that lightning attack. And people needed them, because the only way to raise Storm Lord was to use lightning-based spells or items or be hit by them.

For me, it was doubly awesome, because it increased the damage of my Imbue Arrow, *and* Imbue Arrow would increase the skill because it was a lightning-based skill. And since I can use Imbue Arrow way more than I can cast lightning-based spells, it would give me an efficient means to increase Storm Lord.

Because Gift of the Djinn was linked to Djinn Form in my skill window, I already had those child skills. I didn't get them immediately the day I got it, but they showed up in my skill window after I logged out and logged back in the next day. I guess that had to update my character for the game server or they hadn't added the skills into the server's database until the next day or something. But, I had a *third* skill that the others hadn't discovered yet, which I bet unlocked at 1,500; my Djinn Form skill is

1,603. That skill was called Jolt, and what it did was allow me to deal electrical damage to opponents by touch...but it cost a *hell* of a lot of mana to use. That skill *was* enhanced by Storm Lord, I found out, but since the skill was so low, it barely did any damage at all even with that boost.

It cost me more mana to use Jolt than it did for me to cast a Lightning Bolt spell, and the spell hit like 1,000 times harder than Jolt. That told me that the skill, while offensive, wasn't designed to be a human player's staple attack. It was meant more as an *oh shit* option that would allow a human player to deal some damage, but the high mana cost kept that damage at reasonable levels.

Come to think of it, there was a low-skill Evocation spell called Shocking Grasp that acted almost the same way as Jolt. It was meant for starting players, a low skill, low power, low mana spell that allowed the user to deal a small amount of lightning damage by touch, like a super-charged static shock. Unlike Magic Missile, that had use at high skill levels, Shocking Grasp did not. It had a maximum limit to the damage it could deal, and that maximum didn't make it worth using once a magician got past a certain skill level, when more powerful spells were available to him. Shocking Grasp was superior to Jolt in almost every way but one, and that was that I suspected that Jolt did *not* have a maximum cap to its damage. I bet at high skill levels, the mana cost comes way down and it hits much harder, which was more than enough motivation for me to invest time and effort into raising the skill.

Why? Jolt required no words of power or prep time to use. It was an instant skill triggered by willing it to go off, and that could be *extremely* useful.

So, humans had gone from one of the weakest and most useless races in CO to one of the most powerful almost overnight, to the point where I was afraid that we'd been buffed a little bit *too* much. And if that was the case, then our new skills would be nerfed, or even outright removed, to restore balance. I had the feeling that Jolt wasn't going to be a skill for very long, to reduce the appeal of the human race for new players, so I was going to enjoy it while I had it.

The one thing they weren't going to take away was flight, and that made me happy. It was pretty cool to just hover in midair over the city and look

down, see the new dynamic...humans *flying* around rather than *walking* around. There had already been quite a few injuries from people crashing into each other, not paying attention to where they were going, and it told me that very soon, the fundamental architectural style of the city was going to change. Its inhabitants could now move in three directions, which made things like walls and fences utterly pointless, as well as allowing buildings to be built taking this new method of movement into account. Stairs would disappear in the city, replaced by holes in the floor or ceiling. Houses and buildings would be built with entrances off the ground with no easy access except from the air, to keep the “groundbound” races out of them. The streets would remain so they could move cargo around by wagon, but they would see almost no foot traffic. And what the Djinn had done would spread through the city, with hovering platforms holding buildings, or just buildings hovering in the air on their own—the house built around the hovering platform both above and below to conceal it—which would turn the city into a truly three dimensional place, with buildings both above and below.

But not everything was taking place up here. Down on the ground, where the city used to be, they were taking advantage of the giant crater to build a new set of docks for ships, many of which had come here having no idea the city had been pulled out of the ground. There would be a new Harbor District on the ground, would most likely become a city in its own right over time, and once the high elven mages figured out how to move goods up and down to the city, those docks would again be a critical part of the city’s economy. But the construction was going very slowly because of how the crater was formed. The sides of it were vertical right at the edge, so no pilings could be set out in the water and the edges had to be reinforced to prevent landslides. They also had to deal with the fact that the ground abutting the crater wasn’t level, with the land at the easternmost edge being much higher than the land closer to the coast, so high that any dock they built there would be too high for ships to tie up to it.. The docks had to be built along or against the edge of crater, the wooden ramps extending out as much as they could safely make them go without support on the outside edge and a series of ramps and stairs leading up to ground level along the eastern edge, requiring them to sink pilings into the sides of the crater at angles to create a platform that was stable enough and could handle the weight of cargo moving over it. So what they were doing was building a

semicircular, continuous dock that ringed the inland side of the crater, where ships would tie up, load or unload cargo, and then sail out of the now much wider harbor mouth compared to before.

That crater was the perfect harbor. Any ship could tie up to the dock, no matter how big it was or how much draw it had at the keel.

And below the city but above the harbor, there was also some activity. Some enterprising human magician got the idea to build a new house on the *underside* of the giant rock that held the city, using stone shaping magic to form a dwelling attached to the inverted “peak” of the mountain-sized rock that held the city. He’d made an inverted tower of a sort, a fairly large circular tower that pointed down instead of up, and ended in a definite point, almost like a stalactite hanging from the very tip of the gigantic piece of stone under the city. It was absolutely ingenious, what he did, taking advantage of the fact that nobody *owned* that “land” and carving out for himself a very large and very clever new abode. I knew that others were going to do the same, and over time, an entire “undercity” was going to form down there, most likely complete with tunnels through the stone that would connect the hanging buildings together.

Things were changing so much. I wasn’t sure I’d even recognize Freeport in a month.

But, I was here on business, not to gawk. I’d finished emptying out my old house three days ago, and I’d received mail from the Djinn that they’d finished my house, so I was here to take possession of it and move some stuff into it, get it furnished. Eventually I’d open a shop there, but not until the enclave was finished and the Djinn moved in, since they’d be my primary customers. For now, I wanted to get the stuff I intended to sell into the house’s item storage, which would be almost entirely items made of bone, stone, and metal, the materials that Djinn could not conjure. It was the last major project I had before I returned to my old life in the game, my old ways, and went back to exploring. Despite everything that happened, with the Solo Challenge ending and making good friends in Savar and Emelda, I still wanted to explore every nook and cranny of the Twin Worlds. I wanted the most complete maps any player could compile, I wanted to see *everything* in the game, and that meant I’d to back to exploration, finding

new overworld boss monsters to kill, new marvels to document, new amazing discoveries to share with the other players.

The difference is, I'd be doing that exploration with *much* better gear, which would drastically increase my survivability.

I descended to my new house, and I had to appreciate it. It sat at the very edge of the Djinn enclave, almost as if it was part of it but not part of it, hanging almost directly over where the docks used to be when the harbor had water in it. That made my building prominent, and would increase its visibility and traffic when I opened the shop. It was built in the Djinn style, which was a large, flat-roofed building with no stairs, and very large windows with no glass on the sides that allowed them to enter and leave easily, as well as allow air to flow through the structure unimpeded. The walls were made of light gray stone, the stone scavenged from the city, but they'd added some highlights using different colored stone that created contrast along the walls that made it quite handsome. They'd put an elegant wrought iron fence on the low wall at the top of the building that ringed the roof, which the Djinn used as a part of their home the way they did on the Citadel. The windows were the only way in or out on the upper floors, and in the northwest corner of each floor was a hole that connected the three floors of the building together. The building was built for Djinn, meaning the ceilings were five and a half meters tall to give them plenty of room to hover, with the building standing nearly 21 meters high when the roof's edges, a low wall to keep things from sliding off, were added in. That was the height of five story building on Terra, but it was still shorter than my house on Citadel because that building was built with four meter tall ceilings to give the building the feel of having high ceilings for the Arkons, who were a very tall people. The ground floor was built to be a shop with a workshop area in the back, and the upper two floors were designed to be a fairly spacious apartment, which I would need to furnish.

My plan was to do the same thing here as on Citadel, just reversed. The top floor would be furnished for my Djinn form, and the middle floor would be furnished for my human form.

I was thoroughly satisfied with the result of the Djinn's labors, and I started moving in. I began by conjuring some basic furniture, carpets, and cushions for the two floors, then I went down and conjured what I could for

the shop area so I could have at least a little shelf space for displaying goods. I'd have to buy most of what goes in the shop area since they had metal parts in them, but I could conjure some tables and shelves that didn't for now and replace them with larger and more sturdy pieces later. Once that was done, I unloaded a bunch of stuff into the house's item storage, stuff I intended to sell in Freeport and some extra stuff that would give me a good stock of exploration supplies in case I needed to resupply and for some reason didn't have the time or inclination to go back to my house on Citadel. The workshop here was nearly the same size as the one on Citadel, but this one I set up exclusively as a smithy. The Djinn could conjure leather and cloth goods, so they wouldn't be buying it. But they would be buying metal goods, so the workshop here had to cater to that need. On the second floor, I set up a very small work area for leatherworking and tailoring, without the leather treatment equipment like racks and vats, a place where I could make finished goods using pre-prepared leather and cloth, which I could conjure. The top floor was set up with the plan to put in a small research library, mainly a place where I could practice Scribing. You still needed a small research library to practice Scribing by itself, so you could refer to the magical tomes so you could use the proper symbols when you penned the spell scrolls. I needed about a bookshelf full of books to practice Scribing, and the top floor would be able to hold it without cluttering up the place, given there was little furniture up there in the first place. I'd practice Research on Citadel, and set up this small space for Scribing in case I ever needed to scribe a spell from Freeport.

After clearing out my item storage, I then spent nearly two hours going between Freeport and Citadel to get everything else I planned to move, a mixture of personal items, tradeskill materials, tools to set up my smithy, and merchandise to stock the shop. When that was done, I more or less just sat on a comfy chair up on the roof and watched the hustle and bustle, pondering my other life.

The real one. I was at a crossroads in the game, but at a much bigger one in real life. I still had no real idea what I wanted to do with my life now that I was more or less free to do whatever I wanted. I'd kicked around going to the Academy, opening my own business, doing nothing, even going back to work, but I hadn't really come to any decisions. About the only thing that I'd managed to do was take the c500,000 I had earmarked

for investment and get it squared away. Last week, I opened an account at the Second Bank of Moridon at the suggestion of the banker at MMS, which was a much more upscale bank meant for rich people, and I was assigned a personal financial planner to help me make a plan for my money. She was a Moridon, Sankilai Dron, and after she spent nearly three hours all but interrogating me over what I wanted to do with the money, she only needed about six hours to put together a comprehensive financial plan that did exactly what I wanted it to do. And simply put, that was to put the money in no-risk investments that would supply me with a moderate monthly income that would last me for the rest of my life. Her plan invested my money in a series of guaranteed bonds issued by the Moridon government that earned a return on my C500,000 that, when distributed as monthly payments, came out to C1,187.83. That was nearly twice my old salary, and more than enough to move into one of the upper class apartments over by Jacksonville Beach, or even buy my own house. The average monthly mortgage payment for a three bedroom house or condo in the Jacksonville area was C370, where the rent on an upper class apartment would be around C500. And if I couldn't live off C400 a month, there was something wrong with me.

I told you before, I could easily afford to live in a much nicer apartment, but I choose not to because the efficiency I have now suits me.

To put it into perspective, the rent on my efficiency now is only C180 a month, which I could easily afford on my old salary of C642.11 a month as a database manager. Which isn't bad, given the mandated minimum living wage on Earth is around C360 a month, ensuring that anyone can easily afford the kind of efficiency in which I live. So, I used to make about double the minimum wage, which put me just on the lower edge of middle class, or the upper edge of working class. For me, it was more than enough, so I was certain that the income off my dividends was going to be more than I needed.

A Galactic Credit, Earth's de facto currency since the Faey took over, was worth about what three dollars was back before the subjugation. A Big Mac at McDonald's costs C1.19, when it used to cost like \$3.69.

That wasn't the only new income I'd have coming in. About two weeks ago, the DFM sent me a rather terse message informing me that my stipend

payments as a farm survivor would start being sent to my account starting next month, and a pro-rated amount of C112.33 had been deposited into my Second Bank account as of that morning. I would receive C683.29 a month for the rest of my natural life as part of the stipend program, which was enough for a farm worker to live off of so long as they lived a modest lifestyle. That was effectively a salary of about twice the legal minimum wage on Terra. Adding that to my monthly dividend distribution, I'd be living off of a combined guaranteed monthly income of C1871.12, which put me into the lower tier of the upper middle class. That was the kind of monthly salary a high level executive or master tradeskill practitioner took home.

But I had to move out of the efficiency, because I'd done one thing that I'd been wanting to do for a while. I'd needed to move to a building with a parking lot, because I was going to buy a hovercar and a skimmer.

Hovercars weren't that expensive, but you did have to have a license to drive one, which I lacked. I similarly had no license to fly a skimmer, but my skimmer license would allow me to drive a hovercar, so I only needed the skimmer license. Skimmers, like any vehicle capable of operating in outer space, required a Class 3 Operator's License to fly, and a Class 3 also allowed the holder to drive a hovercar. And that was the second real thing I'd done since getting the money. I was taking a Class 3 course to get my license. I was four days into the 15 day course, which were held every morning at 8:00 am and lasted six hours every day. I'd had four classes so far, and I have to admit, I had no idea there were so many rules involved. You had to pass a 120 question test about the rules of operation both in an atmosphere and in outer space, plus you had to pass a practical skills exam.

That part was much easier. The class came with a skimmer simulation simsense that let you practice flying a skimmer anytime you wanted, and I'd been using the hell out of it for the last few days.

There was one other piece of major hardware I was considering buying...a bionoid. I don't really *need* a bionoid, but it does have some major advantages, and the biggest one was, Faey telepaths couldn't get into my head if I was out in the world using a bionoid. I could use the bionoid for my chores and errands, especially use it any time I might potentially have to deal with a Faey, and when I moved into my new apartment, I'd

have room to stow the bionoid unit when I wasn't using it. The model of bionoid I was considering wasn't going to be cheap, either, because I wanted one with some extras. You can buy them with augmented strength and speed, "athletic model" bionoids that were built for extended physical activity and had operational parameters beyond human norms, and having a bionoid like that, with its machine strength and very fast processing speed, which translated to reaction speed for the driver, would make it highly improbable I'd be at a disadvantage if I ever got into a fight while driving a bionoid. I wanted a bionoid more like Xen than the real me that I could use in the real world, something as strong and as agile and as flexible as Xen, which would allow me to fully exploit my fighting skills if it ever came down to it.

I have to admit, I was gonna do it. I hadn't completely talked myself into it yet, but I really liked the idea of being in a bionoid when out among people, for the protection it provided from both people I don't trust and the Faey I fear. I just had to justify putting myself into even more debt to pay for a C26,750 security blanket. C20,000 for the bionoid, C5,750 for the extras I wanted, and C1,000 for the upgrade that would allow the bionoid to operate on the Confederation comm network, that I could use anywhere in the Confederation instead of only on Earth. Since the touring skimmer I wanted would be capable of traversing Stargates, the bionoid I was going to buy needed to be able to operate on the other side of that Stargate. That way my real body could stay at home and my bionoid could do the traveling.

I hadn't had the money for a month, and I was already planning on going into debt to buy a touring skimmer and a bionoid. But at least I wasn't buying anything frivolous or stupid. As long as I stayed within my budget, I'd be alright. Besides, I still had almost all of the C17,000 I'd put aside for buying silly toys and whatnot, so I still had a good cash reserve for emergencies.

Speaking of class, I'd best log out or I was going to be late.

This would be the second to last day I'd be leaving from my apartment. The first thing I did with the money, even before I decided to buy a hovercar or a skimmer, was buy my own place. I didn't want to rent anymore, I wanted a place that was mine, that was *my space*, where I didn't have to answer to a landlord. So, after the Grand Crusade was done and I

had time to look properly, I started house hunting. And I found what was perfect for me. It was a condominium, not a house, on the 58th floor of an upscale building on the south side of Jacksonville, which was the “richer” side of town. The unit I’d bought was a very nice two bedroom model, with one bedroom for me and one bedroom for when Sano or Rita came to visit, which would double as a storage space for my new bionoid when it wasn’t being used by a living person. The condo was surprisingly large for its list price, with a full living room, balcony off the living room that gave me a fantastic view of the ocean, dining room, kitchen, parlor or study or den or whatever they were called, a very large combo utility room/garage, two bedrooms with one being a master bedroom, and two bathrooms, the master bedroom built in the Faey style with the separate shower and large soaking tub. The condo also had a balcony off the living room, a surprisingly large one that was not connected to the balconies on either side of it and had retractable privacy walls on the sides if I didn’t want my neighbors looking at my balcony and ventilation infrastructure in place to allow me to grill out there. The apartment faced east, which meant I had a commanding view of the Atlantic, a fact that made the unit C2,000 more expensive than units facing in other directions. And what was most important, the building had its own parking in sublevels under the building, with some of the parking sized for skimmers, since many of its tenants had both hovercars and skimmers, in a fairly large parking facility underneath the building. Each tenant was assigned one space per bedroom the condo had for free, but could rent additional spaces if they were needed. The condo’s utility room had a large cargo door that opened to the outside that would allow large items to be brought into the apartment without having to bring them through the inside of the building, which was why the balconies weren’t connected, and the utility room was large enough to house a hoverbike or a very small hovercar...which was also intentional. That was a feature in the more upscale units in the building, from the 50th floor up. The apartments on the lower floors didn’t have a utility room like that, one that opened to the outside and could double as a garage for a hoverbike or small hovercar. That feature made the condo a good C1,400 more expensive than a similarly sized condo on the lower floors, but there weren’t any of those available. If I wanted it, I’d have to spend the extra money on a unit with that deluxe combo garage/utility room.

It was all good, since I was planning on buying a hovercar anyway. And now that I had a garage, I was going to make sure I bought one that would fit in the utility room. That way I could save my parking spot down in the underground garage for the skimmer.

The condo also came with something I'd never had before as standard equipment, a helper unit. Helper units were robots, a small flying disc about a meter wide with two arms attached to it that moved around using grav pods. They were capable of basic fetching and carrying, cleaning, doing laundry, and the like. The more upscale models were capable of cooking, and since this was an upscale condo, this one had that capability. It could even talk, it had an AI that allowed it to respond to verbal commands and even hold something of conversation. The helper unit would keep the apartment tidy and do basic chores for me, cook for me if I wanted, and they were programmable to allow them to perform new tasks, or perform a task exactly the way I wanted. So, for example, if I like my clothes folded a certain way, I could teach the helper unit how to do it. There were a bunch of expansion programs available on Civnet to customize helper units, and the unit in the apartment was advanced enough model to use all of them. The one in the apartment was a deluxe model, reflecting the price tag that came with the condo.

I'd already done the financing, which only took my financial advisor about two hours to set up once I signed the "intent to buy" paper at the management office in the building. The mortgage would run C770 a month on a 15 year mortgage—I didn't want a 30 year mortgage—which included a separate C60 a month building service fee to pay for utilities, building maintenance, and upgrades. That was more than my monthly stipend, but not by very much, so the stipend was effectively paying for my new condo.

It was more than I really wanted to pay, but I didn't have many options...and besides, the condo was *awesome*, with everything I was looking for and some extras I didn't consider but liked more and more as I inspected the unit. It was more than big enough for my needs, had the extra bedroom for the bionoid, and while I didn't necessarily need a utility room that doubled as a private garage, it was take it or leave it.

I was supposed to close on the new condo today, after my skimmer class, and I'd be moving in tomorrow. Well, I wasn't *closing* on it, but I'd

reach a stage in the paperwork where the building manager would allow me to take possession of the condo and move in. The actual closing on the condo would come next week. So, after getting dressed in my tiny efficiency, I headed for skimmer class.

It almost felt like I was back at work, except for the fact I was getting on a different tram. The class ran from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm and would run for two more weeks, since it followed Earth conventions and ran from Monday to Friday. Today was going to mark the end of the first week of class, and so far, I'd done pretty well. I'd passed all the written tests they give to make sure we know the rules we were taught, and I'd be taking my first practical simulation test today, dealing with low altitude operations. If I passed that practical, I'd be legally allowed to drive a hovercar, it was the Class 1 practical skills test. Once I had my Class 1 endorsement, I was going to buy a hovercar that would fit in the garage, so I wouldn't have to take the tram anymore. The second week's tests would be cross country operations, which was the same as the Class 2 license, and the third week's tests would be outer space operations, which was the Class Three section of the course. Once we passed all those tests, then we'd take the Class 3 written test and practical exam on the last day of the course. If I passed that, I'd walk out of the building with my Class 3. Once I had that, I'd be looking at buying a skimmer.

I wasn't going into debt to buy that hovercar. I was going to buy a used one using the money I set aside from the payment for large purchases. I could buy a nice used compact hovercar that would fit in the garage for about C5,000, something that I could use to run errands around town or go to and from class. That would leave me C12,000 to furnish my new home, which was more than enough.

I perused the listings for both new and used skimmers on the tram to class, then put it aside when class started. The course I chose was fast-paced because I want my license as soon as possible, and it requires a lot of attention to memorize all the rules and operating procedures we have to know that hovercar drivers don't. Hovercar drivers don't interact with airspace traffic control, for example, but we do, so we have to know the proper procedures for dealing with traffic control. That's the main focus of next week's segment of the course, high altitude flying, because hovercars don't fly at high altitudes outside of established "interstate corridors,"

controlled airspace specifically set aside for hovercars traveling long distances. Since skimmers don't have to fly in those corridors, we have to know how to take orders from traffic control. We also have to share the sky with other vehicles that don't use the corridors, like other skimmers, Sticks (like tractor trailers, they carry cargo containers), dropships (a different class of vehicle that's similar to skimmers but are designed to be based on a ship and land on a planet rather than be based in the atmosphere), cargo freighters (they carry hundreds of cargo containers at a time, where Sticks carry up to 12 at a time depending on the model), and even smaller spacefaring vessels, the ones capable of making ground or water landings. I already had a jump on next week's coursework because I don't work, so that means I have lots of time to study...and with the Grand Crusade being over now, I don't feel like I *have* to log in.

It still felt weird. This time last month, I'd have been at my cubicle filling out forms and doing data retrieval requests. Now I'm in class learning how to fly a skimmer.

This class didn't just teach how to fly a skimmer, it also taught how to remote pilot a skimmer through a merge, either merged while physically in the skimmer or by remote. That part of it was really interesting, since your point of view was much different when you were flying the skimmer from the inside, relying on the cameras and instruments instead of your own eyes, but it wasn't really all that hard. No harder than flying the skimmer manually.

After class, instead of going home, I instead headed out to prepare to move into my new apartment tomorrow. The unit was unfurnished, so where my efficiency is furnished—such as it is—I'd need to buy a living room set, a bedroom set, a bookshelf or two, a dining room set, a merge pod, and a couple of desk chairs. And moving would be easy, since I don't have much stuff. It might take me two hours to pack my things and hire a hovertruck to take it to my new place, but I couldn't do that until I got some furniture for the apartment.

I wouldn't need to buy everything. There was some "furniture" incorporated into the design of the condo unit that I wouldn't have to buy, and the unit came with some pretty impressive appliances pre-installed. I'd need to buy a dining room set, or I could leave the room empty and just use

the table in the kitchen or the bar area on the far side of the kitchen island, which were built into the kitchen as standard equipment. But, I'd need to buy stools or high chairs for the island bar table, where the kitchen table had four seats incorporated into the design. The condo unit had its own vidlink, so I wouldn't need to buy one of those, that was standard equipment just about anywhere on Earth anymore. There were writing desks incorporated into both bedrooms, so I wouldn't need those, but those desks didn't have chairs, so I'd have to buy some if I wanted to use them as something more than a shelf. The kitchen was fully furnished, and the apartment came with a clothes washer/dryer already installed in the utility room. The appliances were part of the list price of the house, meaning that I now owned them, and I'd be responsible for maintenance on all of them. I could replace them if I wished, but I doubted that I'd need to do so. They were all top-line models of current appliances, befitting a condo like this..

One very useful feature in the new apartment is that it's interface compatible. I could control all the apartment's functions and the appliances with my interface, even do it remotely over Civnet, so I'd never have to use their manual controls. Them coding the apartment's equipment to my interface was part of the closing process, which the building manager said would be done the day I moved in.

Guess that gives me a reason to wear my interface around the house.

I was going to spend some of that C17,000—well, C12,000 given I was going to buy a hovercar—I had put back for splurging. I went to a furniture store and bought all the furniture I needed, all of it economy style furniture that looked nice and was comfortable, then I went to a specialty store and bought something I was going to need if I wanted a bionoid, a merge pod. You weren't allowed to merge directly to a bionoid because of the risk of a medical condition called *dump shock* that would cause someone to go into a temporary coma if the bionoid's onboard computer was shut down unexpectedly or was destroyed in an accident, so you had to buy a merge pod to use one. Merge pods held a control computer in them that monitored the user's vital signs, would alert the Medical Service if you had any medical problems while using a merge pod, and would safely disconnect a person from the bionoid before dump shock could happen if the bionoid was damaged in a skimmer crash or had a malfunction or something. Merge pods weren't cheap, the one I bought was C400, but it was mandatory

equipment to use a bionoid, just like a third gen simsense rig was required equipment to play CO.

Merge pods could be used for more than bionoids, so at least I'd get some use out of it. They were designed to be ergonomically comfortable for people who spent extended time in a merge, and it would be way better for me to play CO in the merge pod than laying on my bed. The merge pod place where I bought mine had models for about 30 different species on the display floor and could order models for any species living on Earth, each one built to be most comfortable for a particular species. Because of that, I was going to put my merge pod in the living room, so I could run a hard dataline from the vidlink to the merge pod. I know I could set it up to use local gravband, but I'm old school enough to prefer hardline connections.

For the first time since I was a kid, my bedroom was going to be used almost exclusively for sleeping.

By sunset, I had everything done. The furniture was going to be delivered tomorrow morning, I had boxes to pack my stuff, I had a cargo truck hired to move my stuff, my vidlink's data had been successfully downloaded over to the vidlink in the new apartment, and I had a memory stick big enough to hold the 232 gigastrings of programs and data in my vidlink to serve as a hard copy in case the export was corrupted. Seriously, that was ridiculous. The CO program was only 2.1 gigastrings, and the other programs I had in it amounted to all of 6.24 gigastrings. Virtually all of that data was my simsense recordings, those were memory intensive since they were recording the sensory data as well as the standard A/V. I really needed to change my recording parameters to pare out some of the sensory stuff. I didn't really need to record smell, taste, and touch.

Good thing the vidlink in my new apartment had *ten* terrastrings of memory in it. Most decent vidlinks nowadays have a minimum of one terrastring of memory and are running MB-1000 processors or better, which are compatible with third gen simsense rigs. Upscale vidlinks come capable of running third gen simsense without the rig, but that kind of "onboard" simsense compatibility isn't as good as a dedicated third gen simsense rig, which had hardware in it specifically designed to encode and decode sensory data. The vidlink in my old apartment—this apartment—only had 250 megastrings when I first moved in, and I went out and bought new

memory chips for it to increase that to 500 gigastrings...which required me to buy a new master processor for it, since the old one could only handle a maximum of 250 gigastrings of memory and weren't compatible with second gen simsense rigs, which were the mainstream back then. I've put about C1,000 worth of upgrades into that vidlink over the years I've lived in this apartment to upgrade it to where it can play cutting edge simsense games, and the sad part is, I can't really take those out. I threw away the old equipment, I didn't really think I'd ever move out of this apartment. So whoever takes this apartment after I move out is going to inherit a pretty kickass vidlink.

Hey, efficiency apartments have cheap vidlinks in them.

The new vidlink wouldn't need any upgrading outside of my simsense rig. It came with more than enough memory and its master processor was hardcore, an MB-2200, so all I had to do was plug my third gen rig into an expansion bay (it had six expansion bays) and I was good to go.

The next morning, after a trip to the new building to finalize moving into the apartment with the building manager and confirming my biometrics had been added to the apartment so I could control everything via interface, I executed my "master plan" and moved to the new apartment...which took me all of about four hours. When you have almost no stuff, it's easy to move it. An hour to pack, an hour going and getting my cargo hovertruck and bringing it back to the apartment (taking advantage of the fact that I can drive hovercars legally now), half an hour to load the truck, a ten minute drive to the new apartment, and a half an hour to unpack it I took the truck back to the old apartment so I could make sure it was clean and ready for a new tenant, then I gave the building rental office official notice I'd moved out. The building only leases month to month—buildings like that have high turnover—so it was just signing a form and going with the manager to inspect the unit so he was sure it was clean and I didn't break anything. After that, it was as simple as dropping the hovertruck off back at the rental place and taking a tram to my new home.

I got home just in time to accept the delivery of my new furniture. The delivery people were waiting for me when I got there, their cargo truck hovering just outside the cargo door for my apartment, and I watched as they brought it in through the utility room using hover pods, the delivery

guys wearing hoverpacks so they could fly in and out of the apartment to get the furniture. The merge pod delivery truck arrived as the furniture guys were unloading, so that was brought in and placed before the furniture guys had gotten to the living room set, letting me place it into the living room first. Once they brought in and placed my new furniture, I was more or less done. All I had to do was unpack my stuff and put it away, and I was fully moved in.

That took about two hours, and necessitated a trip downstairs to the shopping concourse to buy a few things I needed for this apartment I hadn't needed for the old one, like queen size sheets for the beds and cleaning supplies for the helper unit to use to do its job. I was programming the helper unit with the tasks I wanted it to perform when Sano contacted me over my interface. *[You get moved in yet?]*

[Doing the last things now. Lemme give you my new vidlink ID.]

Sano's face appeared on a hologram in front of the island in the kitchen a few seconds later, in the act of taking off her interface as she looked from side to side. "Much bigger place. I like it. What kind of view does it have?"

"Unimpeded view of the ocean," I replied brightly as I finished tinkering with the helper

"Now I'm jealous," she laughed. "Ooh, a helper unit! Standard with the apartment?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I've never had one before, so I'm not sure how this is gonna go."

"They're really useful," she told me. "So, give me access to the camera pod and let me get a look around."

"Sure," I told her, ordering the vidlink in the living room to do so using my interface. The camera pod launched from the top of the vidlink, and after Sano put her interface back on, she started exploring the condo using it. I finished up with the helper unit and let it go back to its socket in the ceiling over the island—where it stayed when not doing anything—and walked into the living room, a hologram winking on in front of the vidlink when I moved into the new room. This apartment had holo emitters in every room, even the bathrooms, which would allow me to watch viddy or take calls anywhere in the apartment. "Wow, pretty swanky," Sano said with a

smile at me after the pod returned to the vidlink, which prompted her to take her interface off again.

“I’m paying more than I wanted for this place, but I couldn’t pass it up,” I admitted. “It has everything I want, some things I didn’t know I wanted until I saw them, and there’s always that view. That and there are like *no* decent apartments for rent anywhere in this city. It was buy a condo or stay in the efficiency, and this place was like perfect. So I decided what the hell.”

“I don’t blame you,” she smiled. “I see you chose furniture not far off from the style in your townhouse in Citadel City.”

I had to laugh. “Hey, I like that furniture,” I defended myself. “And this living room set wasn’t expensive at all.”

“How much?”

“C490 for the whole set,” I bragged. “I’m gonna go back there and get some furniture for the balcony, you know, a grill, an outdoor chair and maybe a small table. And I think I’m gonna get a couple of paintings or pictures or something for the walls. My old place was too small for stuff like that, but these walls look, I dunno, bare.”

“I’m glad to see you’re settling in,” she smiled. “But instead of pictures, you should get some wall projection holo emitters so you can put whatever you want on the walls and change it whenever you feel like it. Did you hear from Rita?”

“Not today, what’s she up to?”

“Same as you, house hunting,” she replied. “She sent me a bunch of holos and asked me which house I liked best. I swear, that girl just doesn’t seem to be able to make up her own mind,” she chuckled. “But the big news is, she’s leaving El Paso.”

“Not surprised, she told me she doesn’t like it there all that much,” I grunted. “Where is she gonna go?”

“The houses she showed me are all in Mexico,” she replied. “As in actual houses, not an apartment. She wants to move far away from any big city, and she said her family is originally from Mexico, so she’s looking around down there. So she’s been house hunting in smaller towns and

villages in southern Mexico. I think she said they're on the Yucatan. Where's that?"

"The Yucatan Peninsula," I supplied. "Just bring up a map of Mexico, you can't miss it."

She glanced to the side. "Oh yeah, I see," she nodded. "And I see the towns she talked about, too."

"Well, I'm glad for her," I said. "If it makes her happy, then she should do it."

"That puts her in the middle," she laughed. "A little closer to you than to me, but we'll be flying all but right over her house on the way to see each other. So, you pass your practicals yesterday?"

"Yup. I have my official Class One, and I already used it by renting a hovertruck to move my stuff. Monday we start the next phase. Two more weeks and I'll have my Class Three."

"Ooh, you gonna buy a hovercar?"

"Yup," I answered. "I'm gonna buy a used one, I don't want a hovercar payment on top of my mortgage and the skimmer loan. I don't want to payment myself out of my income. I don't really need a hovercar, since my building is on the tram line, but this apartment has its own garage. That kinda convinced me to get one, because it'll be so convenient. No more waiting for the tram."

"You should definitely do it. Take it from me, Kevin, once you have a hovercar, you'll wonder why you thought you didn't need one. It's sooooo convenient to be able to go exactly where you want to go whenever you want to go, without having to wait for a tram."

"That's why I've decided to buy one," I chuckled. "Or maybe I could get a hoverbike. The utility room here has a cargo door that opens to the outside so it can double as a small garage, so I could store it right here in the apartment."

"No thank you," she said adamantly. "I tried one of those out when I first moved here, and it was absolutely terrifying. All I could think of was that I could fall off and die."

“That’s what the safety harness is for, nit,” I teased.

“That didn’t matter. The first time I leaned over and looked down while I was up in the air, that was it. I landed it back at the dealership and haven’t been on one since. I guess I’m afraid of heights,” she admitted.

I didn’t comment on that. “I’m still looking at skimmers. I haven’t decided on a new one or a used one yet,” I mused. “But now that I have my class one, I can start seriously looking for a hovercar. I just have to make sure I buy one that’s small enough to fit in the utility room.”

“You can find some really good older model used hovercars for around four thousand credits,” she told me. “And if you’re willing to go with something much older, you can get them as cheap as five hundred. I bought mine for two thousand. It was in really good condition and the interior was still in great shape.”

“I thought you took the tram to work.”

“I do, it’s murder finding a parking space downtown,” she replied. “I use it for errands and whatnot. The tram service here isn’t all that great, so you kinda need a hovercar if you wanna do things.”

“That’s kinda like here,” I chuckled. “Almost everyone in 2M took the tram to work because there’s a parking shortage downtown. There aren’t enough free spaces to go around, and rental spaces can go for ten credits a day.”

“Wow, that’s even worse than here,” she said. “A lot of people here that take their hovercar to work send it back home on autopilot so they don’t have to park it downtown, then recall it to come pick them up when they’re done.”

“That’s only in newer models,” I said.

“Yeah, mine doesn’t have that,” she nodded. “So it’s the tram for me.”

“Well, if I buy a hovercar, I’d better make sure it has autonomous autopilot,” I noted to myself.

“It’s the only thing I wish my hovercar had.”

“Can’t you upgrade the software?”

“I could, but I don’t want to pay out that much. I’d have to replace the main computer, and that’s nearly as much as I paid for the hovercar. The tram that runs by my building goes straight to my work, so I really don’t mind riding the tram,” she answered. “The tram only sucks if I want to go out and do other things. I think that’s why I got the car so cheap,” she added with a laugh. “Everyone wants AA compatible hovercars now.”

“Is it at least remote capable?”

“Yeah, I can drive it by merge,” she nodded. “But since I live alone here, I never really have to send the car out to pick anyone up.”

“Your friends don’t hang out with you?”

“They have better hovercars than me,” she admitted with a laugh. “They’re the ones picking me up.”

“Poor little rich girl,” I teased. “Parents live on an estate while you drive a used hovercar and live in a cramped apartment.”

She smiled slightly. “You don’t know Shio, Kevin. The fact that my parents don’t give me money is normal in our culture. Children are expected to make it on their own in Shio society. Once your parents kick you out, that’s it. Only in the most extraordinary circumstances would they help you.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that,” I said, feeling a little bit like a jerk for saying something like that. “Sorry.”

“It’s not a big deal,” she said. “Besides, us kids look at it as making sure our inheritance is as big as possible,” she winked. “That’s the same as Terran society. When our parents pass on, the kids inherit their estate. And that big manor you talked about will eventually be mine,” she told me evenly. “Mikki is the older sister, so she has rights to it, but she gave up those rights when she joined the House of Karinne. She signed her claim over to me, so I’ll be the one with the house when my mother dies.”

“What about your father?”

“It’s not his,” she replied. “In Shio society, the spouse of the deceased doesn’t inherit the ancestral home and its land when their spouse dies. Though my dad is part of my family, it’s by *marriage*, and the land that runs through my family stays with the bloodline. My dad can inherit money or

other property bought while they were married, but property my mom owned before they were married, and not any land or property attached to the Strongblade family bloodline. My mother is the one that owns the manor, and when she dies, it comes to me, not my father. I certainly won't throw my father out, that's not how we do things, but he won't own the manor."

"Huh," I said. "I had no idea. So your dad changed his name?"

"My dad's family name is Darkbranch, not Strongblade," she replied. "And he has his own bloodline with its own ancestral home. Shio don't change their names when they get married."

"Oh. So, how does the whole thing with the last name of the kids work?"

She laughed. "That can get complicated," she winked. "If my dad was the primary heir to an ancestral home, then either me or Mikki would carry his last name to reflect our status as *his* heir. Since Mom's house is bigger than the ancestral home of Dad's family, Mikki would be a Strongblade and I would be a Darkbranch, since Mikki gets the bigger claim as the oldest. She can't inherit both, though. Families can't merge ancestral homes that way. But since Dad's not the oldest child, that means that he's not going to inherit his family's land unless his older brother dies before his father does, which isn't very likely. That means that Mom's kids carry the name Strongblade, since we *are* eligible to inherit Mom's house."

"That sounds almost feudal."

"It's a really old tradition that goes back thousands of years," she nodded. "And only applies to an ancestral home and the land attached to it. Shio that live in apartments or condos, or aren't the direct heir to an ancestral claim, they don't have these kinds of issues."

"Okay, so who gets to tag the kids with their last name in families that don't inherit?"

"The older parent gets to pass the name to the children by tradition, but it's also something of a tradition for at least one of the children in a marriage to carry the family name of the other parent. Usually the third child, if there is one," she answered. "Dad is older than Mom, so if not for the fact that Mom has an ancestral claim, the kids would be Darkbranches."

“Is your brother a Strongblade or a Darkbranch? He’s the third child.”

“He’s a Strongblade, because Mom has an ancestral claim, and that puts him in the line of inheritance,” she answered. “That’s when you don’t apply that tradition, when one parent owns an ancestral claim and the other doesn’t. If she didn’t, then me and Mikki would be Darkbranches because Dad is older than Mom, but Kallim would still be a Strongblade since he’s the third child. He’d carry Mom’s family name.”

“Wow. That sounds complicated.”

“Long ago, it was the subject of a lot of jockeying,” she laughed. “Naturally, every Shio wants to pass *their* family name to their kids, so nobody wanted to marry anyone older than they were. Especially if they were the oldest child. That’s where the old tradition of the oldest child having an arranged marriage came from. The oldest child would marry someone younger than them to guarantee the passage of the family name to the next generation, where the younger kids would be allowed to marry about anyone, since they didn’t matter nearly as much. We don’t do the arranged marriages anymore, but it’s still more or less a sacred tradition for the oldest child to marry someone younger so they can pass down their family name.”

“Sounds like Shio culture really puts emphasis on the first born.”

“Yup. Mikki is the oldest, so she had some perks I didn’t when we grew up. But they came with a bunch of obligations I don’t have, so really I don’t mind at all that I’m younger. I had way more freedom than Mikki did when we were growing up.”

“Learn something new every day,” I had to say with a rueful chuckle. “Wait, since you’re the heir, doesn’t that mean you’re in your sister’s shoes now?”

She laughed. “Yeah, but most of the annoying stuff happens when we’re kids, so I got out of most of it,” she winked. “I suppose I’d be expected to marry someone younger than me, but like I care about that.”

“Cool. I meant to ask something.”

“What?”

“What video editing software do you use? I was kicking around the idea of releasing some of my simsense recordings, but I don’t really know much at all about how that works.”

Her eyes lit up a bit. “Well, you’re talking to a professional video editor,” she told me brightly. “There are three programs you want, and I think you already have one of them. You said you record your simsense, so that means you must have Simvara.”

“I do,” I nodded.

“The free or the paid version?”

“I have the paid version. The free version didn’t have the features I wanted.”

“Good choice. You have latest version?”

“Yeah, I keep it updated.”

“Good. That’s the best simsense recording software on the market right now,” she said approvingly. “You’ll need software to do video editing. SimFeed has some basic editing tools, but they’re nowhere near enough to produce good viddies. Most video editing software is designed to work with simsense, so you can pare out sensory feeds and control comm channels, like taking out guild chat and such. For the editing software, you want to use VidMaster Premium. It’s not free, it’s actually just on the edge of being expensive, but it’s worth it. It’s easy to use, and it has tons of very good tools for editing simsense feeds to produce both fixed camera and free camera viddies. VidMaster also handles version rendering and storage compression to make it compatible with video hosting Civnet sites. The third piece of software you need is for the audio. VidMaster has some audio editing tools, but they’re not good enough. So you want Soundmax Pro. Soundmax is an external program that plugs in to Vidmaster. They’re two different programs, but Soundmax is designed to work with VidMaster, from inside VidMaster, so you don’t have to switch back and forth. Not only does Soundmax let you edit and manage the audio in a viddy, it lets you add custom sound effects and background music tracks. VidMaster won’t do that. So, you need to buy VidMaster Premium and Soundmax Pro. Both together will run you about a hundred and thirty credits or so. They’re

not cheap, but if you wanna do editing right, you pay for the best tools to do it.”

“Got it,” I said, making a note in my interface. “Are they easy to use?”

“VidMaster is once you get the hang of it. It’s got *hundreds* of features, so it might feel a little overwhelming at first. But once you learn what it can do and how to access those tools, it’s very easy to use. Soundmax incorporates itself into VidMaster when you install it, so you don’t have to learn that separately. You’ll learn it as you learn VidMaster.”

“Okay. Sounds like I’m gonna have a lot of work to do.”

She chuckled. “I’m here if you need help,” she smiled. “I know VidMaster better than I know my own mother. I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have.”

“I’ll probably hold you to that,” I warned.

We chatted for nearly two hours about other things, just small things, while I finished setting up the house, then we moved to interface when I had to go back down to the shopping concourse and pick up some things I forgot, or didn’t think to get until I had the furniture in the house and realized I needed it. She stayed on with me as I bought and downloaded the two programs, and she even helped me install them in my vidlink by using the camera pod to look over my shoulder as I installed the program modules. Just as I was finishing, the helper unit drifted into the living room carrying a tray and set it down on the coffee table. It held a tuna salad sandwich cut into halves and a bag of potato chips, with a container of strawberry oye juice. “I didn’t tell it to do that,” I noted to Sano as she helped me configure the last bits of the software.

“If you turned on the daily calendar function, it’ll do that,” she told me. “It realized you missed lunch, so it picked a random item off your preferred foods list and made it for you.”

“I’ll have to tweak that so it only cooks when I ask it to, I don’t eat what you’d call regular meals,” I chuckled. “But I am a little hungry,” I added as I picked up one of the halves. “Thank you,” I told the helper unit.

“*You are welcome,*” it answered in its machine voice, and drifted back towards the kitchen.

“That’s the one thing I wish I had for my apartment,” Sano laughed. “I hate doing housework.”

“Are they expensive?”

“Fairly,” she nodded. “The fact it came standard with your condo, and it has speech function on top of that, tells me just what kind of condo it is. That means it’s a pretty high-end model helper unit.”

Almost immediately, I knew what I was getting to buy for Sano to thank her for all her help. I had money, and the idea of using it to make a friend happy appealed to me greatly.

“Welp, afraid I gotta go, Kevin,” she said. “I have a few errands to run, and I’m going to the shiziki game tonight, so I gotta get everything done.”

“Okay. Have fun at the game.”

“I always do,” she smiled.

We said our goodbyes, and I felt a little...lonely after her hologram winked off. Neither of us had been nearly as active in CO as we’d been during the Grand Crusade, mainly because I was dealing with this new normal in my life and Sano had a big project at work she was doing. I think all of us Champions took a little break from CO after the Grand Crusade ended, just to relax and unwind a little bit after all that exertion and stress. I know I didn’t log on for nearly a full day after the final battle, it was really draining and I needed a little time to recover from it.

I hadn’t been lonely in the game since the Solo Challenge ended. I back to my usual ways of adventuring by myself, but I talked to Sano, Rita, and Mrima a lot while I was out soloing. Rita and Sano were back at raiding, and Mrima was still having tons of fun with her cubs and her new friends in faction territory. They’d all joined a guild together, an all-Jagaara guild named the Claws of Shavalar. They were all relatively new to the game, they were the Jagaara she’d been grouping with who decided to all come together and form a guild of their own, so they were all enjoying faction territory content together, raising their skills and gearing up in preparation for hitting neutral territory.

I’d told Mrima to find a good guild filled with friendly people and play the game together, that it would make the game much more fun for her, and

she'd taken my advice.

But what was different for me was that the other Champions I'd met during the Crusade were keeping in touch with me. I had Braggan, Meldo, and Alandra on my friends list now. I'd come to genuinely like them in the short time we'd known each other. I talked to them every once in a while, they talked to me, and a few times I'd met with this one or that one up on Citadel. The Grand Crusade had opened me up a little bit to others, and I'd come to learn that there were more potential friends out there than just Sano and Rita.

And I certainly had enough to do for the rest of the weekend. I was going to explore this new vidy software and try my hand at making my first ever vidy. It wasn't going to be anything special, really just a recording of the final battle at Freeport from my point of view, so I wouldn't have to do any scenes or editing or anything. It would more or less just be putting up my simsense feed, just formatted for me to put it on the Arena, and edited to remove things like Selvaron, to protect him from being harassed by loot-seeking dicks. I figured it would be a good start, since it wouldn't be that hard. All I had to do was have the software only include A/V and set up the camera for floating, then edit out the parts that I didn't want people to see, like me interacting with Selvaron.

The camera setting was very important. You have to understand that when my software records my simsense, it does it from both my first person perspective and from a third person perspective. It records everything around me in a panoramic format all the way out to line of sight, and when I play it back in third person mode, I can move the camera view around up to five meters away from me so I can see things from better angles, or look around the surrounding area to see things I didn't notice when I recorded it. When you release a simsense feed, you can set the camera to *fixed*, which meant the camera couldn't be moved from its assigned position, or allow the viewer to move the camera around as they wish to watch the footage from whatever angle they please.

Virtually no one releases vidy from only first person, because you barely see anything, especially during combat. You don't see the movements of my arms and legs and body when I fight from my first person, you barely see my swords, because my attention is on my opponent

and my eyes shift and move around quickly to take in any other possible threats as I fight. The movement of my head and body also affect that point of view, so a first person viewpoint during combat is usually a bobbing, weaving, chaotic mess that barely lets you take in what's really going on. Really, it's something of a surprise I can fight as well as I do when you look at what I see through my own eyes, that I can manage to function through that insanity.

I guess I'm just used to it.

Just about everyone releases simsense feeds with the third person camera being controlled by the viewer, so they can watch from whatever viewpoint or angle they please. Viddies can be recorded with the same functionality, allowing the viewer to control the camera, or they can be set so the camera is fixed, which is used mostly in cinematic viddies.

So, my first foray into the world of viddy editing was me taking a piece of my simsense feed from the battle, cutting out the parts of it I didn't want people to see, removing all sensory streams except A/V, setting which comm channels I wanted to include in the viddy, and adjusting the camera settings to give the viewer the ability to control it. And it took me almost the entire rest of the day to do it. I'm sure Sano could have done it in about fifteen minutes, but I was still learning how the software worked, and I was doing it more or less to learn the software by starting out with something relatively easy.

I climbed out of the merge pod where I did the work just after sunset, and I have to admit, I had fun with it. I played with the viddy software way more than I did any real work with it, learning it by using it, and the end result was about 20 minutes of footage from my simsense feed that centered on the fight with the first raid boss, where I held it off to give the others time to organize. I converted it into the format the Arena uses to host viddies and uploaded it to my account on The Arena, figuring that it may get all of one view, and that was Sano.

And that part of it made me consider an actual *viddy* viddy I could do, explaining how Touched by the Djinn and Gift of the Djinn worked. Everyone on Methrian knew I had it, so I wasn't giving anything away. And since I had Touched by the Djinn, I figured I'd be pretty good at explaining how the flight worked and whatnot. I thought it'd be fun to do something

like that, and it would give me some experience doing some actual editing rather than just cutting out chunks of A/V from my feed, as well as doing voiceover or even an in-game intro like some viddy makers did. And if I ran into any real problems, I could always ask Sano for some advice.

I could give it a try and see what happened. It would be fun.

I expected my first ever viddy to have all of one view, since Sano was the only one that knew of my Arena channel.

I was in no way expecting what happened.

It started off slowly, so slowly I didn't even notice. I was involved that next week with skimmer class, and didn't even look at the Arena for several days. When I wasn't at class, I was in CO exploring a large forest just south of the Icefang Mountains, which were the home of the orc tribes who had massed up and invaded last year. It was a very dangerous place, meant for very high skill players that were well geared, and the thick forest canopy made it almost impossible to explore in Djinn form. So I was on the ground, stalking through the woods as I did my usual thing, which was map the area, identify any NPC factions, and hunt for overworld boss monsters.

Saturday, when I didn't have class and had time to attend to other matters, I started working on my first real viddy. I felt kinda stupid looking at an icon in front of me that represented the camera (that's a feature you can turn on and off in CO) as I introduced myself and explained what the viddy was about. I then recorded myself demonstrating the abilities that humans gained from Gift of the Djinn and explaining how they worked, including recording visuals of my skill window so people could see the names and numbers.

I wanted to check to see if the Arena had a limit on how many viddies someone could post, so I checked the site and brought up my page, and I was almost stunned to see that my first viddy had over *thirty thousand views*! The exact number was 31,136 views! I was completely at a loss... how did people know it was there? How did they find it? Sano was the only one that knew I had the account. Did she tell people about it?

And what was more shocking, when I brought up my account settings from my page to look up posting rules, I noticed that I had money in my

account's financial transaction window. The site had deposited C30.202 into my Moridon Municipal Savings account! That was the account I'd used when I set up my account.

I was completely confused, at least at first. I realized after looking at things that I had turned advertising for my account on, or maybe it was on by default, which meant that the Arena was putting ads into my vidy. And the advertisers were paying me for it. That money was money that my vidy earned from the views. For every view my vidy received that was long enough to display an ad, I was paid C.001 by the Arena. That was C31.136 for 31,136 views, at least before taxes. The Arena automatically deducted 3% for Earth's Civnet Transaction Tax from that amount, which left me with left me with 30.202

30 credits. In old Earth dollars, that was nearly \$95. I was paid C30 for a few hours of work that was more fun than work!

Holy *shit*!

Well then, I guess I'd be leaving advertising on from now on!

The mystery of how I got so many views was solved after a little investigation. Someone had linked to the vidy on the *CO Today* forum, in a thread about the battle at Freeport, which revealed that I had a page on the Arena. That led people to my vidy, but it also led them to my page, which now had nearly 2,000 people following it. That really flattered me, that that many people had watched my vidy, and that so many were now following my page to see if I put up any more viddies.

That suddenly made my vidy seem not good enough to post. Not if people were actually going to watch it...and I'd get paid for it.

Sano probably got a little mad at me on Sunday, because I called her several times asking for advice on how to properly edit the vidy, to fix some weird bug with the sound, which wasn't properly syncing up to the video, to make it worth people seeing it. I spent almost all day on it, including logging back in to record more footage. She very nearly demanded to just send her the footage so she could do it, but I was determined to do it myself...well, mostly.

The finished product was much different from my first attempt. I tried to make it professional, with changing scenes and alternating between a

fixed camera for the parts where I was addressing the camera and a free camera when I was demonstrating the skills, and I also redid some of the speaking to the camera parts, trying to sound much more natural. I sent the finished product to Sano for her to look over, and she was fairly impressed with my work...but she couldn't resist suggesting several changes, and putting in some music, and making a proper intro and outro—she had to explain what those meant—and was about to try to “tweak” my video to her own standards when I cut her off.

I'm not a professional video editor.

I posted the finished product on my Arena page, and this time I posted a thread on the forums more or less announcing I'd started a vidy page and what I'd be putting on it, footage from my explorations and a few tutorials on what I know about the game. I definitely felt a little self conscious about advertising my page.

I was again too busy with real life to worry about the page over the week, finishing the last week of my Class 3 license and finishing the exploration of the Misty Forest, which produced results. I found a scion in a cave in the foothills, and I found an overworld boss monster. And that overworld boss monster gave me the inspiration for a future video; I was going to record my attempt to kill that overworld boss monster and make a tutorial out of it, show people how I do it by actually doing it within the game. I could explain my methodology before I started the attempt, then record the subsequent dozens of deaths as I learned how the boss behaved, come up with a strategy, acquire whatever consumables I needed to take it down, then do the deed. It is more or less my niche in the game, and more than one person has asked me how I do it.

So, I was going to show everyone how I do it, and I'd do it by demonstrating my process on a boss monster I've never killed before.

Friday was a big day for me for a very different reason. That afternoon, I took my Class Three practical exam, which was me flying a skimmer to an orbital station at Draconis and back down to Jacksonville with an examiner to prove that I both knew how to fly the skimmer (which I did thanks to that simulation software and tons of practice over the last month) and knew all the rules and procedures for space operations, including passing through a Stargate.

And I passed easily.

The course finished with a little graduation ceremony, where I was presented with a hard copy of my brand new Class 3 operator's license, which would allow me to operate any hovercar, skimmer, or dropship under 50 *benkonn*—a measurement that was about 48 metric tons—both in the atmosphere and in space. I now had the freedom to go anywhere in the Confederation I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there. Well, at least I would when I bought my skimmer.

And that dominated my weekend. I'd been searching for skimmers since I got the money, and I had three different models I was looking at. One was a four passenger skimmer from a company named Thrynne, which was supposed to be the best skimmer company around, one was a six passenger skimmer from Thrynne, and the last was an six passenger skimmer sold by a company from the House of Karinne called KPM...what those letters stood for, I had no idea. Those were the three skimmers that would fit in the skimmer parking in the garage downstairs that had all the features I wanted and were inside my price range. I'd decided to buy a new skimmer rather than used to get access to the warranty, so now it was a matter of making a decision.

I spent the weekend making that decision. I arranged test flights of all three and inspected them carefully, because I knew I wouldn't be buying another one until I paid off the first one, so I wanted something I would still enjoy owning in ten years. That meant it had to be durable, dependable, and I had to feel very comfortable in the cockpit. I weighed each of the skimmers carefully, but after the test flights, I'd made my decision.

I decided on the six passenger Thrynne AVS-1170-D. The skimmer had full merge capability, including the ability to be piloted by remote, but also had manual controls for those who liked to fly the skimmer by hand. The skimmer had plenty of cargo room on top of being a six seater, with the back four seats able to be folded down into the floor of the cabin to turn the back into a full cargo area. It also had two beds in it that folded out from the side panel, which you could put out after folding down the back seats. It even had a refrigerator in the cabin and a lavatory in the back, which would let me pack everything I'd need for a two week vacation into the skimmer and all but live out of it if I wanted.

The Thrynne was the only six seat skimmer I looked at that had a lavatory, I'd learned during my research. That meant that this skimmer was meant to be used for long distance trips, it wasn't just a glorified car. It was more like a small RV. And that made it perfect for me.

Outside of the versatility of the skimmer, I liked its design. It was sleek and elegant, it looked very stylish, and I really liked the cockpit, it was roomy enough for it to feel spacious and I liked how the instrument panels were laid out. It would be really easy to get into and out of, unlike the four passenger Thrynne and the KPM skimmer, both of those had you squeezing around a center console. The AVS-1170 would fit in the parking spaces under the building if I combined the two spaces I owned, but only just barely. It was a six passenger skimmer but was built on an eight passenger frame to give it extra space inside, and the spaces down in the garage were only large enough to accommodate a four passenger skimmer. By combining my two spaces and parking the skimmer across them, I could get a larger skimmer and not have to pay extra to rent another parking space.

By Sunday afternoon, I was signing my name to the contract. The exact skimmer I wanted would be delivered in three days, I ordered some extras that weren't in the models at the dealership, which worked out since it would take a few days for the bank to arrange the financing. I'd be able to pick up my new skimmer on Wednesday.

And my first planned use of it was to fly down to Sao Paulo on Saturday and take Sano to dinner somewhere...I just had to work up the nerve to ask her.

I didn't really get back to CO until Monday, and that was even more of a shock. I now had 5,109 followers on my page! My new vidy explaining Gift of the Djinn had 47,384 views! And my first vidy now had 41,048 views! And they'd paid me C428.895 for the ads in both viddies!

Holy *shit*! C428 was serious money! That was over half of my mortgage payment! If I could make one vidy a week that got the same amount of views as the first two, I could pay my mortgage off the revenue from the viddies and have more money from my monthly dividend income for other things!

I...I could make a living doing this! A *good* living!

In that moment, I understood. I understood not just why, but *how* some people played CO professionally. I'd never considered that you could make that much money off of just making viddies and posting them on a site. I thought the pro CO players were living in rented rooms and were just barely squeaking by, but no way was that the case. Some of those guys got *millions* of views on their viddies, and that translated to *thousands* of credits in revenue for them. I'd bet that the most popular CO streamers and viddy makers lived in luxury in condos or houses way bigger than mine. I'd bet those guys made tens of thousands of credits a year. I'd bet that some of them were *rich* by now, after nearly three years.

I was honestly dazed. I sat in the merge pod for a while just looking at the number, which was being projected as a hologram on the wall in front of me. I didn't really need the money, I had my dividends and my stipend, but if I made viddies, I'd be able to put money back, be able to do most anything I wanted. My dividends were set up so I could live a lower middle class lifestyle for the rest of my life...well, if I could make money doing this, I could enjoy a more upscale lifestyle. I could stop living like life didn't matter and *do something* with my life. I could do all those things I dreamed about doing before I was sent to the farm and had any desire to live my life crushed out of me.

It hit me so hard that I literally started crying. I was *free*. I would never be free of the memories or the fear or the trauma, but I was free to live my life however I wished, from this moment on. The Trillanes and the farm had destroyed my life, but now, finally, after fourteen years since I was freed from that hell, I could build a new life and start living again. I could live the life I wanted, not just drift from day to day in something more of an existence than a life. I could do whatever I wanted. I could be whatever I wanted.

And I understood how Rita had changed since she got the money. She was leaving her old life behind entirely—well, outside of still playing CO, she enjoyed playing the game far too much to quit—and was starting an entirely new life in another country, trying to find a new life for herself that would make her happy. And while I wasn't leaving Jacksonville, I was doing essentially the same thing.

And what did I want? I wanted to play CO, continue to train using my swords in the real world so I felt that I would be able to protect myself if I was ever mugged again, and since I'd had so much fun making those viddies, I wanted to keep doing it. Maybe even start live streaming my game sessions so people could see what it was like to play Xen along with me, though I'd have to be careful not to reveal too many of my deepest secrets. And when not playing CO or exercising, I'd try out some hobbies and activities, and definitely do some traveling using my new skimmer.

I'd learn more about the Shio so I could understand Sano's people better. Maybe even learn to speak their language. And I would definitely be seeing Sano if I could help it, both in the game and outside of it. I wanted our friendship to be more than just over Civnet, and now, thanks to Jason Karinne and this new revenue stream from making viddies, I could afford to fly down to Sao Paulo more or less any time Sano told me I could come down and see her.

But there was one thing I was definitely going to do, and I did it so fast that I didn't even think about what I'd done until I did it. I went onto the Confederation Network, found out when Sano's favorite shiziki team was having a game on her day off, and I bought two tickets for it. I was going to take her to a shiziki game on Shio Prime because she loved shiziki and I wanted to do something for her that would make her happy. And if she didn't want to go with me, then I'd lend her my skimmer and let her go with whoever she wanted.

But I'd better make sure she didn't make plans for that day.

She was at work, but I knew she had her interface on, so I queried her to see if she was available to talk. *[What's up, Kevin?]* she answered.

[I'll get my skimmer on Wednesday, and I was wondering if you would like to go do something on Saturday,] I started, all but rushing to get it out before I got nervous. *[How'd you like to go to a shiziki game with me?]*

[I'd love to!] she answered, which made my heart both leap and lurch. *[But the Lancers aren't playing on Saturday.]*

[No, but the Briari are.]

There was a startled silence. *[Are you serious? We'd have to go to Shio Prime!]*

[I can go through Stargates in my skimmer,] I told her, [and I don't have to get a visa or anything to visit the Federation. Terrans are allowed to visit the Federation without having to do any paperwork or anything, and since you're Shio, I think you don't need any special permission either.]

[Nope, I'm still a Federation citizen,] she replied.

[So, how about we go to Shio Prime and watch the game?] I asked formally.

[I would love to, Kevin,] she replied immediately. [I'll get us the tickets —]

[I kinda already bought them,] I admitted, feeling a bit sheepish.

What I got back wasn't laughter, it was a sense of amusement. Since you can't "laugh" communicating mentally through a jack, you instead convey the emotion, at least if you have a simsense-capable interface. I don't—but I will soon, getting a top of the line interface was now on my shopping list—so what I got instead was almost like a caption or subtitle that told me Sano was amused. *[You bought the tickets before asking me? My, someone is confident,] she teased.*

[I was thinking about it and wanted to make sure I had the tickets before I asked,] I blurted, feeling a little scattered and foolish. [I woulda felt rotten if I asked you and we found out we couldn't get tickets.]

[Good excuse,] she replied playfully. [We can go to my favorite restaurant in Vankiri after the game. I've been dying for their pan seared jobri ever since coming back from seeing my parents.]

[I'm up for it. I like Shio food.]

[You'd better,] she teased. [Afraid I have to go, Kevin, you're distracting me from work.]

[Sorry. Call you after work so we can organize it?]

[Sure thing. Talk to you then.]

She disconnected, and I felt both elated and terrified. I hadn't been on anything even approaching a date since before I was put on the farm. But I was looking forward to seeing her again, so looking forward to it that I just asked her out on a date.

We'd be going to her home planet, and I realized I had absolutely no idea what it was like there, or what her people were like. She'd lived here so long that she acted more like a human than anything, but I knew that couldn't be the case on her home planet. The Shio had their own culture that went back thousands and thousands of years, and I didn't know a single thing about it. The only thing I really knew about the Shio was that there were a lot of them living here on Earth, their planet was hotter than Earth was, and they had a big thing about food. I didn't know anything else.

Well, tomorrow I was going to start changing that. The first thing I was going to do was go buy a high end interface and buy one of those translation modules, like the one Mrima's cubs bought for her. It would let my interface translate both spoken and written Shio in real time, as well as about 2,000 other languages, and that would let me function on Shio Prime when we went to the game. It would even translate into Shio for me, a simulated voice coming from the speaker on my interface that would translate my thoughts into Shio for someone that didn't speak Faey. And after I did that, I was going to do a little reading up on the Shio. I wanted to know more about them, their society, their history, their culture. I wanted to know more about Sano by understanding where she came from and how that shaped her life.

Hell, I might even go so far as to have the Shio language telepathically inserted into my memory. You can do that on Earth, there are telepaths that make a living doing things like that. The trick for me would be finding a telepath that wasn't Faey. There was no way *in hell* I would let a Faey telepath into my mind, not after what they did to me. Not after what they made me do.

Never again.

So far, the day was panning out.

Crouching down on a towering spruce-like tree in the Misty Forest, I was watching a gigantic bipedal humanoid-like creature named Korriax the Hunter. He was an overworld boss monster, and I'd managed to learn so far this game session that he belonged to no NPC faction, so I could kill him. I'd been observing him for about half an hour, seeing if I could learn

anything about him, but hadn't had much luck. Overworld boss monsters could have complex AI depending on their species, if they were from a smart species they acted that way, but this guy seemed dumb as a box of rocks...that, or he wasn't invested in much of a dynamic AI. He'd just stood outside his cave the entire time I watched him, as if he were guarding it.

This wasn't going to be easy. The Misty Woods were a high skill adventuring area, meaning that big and ugly down there was going to have some extremely high attack and defense skills. That meant he'd hit like a Mack truck and be hard to damage in return. On top of the high base damage he could do, most likely he'd have a wider array of both offensive and defensive abilities compared to boss monsters in lower skill areas, which made him much more dangerous. Part of the methodology of killing bosses was learning what those skills were so I could identify and counter them, and that would require me to go down there and attack him so I could see him in action. I would die doing it, run back and get my stuff, and do it again, and again, and again, however many times it took for me to see everything he could do.

I'd been in the game for about two hours after getting the real world stuff done. A brand new interface was sitting on the end table outside the merge pod waiting for me, which I'd bought that morning. It was the best model available right now, a Dynamix 120DX interface with an insane 75 gigastrings of memory (which was *monstrous* for something as small as an interface) and a micro MB-1600 processor. That was more powerful than the processor in the vidlink I'd had in my old efficiency apartment. I could theoretically run CO from my *interface*, if not for the fact that I don't think its onboard simsense processors could handle CO's simsense stream. The interface was theoretically third gen compatible, but I'd heard that most compatible devices had issues with even rudimentary third gen simsense without a rig. Usually when they said "compatible" they meant that you could run your simsense stream from your rig through them, that you could jack into the rig through your interface. That beast of an interface was loaded with the translation module Mrima had in her interface, which would let me talk to virtually anyone that came to Earth. It had 6,120 languages loaded into it, with 297 of them being languages from Earth and the rest being languages used by aliens that came to visit. With it, I could go

almost anywhere both on Earth and in the Confederation and be able to communicate with people, which would make it much easier to travel. I'd also gotten in my exercise for the day, spending my usual two hours in the gym up on the 78th floor, which had an awesome view of the ocean. This building has two gyms, one down in the first sublevel, just above the parking garage, and one on the 78th floor, just below the penthouse units. I don't really like the gym down on the sublevel because it feels kinda like a dungeon, no windows at all, so I was using the one up there. I was allowed to because I lived above the 50th floor, it was restricted only to those who lived in the "luxury" condos on the 51st floor and above.

Get this; the elevators in the building were coded so people who lived on the lower floors couldn't go above the 51st floor unless someone living on those floors allowed it, something I didn't know when I bought the condo. Talk about snobby.

There was an entire shopping concourse up there, believe it or not. It was much smaller than the main concourse on the ground floor, ten different shops that primarily sold food, sundries, and convenience items, along with three restaurants that would deliver, just like room service. The prices up there were higher than the ground floor, but you were paying for the convenience on top of it being a "luxury" shopping concourse.

Seriously, they sold both general staples like milk and rich people food up there like caviar, wine, and cheese with names I can't pronounce, stuff I've never heard of and would probably never want to eat.

I'm just glad my neighbors don't seem stuck up, and reflected the cosmopolitan aspect that Earth had become over the last few years. I'd met both of them over the two weeks I'd lived in the building, and thank God neither of them were Faey. My neighbor to the south of me was a Keelo, who were a very tall, slim, very handsome human-like race, but the neighbors to the north were Verutans, who are a race of bipedal cat-like people with green fur with black stripes. They're very tall, so they're nothing like Mrima, and they're pretty friendly. My neighbors were a mated pair that had moved here about two weeks ago from the Verutan Empire, so they were settling in here in the building as well. The male, Envarr, worked for their government in their version of the State Department and was here to pull a two year duty rotation in the Verutan consulate here in

Jacksonville, which had been opened up just a few weeks ago. The female, Straremai (man is that hard to pronounce), was an honest to God naval engineer, was an officer in the Verutan Navy, and was going to be working in their big cargo station beside the Stargate that went to their empire doing whatever it was engineers did in a space station. She'd be commuting up there from Jacksonville every day. They'd had the option to live in the consulate compound, but they decided to buy the condo instead because they said consulate apartments were notoriously cramped. The government didn't help them with their mortgage or anything, but from the way they were dressed, I don't think they have any problem with money. I guess the two of them have a combined income that makes them more than able to afford living on this floor.

The Keelo living to the south of me was much more of a mystery. Near as I can tell, just one person lives over there, a tall, regal-looking older gentleman that always looked like he was going to or coming from the beach. He looked too young to be retired, but he seemed to always be home...and I guess I shouldn't judge because I don't have a job either. He'd said hello the three times we'd crossed paths in the hallway, but he hadn't talked to me the way the Verutans did. He wasn't aloof or snobby or distant, I guess he just wasn't the talkative type.

I can respect that.

"This is the boring part of being a boss monster hunter," I noted into a special non-verbal channel I'd set up just for the viddy I was going to make of this. That way I could narrate in real time in a way that wasn't audible, and I could just include that channel in the viddy when I did the editing. "It's not about just running up to it and attacking it. You have to learn as much about it as you can before you start the process of learning what it can do. That can cut down on the number of times you die learning its abilities, which means a smaller repair bill."

I ghosted to another branch when the monster started to move, using my new flight power to stay in human form. I watched as it went down the hill from the cave entrance, then knelt by a stream and filled a waterskin, took a long drink, filled it again, then went back to his seeming guard post, protecting the cave entrance. Okay, so this was a monster with a very simple AI, I supposed. I watched for another ten minutes, and just as I was

about to leave, so I could log out for a little bit to get something to eat and use the bathroom, I heard something coming. That made the giant take up his club in both hands. “They’re coming!” he shouted, speaking a dialect of Giant, which I knew enough to make out his words.

Who was he talking to? I shifted to another tree and muttered the words of power to Night Vision under my breath, and when it took effect, I could see into the darkness of the cave behind him. I was a bit surprised to see a female Giant and two child Giants.

“Welp, this hunt just ended,” I noted to the comment channel. “Call me soft-hearted, but I don’t kill children in this game, or the parents of children. That makes this overworld boss monster off limits, because I know for a fact he has a family. And it might mean he’s on an NPC faction as well,” I added. “I haven’t found any factions out here yet, but that doesn’t mean they’re not here. I don’t kill members of an NPC faction, because I always try to raise my standing with those factions whenever I find them to see if they have any really good quests.”

I heard rustling in the trees behind me, and I turned to see a pack of giant wolves, known as Worgs in the game, charging out of the mist right at the cave entrance. The giant put himself squarely in front of the cave entrance, ready to fight, and I had the inspiration to put a hand in, to see if he was an NPC faction or not by helping him. I vaulted off the branch and crashed into the lead wolf with both swords leading, stabbing it just behind the skull, which made it yelp and collapse even in mid-stride. I’d dealt enough damage to kill it outright, which was a bit surprising given these monsters were high skill. I rolled through when I was pitched off its back and slashed at the leg of another Worg even as I dodged its snapping jaws, making it crash to the ground and start sliding. The Worgs that got past me attacked the Giant, and I rushed up behind the pack and attacked from the back.

It was a bit of a chaotic scrum. I was avoiding gnashing teeth and the Giant’s club as he swung wildly, with no regard for me being there, harrying the Worgs and keeping them distracted as the Giant laid into them. The Worgs kept attacking almost mindlessly as the Giant thrashed at them, the sounds of yelping Worgs and the club smashing into the ground filling my ears, which I found a little odd. The Giant was clearly very bad at

fighting, he had no form and no skill, just bashing and smashing. Just in the fleet glimpses I got of him as I fought the Worgs, I realized I could have taken him without much trouble, not if fought me like he was fighting the Worgs. But, where the Giant lacked skill, he made up for it with sheer power. Every swing that managed to connect with a Worg killed it, and in a matter of moments, the Worgs had lost more than half their number. At that point, they turned tail and ran back the way they came, leaving me standing almost within club range of the Giant as his shoulders heaved from his panting, looking down at me with both fear and suspicion.

“I’m not here to fight,” I told him, speaking Giant, sheathing my swords deliberately.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” he demanded.

“I’m an explorer from the city of Freeport, exploring this forest,” I replied. “I’ve been watching you for most of the morning,” I admitted. “I was trying to figure out who you were and why you were here.”

He narrowed his small eyes—comparatively for his face—and raised his club a little bit. “Why help us?”

“Because it looked like you needed it,” I answered calmly. “Have those Worgs been attacking you repeatedly?”

“They’re being sent,” another voice called from the cave. The female came out, and I realized almost immediately that the giant standing guard wasn’t the father, he was a *son*. He was the oldest son of this female Giant, who was over a head taller than he was. “By Falgbord.”

“Excuse my ignorance, madam, but I’m new to this forest. Who is Falgbord?”

“He leads our tribe, the Mist Giants,” she said spitefully. “He took the chieftanship from my husband using deceit and trickery, poisoning my husband the night before challenging him for his position. Tribe law required him to face the challenge despite being poisoned, and he was killed. I know of his treachery and I can prove it, so he’s trying to kill me and my children to protect his position.”

“The tribe detests Falgbord,” Korriax said heatedly. “If we can prove he poisoned my father the night before he challenged him, he’d be killed by

the tribe and we could return.”

“You helped us against the Worgs Falgbord sent to kill us, which means you have a kind heart, little one. I know it is much to ask, but we are desperate,” the mother said. “Would you help us against Falgbord, to save my children and allow us to return to our tribe?”

Much to my delight, a quest popped up in my quest log! It read *Parting the Mists*, and it rewarded rep with the Mist Giants! I’d found a new NPC faction!

But it was odd. Why was Korriax flagged as an overworld boss monster when he was clearly not powerful enough to pose a challenge to a group? It was the first time I’d ever seen anything like that before.

And maybe that was the point. 99% of players would see the boss flag on him and attack him almost immediately, going after the loot he drops. But it seemed that if you don’t attack him, if you talk to him instead, you gain access to his NPC faction. That was quite the clever little trap for players.

“I will help you,” I told her, which caused the quest to be accepted. I reached for the scrolltube on my belt and pulled out the map I was making of the forest and approached them. “Can you show me where your village is on this map? I apologize for it being so small for you.”

I was quite delighted about this turn of events. I may not be killing a new overworld boss monster, but as far as I was concerned, this was better. Quests you get from NPC reps you have to find and raise are usually very, very good, and they give great rewards like powerful gear or extremely useful or interesting toys or trinkets. My Spider’s Fang is a great example of the kind of quest rewards you can get from finishing a quest chain given by an NPC faction you raise. Besides, the Mist Giants could tell me all kinds of things about the forest that I didn’t know once I had enough rep that they would talk to me, which would allow me to explore it both thoroughly and safely.

And this would be a good vidy to make about how to go about locating and raising rep with NPC factions, as well as ramming home the point that you don’t kill everything that moves in this game, else you can miss out on some pretty cool stuff.

Chapter 11

Things were going awesomely.

Opening my eyes and climbing out of the merge pod, I stretched a little before walking over to the large windows and sliding glass door that led out to the balcony, looking out over the sun-tinged Atlantic ocean. The sun was almost directly overhead, but the light was reflecting off the waves and undulating surface, creating a beautiful shimmering effect. I'd just spent the last three hours editing a new vidy I intended to release on The Arena tomorrow, which was a tutorial for how to find and gain rep with the Mist Giants in the Misty Forest.

I'd finished the last rep quest this morning, culminating in me helping Korriax kill Falgbord and allow him and his family to return to the village. The permanent changes it made to the village told me that it was the kind of quest that wasn't respawned if someone killed off Korriax and his family, and most likely an alternative means to gain rep with the Mist Giants would be put into the game in its place. But, the Misty Forest was so out of the way, I seriously doubted that it was visited by very many players. There wasn't that much out there, it was untamed wilderness for hundreds of kilometers in every direction, with no friendly villages where players could resupply. The remoteness of the place was what brought me there—well, on top of the fact that I've never explored this region—and I'd bet that only maybe a couple of servers in the Terran cluster had players that had been there.

The change to the village and the NPCs meant that anyone else on my server that came out here could start the rep quests with the giants just by interacting with the sentries protecting the village. I'd "unlocked" the village for everyone else. But, since I was the one that unlocked it, I got a unique item as a reward for finishing the quest line that led to this point. It was a magical trinket that Stetla the mother giant had given me from Falgbord's corpse. It was a unique item, one of a kind, and since I was the one that unlocked the Mist Giant village, it was mine.

It was pretty cool, and something I was going to keep, for it was how Falgbord had been commanding the Worgs. It was called the Worg's Eye, a magical gem that Falgbord had inset into a charm so he could hold it—the gem was like a grain of sand to the giant's massive hands—and I'd dug it out of the fired clay disc that had held it so I could put it in my item storage. What the gem did was allow me to command Worgs, and Worgs wouldn't attack the holder of the gem. It only worked on Worgs, it didn't work on regular wolves or wolf-like animals or beasts, so it had a limited usefulness. Worgs were actually fairly rare in the game, and lived primarily in the colder climates...and Freeport was far to the south, in a place where Worgs weren't found. But here, in this forest, it was a very handy item to have, because there were a *lot* of Worgs around here.

I'd recorded the entire quest chain, and I'd edited my simsense recordings down to a 25 minute viddy that walked players through how to start the quest line, what to do for the quests, and how the village changed once the quest line was complete. But that wasn't all I was going to do. I was going to go through my very large library of simsense recordings and pick some of them that I thought might make good viddies, either tutorial viddies or just stuff I thought people might want to see, like some of my more epic fights, or when the water was drained out of the First City, or just some of the most beautiful places I've visited in the game.

That was a viddy I was definitely going to do, a kind of cinematic piece showcasing some of the most awesome locations I'd visited in the Twin Worlds.

It would be much easier for me to get to those places now. The quest chain to unlock the village had given me enough experience to buy the points I needed to be able to use Succor. That was going to make things easy for me, shrinking the world down by reducing my travel times *drastically*. I'd set my landing point in my townhouse in Citadel, which allowed me to jump back home to unload stuff or pick up supplies and then head back out to where I was. The amusing thing was, I had to switch to Djinn form to cast the spell. I didn't have enough mana in human form to cast the spell, but my Djinn form gear did give me enough mana for it. Succor gave me easy access to the Nexus Scion just outside Citadel City without having to cast Teleport, which would send me to any scion I wanted. And out in the field, I had the Rod of Scion Mastery to get me to

any scion I wanted...at least if I could use it where no other player could see it. Those two combined cut down my travel times to where I was no more than three or four hours from just about anywhere in the Twin Worlds.

No way in *hell* was I letting that secret out. I'd have a veritable pack of other players after me for it.

Now that I'd gained the ability to cast Succor, my plan was to dump every point I could into Touched by the Djinn. The Sultan told me that there was another level to my Djinn form that would allow me to enter the Elemental Plane of Air, and I wanted to get there as fast as possible. I heavily suspected that ability unlocked when I hit 2,000, and that meant I had to raise the skill by 442 points. That was going to take some serious work, both dedicated grinding of the skill by using it constantly and using every experience point I gained on it. And lucky for me, flying in human form raised Touched by the Djinn in addition to Gift of the Djinn. My guess about that is that the game linked my flying skill to both the racial and the Legendary skill, so skillups in one skilled up the other. That would allow me to work on it even when I was in human form, and I'd do that by flying.

Seriously, flying was *addictive* in the game. While doing the rep quests, I found myself flying short distances, staying almost at ground level, just because it was faster than walking over there. And I'd reached the point where sometimes I didn't even realize I was in the air. That made me a little, well, worried, that I might try something like that reflexively in the real world and end up falling off a bridge or something.

My next vid project was going to be a big one, which might be popular. I was going to create a tutorial on how to fight as a human with flying. I'd spent quite a lot of time studying how flight changed my fighting style, how not being chained to the ground gave me some very interesting advantages, and I felt it was important enough to release as a tutorial vid for the up and coming humans out there in the game. They'd have to level their skill way up before it would be feasible, but when they did, my tutorial would be there to explain to them how it worked and how they could use it..

I didn't expect the Mist Giant tutorial to get too many views, because it was a bit of a specialized vid. Only people who were currently adventuring in the Misty Forest would find it useful. Not like the other two viddies I have out. Both were now over 50,000 views, and people were still

watching them despite them being out for a while. And every person that watched it was .01 credits in my bank account, at least before taxes.

Seriously, I was making so much money off the viddies that I hadn't even had to touch my savings or my payments since I released the first one.

I was going to keep it the way it was now, with my viddy income going to my account at MMS and my stipend and dividend income going to my account at the Second Bank of Moridon. I decided to keep it that way partially out of loyalty to MMS, who had always been so good to me, and partly because it allowed me to use my MMS account as my "daily expenses" account, the account I used for my everyday life, and hold back the other account for the big stuff like big toy payments and large expenses. I did link the two accounts together in a way that made it super easy for me to move money back and forth between them, including overdraft protection on the MMS account by automatically transferring the credits I needed from the other account. I felt comfortable with it, that using the MMS account for my daily life hid just how much money I had from stores and vendors. I figured it might save me a lot of them trying to upsell me to expensive stuff if they saw my account was with the Second Bank.

Even though I do have money now, I still don't want to bring attention to myself.

I didn't really start making viddies for money. I started doing it because I thought it would be fun, and I've always wanted to try doing it after watching other people's viddies. And they *are* fun to make. I really enjoy doing the editing, deciding on camera angles when I use a fixed camera, how to splice scenes together to make it interesting to watch, even things like using music and sound effects in the viddies for extra emphasis. It was like I was the director of my own little movies, and it was tons of fun. I totally understood why Sano had made a career out of it.

I was being serious about it, too. I'd bought a subscription to a library of music, music samples, and sound effects that Sano suggested that allows me to use anything in it in my viddies legally, without running into copyright issues. The sound effects and some of the music samples were free with the purchase of the subscription, but if I used the music in there, I did have to pay a one time fee to the owner of the music to put it in my viddies. And I

was okay with that, those musicians no doubt worked their butts off to make that music, and they deserved to be paid for that hard work.

I also bought the software to live stream my CO play sessions on my Arena page, mainly at Rita's suggestion. She had this idea where me, her, and Sano would all do live streams of us playing together, because we're a pretty effective group and we tend to do some pretty silly and crazy things when we're together, just for the fun of it. All we needed was to find a dedicated healer that was willing to die a lot, and we'd have a pretty kick-ass core group for doing crazy stuff like taking on the low tier raids as a small group.

Sano and Rita are the only exceptions I make to the Solo Challenge. And the stuff I do with them I keep separate from my usual game play... though we don't really do anything that might earn me usable gear or anything. We mainly just dick around, help one of us farm tradeskill materials and the like, and do crazy stuff because it's fun. The fact that we egg each other on just makes it more fun and more crazy.

Speaking of Rita, she was now settling into her new house on the outskirts of a small town called Rio Indio, Mexico. It was on the southern edge of the east side of the Yucatan, not far from the border with Belize, a very large, very expensive house built right on the beach that had a large landing pad for a very big skimmer, a really big pool, and all the luxuries and comforts she could ever want or need. Rita opted for the other route when it came to her house, for she'd bought it outright from the money she received from the Karinnes, and then took what was left and put it into investments to live off the income the way I had. I could understand her reasoning. She wanted something that was *hers*, something that no one could take away from her—so long as she paid her property taxes—a private little castle where she had total control and would feel *safe*. And she would take that feeling of security over a larger monthly income from her investments.

I was going to come down and visit her, stop over on my way down to pick up Sano to take her to the Shiziki game on Saturday, and I was honestly looking forward to it.

I wasn't worried about her. Like me, Rita had started receiving stipend payments from the government, and she could easily live off that income

for the rest of her life if she burned through the money that she got from the Karinnes.

Her house was *gorgeous*. She took me on a virtual tour of it the way I'd let Sano, by letting me access the hoverpod in her vidlink and have her show me around. It was a Spanish villa, complete with the courtyard, built just last year and sitting empty until she bought it. It was pretty remote, which is why I suspect it hadn't been bought. Only someone that wanted peace and quiet, to be well away from just about everything, would want to live there. And that was exactly what Rita wanted.

Since her house was fairly remote, she'd been wise to install some security features into the house. She bought some guns for herself, had a security system installed that guaranteed police response within four minutes of the alarm going off, and had ordered a pair of personal security robots that would patrol the grounds of her house and make sure everything was alright, robots that were merge capable, which would let her merge to a robot and use it to fight off any attackers. And again, I fully understood why she did it and supported that decision. Rural Mexico wasn't the safest place in the world, because kidnapping people to get money was something of a favorite thing to do for criminals down there. Rita may be living on a tropical beach, but it was a tropical beach well away from any large city, she was living by herself, and the house may attract criminals looking to rob it or kidnap the occupant for ransom.

At least she wasn't completely isolated down there. Her house was one of several built along that beach, each one about half a kilometer apart to give each house a sense of space and separation, all of them equally luxurious and expensive as hers. The other houses were occupied, giving her neighbors. She'd told me that her neighbors on both sides were Shio, which didn't surprise me all that much. Shio preferred hot climates, and southern Mexico was in the tropical zone.

Today wasn't going to be a CO day, because today was special. In about half an hour, my new ASV-1170 was going to be available for me to pick up. I was going to take it out for a joy ride before bringing it home to park it, to get some experience in the cockpit and make sure I didn't scare Sano when we went to Shio Prime on Saturday. So, today, tomorrow, and Friday, the afternoons were going to be spent just flying the skimmer around to

random locations around the planet, and on Friday, I'd take it through the Stargate to Shio Prime as a test run for the real thing on Saturday. That was going to cost me money, though, so I was only going to do it once. It wasn't free to use a Stargate, there was a toll on using them based on the size of the ship using it. A skimmer like mine would cost C12 to take through the gate, so it would cost me C24 round trip. For what a Stargate did, I did not in any way find that to be an outrageous amount to pay. And I was happy to pay that to make sure I knew what I was doing when I took Sano to the shiziki game.

It wasn't that I didn't want to look like an idiot in front of her. She knows I just got my license and that I'm a new skimmer pilot. I don't want her to feel nervous or afraid to be in the skimmer with me flying it. If my bad driving frightened her, she may never go anywhere with me again, and that scared me more than anything. That was why I was going to spend the next three afternoons just flying the skimmer around, give me some time in the cockpit and rack up some experience. It was almost like grinding skills in CO, just put in the time to get better at what you wanted to do. And at least it would be fun for me to do it.

I was looking forward to it. I made a list of the places I've always wanted to visit, and over the next three days, I was going to *technically* visit them. I wasn't going to land and walk around the places, I was just going to land at their starports, stay a few minutes as I plotted out my next route, then move on. For the scenic places, I was going to do a very slow fly-by or fly-through and look at it, then head on to the next destination. I was going to do that with Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids of Giza, and the Great Wall of China. I was going to make stops in London, Rome, Istanbul, New Delhi, Tokyo, Honolulu, and Los Angeles as I did a flight around the world on Friday to practice landing at busy starports, and once I completed the circuit, I'd go to Shio Prime and land at the city of Vankiri, which was in the southern hemisphere of Shio Prime. That was Sano's hometown, her family's manor was just outside the city, and it was also where her favorite team played. I'd make a dress rehearsal of it so when I took Sano, I'd already know what everything looked like and hopefully be more comfortable and confident landing there.

I went to the bedroom to get dressed, and as soon as I was done, I got a notification on my interface that the Thrynne people had arrived. The Thrynne dealership sent a car to pick me up and take me to the dealership so I could get my skimmer, which was very thoughtful of them. They'd landed on the pad on the 51st floor—the building was terraced, with the lower 50 floors being wider than the top 48, so there was a large open air area on the 51st floor that had gardens, landing pads, and children's playgrounds on it—and they were waiting for me.

I didn't keep them waiting, though I didn't entirely enjoy riding with them. The driver who picked me up was Faey, and the salespeople at the dealership were also Faey. But I swallowed my fear of them because I had my heart set on that skimmer. I think they could tell I was distinctly uncomfortable around them, but also that I was doing my best to be polite despite that discomfort. They reviewed their warranty policy with me and let me inspect the skimmer, which was *gorgeous*, and once I was satisfied that it was what I ordered and it was in proper working order, I signed the final forms and received the skimmer's access codes, had my biometrics programmed into the security and access systems, and received the physical key. I found that interesting. Despite having all that advanced tech in it, the skimmer still had a physical key, which in this case looked more like a datastick than a key, that I had to slot into the console to start the skimmer. That gave me an old fashioned, low-tech means of keeping it from being stolen. I could leave the key slotted and secure the skimmer using its security features, which was what I'd have to do if I wanted to be able to start and fly the skimmer by remote, but it gave me a way to make sure that no one could start the skimmer but me.

About an hour after arriving at the dealership, I was in the seat, the control stick in my hands, and ascending up away from Jacksonville over the Atlantic Ocean. It was just like the simulators I'd been using to learn how to fly, and I felt surprisingly comfortable and relaxed. I'd done very well in class, and I found that flying a skimmer wasn't very hard at all. I took the skimmer up into space on our maiden voyage together, and once I got up there, it got more intense. There was a lot of ships flying around once you got out of the atmosphere, which reflected Earth's status as the biggest trade hub in the Confederation. I was much more careful and way more than a little nervous as I had to fly in traffic on my way to an orbital

station which was my first planned stop for this trip, going over the “rules of the road” in my mind as I kept one eye on my windshield and the other on my scope, which was like radar that told me where the other ships around me were and how fast they were going. I also heard a ton of chatter over shortrange gravband, which I had turned on and tuned to two different channels, channel four and channel nine. Channel four was commonly used as the local chatter channel for pilots so they could talk to each other. Skimmer drivers, Stick and dropship pilots, and ship pilots all talked to each other using the channel, sometimes for business, sometimes for fun. There were some conversations going on over the radio between pilots that obviously knew each other. Channel nine was the official planet-wide traffic control channel, and I had to listen in on that channel any time I was flying my skimmer in airspace that was subject to traffic control. The radio knew when I was in controlled airspace, and automatically turned on and tuned to channel nine anytime I went over the altitude cap or left the “interstate lanes” used by hovercars.

I thought that was a pretty cool feature. That way I never forgot to turn on the gravband radio.

I spent the afternoon in space, going from orbital station to orbital station, getting a feel for flying my skimmer around out there, and I have to admit, I had fun. I started off pretty nervous, but the more I flew, the less scary it seemed. I certainly was no grizzled warhorse by the time I came back to Jacksonville, but I didn’t feel like an idiot. I figured that after a month or so of practice, I’d feel like flying up to an orbital station was like driving across town.

I had my interface set to *Do Not Disturb* while I was practicing in the skimmer to avoid any unnecessary distractions, so I had a couple of messages waiting for me when I set it back to normal after landing the skimmer in my assigned parking spot in the garage. Both Rita and Sano had tried to contact me, Rita leaving a message asking if I picked up the skimmer and Sano requesting me to call her back. I called Sano back first, her hologram appearing in the living room as I sat down. She was at home. “I take it you got the skimmer?”

“Yeah, spent all day out practicing so I don’t look like an idiot on Saturday. I don’t want you to spend the entire trip with a deathgrip on the

armrests,” I answered honestly, which made her smile.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” she said reassuringly. “I got our reservations at the restaurant, we’ll be eating after the game.”

“Then we’d better hope it doesn’t go into extra rotations,” I noted.

“They’re playing the *Kenthra*, so no,” she said smugly.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“They’re like a Jacksonville sports team,” she said with a malicious little smile.

“Hey now,” I warned, which made her laugh. “Did Rita talk to you about her idea?”

“Yeah, and I’m not against it. I doubt anyone would be interested in people watching the three of us play around. I mean, we don’t really *do* anything when we group. I’ve had the streaming software installed on my vidlink for over a year, and I’ve only used it four or five times.”

“I thought we could invite Meldo along and try the Burning Mountain.”

“Seriously? A *raid*?” Sano asked. The Burning Mountain was the first raid people were meant to do, it was the start of raid progression. That made it the easiest raid in the game.

“Sure, why not?” I asked. “I looked up the average skill ratings for the monsters in there, and I think we can make it to the first boss. I doubt we could kill him, but I’m sure we’d have fun trying. All we need is a dedicated healer, and Meldo told me he has his healing skills up high enough to serve as a backup healer in the guild.”

“Yeah, he does, but he isn’t fully spec’d for healing,” Sano agreed. “I don’t think we’d need a dedicated healer for something like that, though, so Meldo’s healing should be enough. It’s not like we’d be all that serious about it.”

“So, wanna give it a go? It’ll be our inaugural stream.”

She had to laugh. “What am I getting myself into?” she lamented.

“A humongous repair bill,” I replied in a voice that made her crack up.

Sure, what the hell? You get Meldo on board, and I'll do it. At least it'll be easy for us to get our stuff back."

"Eh?"

"Rita didn't tell you? She got *Summon Corpse*!" she said eagerly.

"Awesome!" I had to blurt. *Summon Corpse* was one of the most useful spells in the game, but it was also very rare, as rare as Teleport. What it did was pretty self-explanatory, it allowed the caster to summon his corpse to the graveyard, but he could also summon the corpse of anyone in his party. If Rita had *Summon Corpse*, she could just bring our corpses to us instead of us having to do the run of shame to get our stuff back. "Did it drop from her last raid?"

"Yup!" she said happily. "They gave it to her because her Scribing skill is high enough to copy it."

"I am *so* buying a copy of that spell from her," I declared strongly.

"It takes a 1,250 skill in both Necromancy and Translocation," she warned. *Summon Corpse* was one of the fairly rare "dual school" spells, having skill requirements in more than one school of magic. Those kinds of spells were rare, and almost all of them were *extremely* powerful.

"Both of mine are over that," I replied. "Rita told me I had to raise all my combat school skills over 1,500 to deal real damage as a mage, so I've been working to get all my schools up to that. My Necromancy is around 1,300 now, and my Translocation is over 1,350 because I had to raise it to use Succor. I seriously need to talk to Rita about that spell. For someone like me, *Summon Corpse* would be *beyond* useful."

"No doubt," she smiled. She glanced to the side. "Speaking of Rita, she's calling me. Lemme see if she wants to conference in. Hold on a sec." Her image winked out, replaced by a [Please Hold] banner and a picture of her shiziki team's mascot. A moment later, my screen was split between Sano and Rita. "Hey Rita, how's the house decorating going?" I asked.

"I just got back from Mexico City," she replied. "My Spanish is really rusty," she added with a laugh.

"They don't speak Faey there?"

“Well, yeah, people can, but they use Spanish, and I didn’t want to stand out,” she replied.

“Get your furniture?” Sano asked.

“Yup, they’re delivering it tomorrow,” she replied.

“How long did that take in a hovercar?” I asked. Rita already had her hovercar license, and she’d bought a hovercar with her money. She needed it, because there was no tram service where she lived, so she had to have a hovercar to get around.

“It wasn’t bad at all, only about an hour,” she replied. “There’s a cross country corridor not far from my house that goes straight to Mexico City. I put it in autopilot and played games on my interface most of the trip,” she added with a laugh. “Wanna see some pics of the furniture I bought?”

“Sure!” Sano said.

“Put ‘em up,” I agreed.

Rita had a very good eye for interior design, and she’d picked some really nice furniture that went well with the paint color of her walls and her flooring, which was carpet in some rooms and hardwood in others. The furniture was all a style, I couldn’t remember the name of it, but it was a specific style of furniture that complemented the kind of house she’d bought. She used a holo to display how the furniture would be arranged in the house, one of the “how would it look” programs that furniture stores used. All you had to do was bring a holo of the room, and they could insert the appearance of the furniture you were interested in buying into the holo, like old-fashioned Photoshop. Thanks to that holo, she already knew that her furniture matched the rest of the décor within the house, and already knew how she wanted it arranged when the delivery guys brought it to the house.

“You’ve almost got everything all set up, Rita,” Sano told her with a smile.

“Yeah, all I need now are the little things and the house is done,” she replied. “You guys logging in tonight?”

“I will be in a little bit,” I told her.

“It’s raid night for us,” Sano reminded her.

“Oh yeah. Wanna do something, Kevin? If we linger, we can rope Sano into something after she’s done raiding.”

“Not immediately, but if you give me an hour or two to finish up something in the Misty Forest, sure,” I replied. “Unlike you, I can’t abuse Succor,” I laughed.

There was a limitation to the spell that I hadn’t considered until I got it, and that was the fact that the ability to Succor back once you used it had a time limit that was based on your skill in Translocation. At my skill, my “anchor point” would only last about two hours before it expired, and if that happened, I couldn’t use Succor to return to my original location. Rita didn’t have that problem, because her Translocation skill was so high that her anchor timer was like three days. Because of that, I had to get things done in Citadel City and return to my original location before that timer expired, else I’d have to use scions to get back and fly back to where I was...and that could take hours depending on where I was.

“No worries, I can use that time to make a few copies of my new spell,” she said happily.

“Sano told me. Emelda’s a big shot now, she has both Succor and Summon Corpse,” I teased, which made her laugh.

“I’m making both of you a copy,” she told us.

“Girl, you keep giving me spells when you know I’ll never use them,” Sano complained with a smile.

“You may decide to raise your magic skills, and I want you to have all the spells you need to make it worth your while,” Rita told her. “Maybe having copies of Teleport, Succor, and Summon Corpse will convince you to come to the dark side.”

“I let my bow do all my talking, Rita,” she grinned.

“Well, then you should think about focusing on raising Translocation. That way your bow does all the talking, but you have some useful utility spells that speed up travel times.”

“I’m a Savasa, silly girl, I go fast enough as it is,” she winked.

“Thank you for the spell in advance, Rita,” I told her, cutting off the impending good-natured snark fight. “You know how useful that spell will be for me?”

“I figured,” she smiled. “You do die a lot, Kevin.”

“It’s an occupational hazard,” I said with a sly smile.

“Afraid I’m gonna cut this short, guys, just wanted you to know I’m home. I’ll be logging in after I grab something to eat,” Rita told us. “Let me know when Xen is back at his house, Kevin.”

“Sure thing. Since you’re doing all that Scribing, we can go farm the ink mats you need til Sano finishes her raid,” I offered.

“We can do that. I have enough to make ten copies, but it never hurts to have enough to make twenty,” she smiled. “And it’ll take us all of twenty minutes to get to where the monsters are that drop the ones I need most. It’s almost right beside a scion.” She glanced to the side. “We can also test out the streaming software,” she suggested. “I’ve never used this program before, and you’ve never used it at all, so we can fire it up and make sure it works before we start streaming for real.”

“That sounds smart,” I nodded.

“Sounds like a plan,” Sano agreed. “I have to update LP Pro, I haven’t used it for a few months. But that’ll take like ten seconds. I’ll also need to link it to my Arena account, which links it to my bank.”

I’d found out while looking at the various streaming programs that some of them were set up to “monetize” streaming and some weren’t. For example, Steam Stream was a streaming program that was fairly bare-bones, it simply streamed your gameplay to a Civnet channel, and had settings to allow it to link to channels on just about every one of the popular game streaming sites, including the Arena. LP Pro, the streaming program the three of us were using, had a lot more features, like the ability to read chat room messages on your channel from inside the game, link a cam for a picture-in-picture of the real you playing the game (which wasn’t really used in CO since it was a merge-only game, but was used in quite a few other game streams where the streamer wasn’t merged), create a dedicated comm channel that broadcast on the stream that only those watching the stream could hear, and the ability to accept donations from viewers to earn

money from streaming. It was fairly common in the pro gaming world, where the top-tier streamers earned money while streaming by taking donations from viewers. I wasn't all that interested in that part of it, but LP Pro had other features in it I liked, and Rita had suggested it, so I went with it.

Pro gaming...that was almost a joke, but here I was. I was now a professional gamer. I made money playing CO through my viddies, and once we started streaming, I might even earn money from people who enjoyed watching my stream so much that they donated a couple of credits to show their appreciation.

"Alright then, so we'll do a stream tonight as a test run to make sure everything works," Rita announced. "We can do a for-real stream this weekend."

"Not Saturday," Sano warned.

"I know not Saturday," she grinned. "We can do it Sunday. Anyway, let me jump off and get something to eat, I'm starving. See you guys in game," she said, then her part of the screen winked out and Sano's image took over the entire holo.

"She's bubbly," Sano noted lightly.

"She's been super-happy since moving out of El Paso," I had to agree. "And I think she has the right idea. Lemme grab a bite to eat and log on so I can finish up in the Misty Forest in time to help her farm mats before you finish your raid."

"Sure thing," she nodded. "It'll give me time to make sure I get LP Pro updated and all my settings are still good. See you in a bit."

We ended the call, and I got to work. The helper unit was already at work preparing spaghetti for dinner, and I helped it out. It had pre-made the sauce this morning, so I helped by browning ground beef as it chopped the onions, bell peppers, and mushrooms to sauté them before adding them to the sauce that was already simmering on the stove. I have to say, the helper unit had really expanded my diet since I moved in. Before, I ate instant food, take-out, and ate out at restaurants. I'm a poor cook, so when I did cook, it was always something simple and basic. But the helper unit was a pretty good cook, and it was easy to load with recipes for foods that I like

but can't cook myself. And while I can cook spaghetti on my own, it's the kind that comes out of a Ragu bottle, where the helper unit made the sauce simmering on the stove from scratch...and it was *way* tastier than Ragu. The pasta wasn't made from scratch, but the helper unit could do it if I told it I wanted it.

I'd had my doubts about the helper unit's ability to cook, until I tasted its cooking. Now I was beyond glad it came with the condo.

We also had a bit of a discussion about what I wanted for dinner the next few days while we cooked. The helper unit had a sophisticated enough AI to hold a basic conversation, so it was far more elaborate than I would have thought before I moved in, asking me if I'd tried this or that, and if I'd like this or that, making recommendations based on my preferred foods list and the dishes it had cooked for me not part of the list that I'd said I'd liked. It was also starting to show a bit of personality based on our past conversations, remembering them and using that information to tailor its responses now. It was a little weird talking to a robot, but I was getting more and more used to it, to the point where I wasn't nearly as self-conscious when I told it that I'd never tried Indian cuisine. It knew I liked spicy food, and I guess that meant that India had some spicy dishes.

"Then with your permission, I will prepare Indian curry for dinner tomorrow," the robot told me. "I will prepare one of the milder versions, and if you like it and want to try some of the spicier recipes, I can prepare them in the future. Some of them are extremely spicy."

"Sure, why not?" I answered it, using a spatula to stir up the cooking hamburger. "Do you have everything you need for it?"

"No, but the grocery store in the main concourse carries all required ingredients. With your permission, I will order them and have them delivered to the apartment tomorrow."

"Permission granted," I told it formally. I didn't have the helper unit set so it could order things from the shopping concourse downstairs by itself. It could decide that it needed something, but it had to get my permission to order it, paying for it from my MMS account. Every store and restaurant in the concourse downstairs would deliver to the apartment, as would the

high-end concourse upstairs. Delivery inside the building was free. “How about a ham and cheese omelets for breakfast tomorrow?”

“I will put it on the schedule.”

“Thank you. This is almost done,” I told the robot. “Do you want me to put it in the pot or set it aside?”

“Please set it aside. I will add seasoning to the meat before adding it to the sauce.”

“You got it.”

After dinner, I logged in and finished up in the Misty Forest, capping off my time there by finding a scion in the rugged foothills of the Iceshard Mountains, which were going to be my next area to explore. Finding that scion meant that it would be super-easy to get back to where I was. The Iceshards were some serious mountains, like the Himalayas, with lots of cliffs, towering peaks, and lots and lots of ice. My flying would deal with the fact that the mountains were very vertical, but I’d need a couple of consumables to deal with the deathly cold, so I wasn’t ready to explore there quite yet.

I dicked around in the townhouse waiting for Emelda to contact me, but ended up with someone else in the townhouse instead. A couple of days ago, I’d sent Alandra a message asking if we could meet and talk when she had time, and she showed up at my townhouse not long after I got back. I invited her in and sat down with her up in the parlor and got to business fairly quickly. “Would you object to helping me make a tutorial video?” I asked.

“What kind?” she returned, taking a drink of the tea I’d made for us. I’d always liked how Alandra had done her avatar. She’d stayed in the typical “dark elf” style of white hair with her bluish-black skin, but her features and her body weren’t nearly as dainty and ethereal as most female elves. She was still very attractive, but her face and her body were more...well, more rugged. She *looked* like a melee warrior, where most elves looked like bandy little supermodels carrying weapons entirely too big for them. She’d found a perfect balance between muscular ruggedness and lithe, female curves for her avatar’s body that made her both attractive and, well, much more believable than most other female elf fighters.

“I want to explain how to use flying in combat situations, for when humans get their skill up high enough for it to be useful,” I answered. “You and me are about the only high-skill dual wielders on the server, so you’d be the perfect partner for the vidy. You can perform the moves on the ground, and then I do them in the air to show how they can be changed. And you can help me when I need a practice partner to demonstrate the moves against an opponent.”

“Well, sure, I’d love to do it,” she told me. “I’ve never done a vidy before, even though like half the guild makes their own. They’ve never asked me before.”

“They’re afraid of you upstaging them and making you look bad,” I blurted, which made her laugh and grin at me.

“Good answer,” she said with an impish smile.

“No, seriously. You’re the highest skill melee fighter in your guild, hands down. Maybe one of the highest skilled on the entire server,” I said seriously. “The fact that you are that skilled is exactly why you’re the perfect player to help me with my next vidy. I need someone that can match me in a duel in order to demonstrate the fighting style.”

“So modest, Xen,” she winked, which made me flush.

“I didn’t mean—“

“I know what you meant,” she interrupted. “And you’re right. Not many melee warriors can last more than ten seconds against you in a duel. That’s not nearly long enough for you to demonstrate the aerial fighting style.”

“So, when’s a good time for you?”

“I’m on summer break right now, so about any time in the morning or early afternoon,” she replied. “I do guild stuff at night.”

“How about Monday?”

“Works for me. We doing it all in one day?”

“I hope to,” I answered. “If things go well, I’ll only need a couple of hours of your time. I can record some of it alone, so you won’t have to stand around and watch me trying not to look like an idiot talking to a camera icon. Then I’ll edit that in with the footage we shoot together. And I

don't want to script the fighting parts, so your reactions to the moves are completely natural."

"Do I have to read a script or anything?"

"Nah, I'm not nearly that organized when it comes to my viddies," I told her. "I plan scenes like how things will look, but I don't write down what I'm gonna say. If I did, I'd sound like I was a five year old reading War and Peace. I just kinda make a talking points outline and follow it so I cover all the important subject matter."

"Okay, sounds like I can manage that," she said. "What time zone are you in?"

"American Eastern," I answered.

"Cool, I'm American Pacific. So how about around nine Pacific on Monday? That's noon Eastern."

"That works for me," I assured her.

We discussed my plan for the viddy more than long enough for Emelda to arrive. She came into the parlor from her guest bedroom—she had her Succor anchor point there at the moment—and looked honestly surprised to see Alandra sitting on the couch. "Hey Em," I said. "You know Alandra, right?"

"Yeah. What are you doing here, Alandra?" she asked.

"Xen asked me to help him make a tutorial," she replied. "We were hashing out the details."

"Ohhh, what kind?"

"How humans can use flying offensively in a melee fight," I answered. "I told you I was going to make it, remember?"

"Oh yeah," she said, nodding. "I'm looking forward to seeing it. I really like the viddies you've put out so far, Xen."

"Thank Savar for that, she gave me tips on how editing works," I said with a wry laugh.

"I didn't know she made a lot of viddies," Alandra said.

“She’s made a fair few,” I dared say. “You should check out her channel on the Arena. She does these cinematic pieces that are pretty cool.”

“They sure are,” Emelda agreed. “They’re like little half hour movies, complete with a plot and dialogue.”

“Oh cool. So what’s her channel name?”

The three of us chatted about random stuff for a bit, until Alandra had to leave to get to her raid in time. After she left, me and Emelda sat down and zoned out of the game long enough to start up the streaming software. I’d already configured it the way I wanted it, so it was as easy as having the vidlink run the program. It would allow me to control the stream from in-game without having to partially delink from the game to change settings, so I could control what I was streaming and could turn it on and off by more or less willing it. It had a ton of features, from things like having an in-game counter that told me how many people were watching to the ability to blank out parts of the game I wanted kept secret, which I very much was using. I had that feature active for my skill window. When I brought up my skill window, the people watching the stream would only see a blank space there, the streaming software would white out the skill window and only the skill window. I set the description of the stream’s content to *testing the software*, set the camera so viewers could control their external view, denied viewers access to the A/V feed from my friends list conversations but granted them access to raid and party chat, and hit the mental “on” switch, starting active streaming.

I had to keep my secrets, like what skills I had and what level they were.

“You set up?” Emelda asked me.

“It says that the stream’s running,” I replied. “I’m gonna let it run for a while to make sure it’s stable. So, where are we gonna go commit mass monster genocide?”

She laughed. “I need starpod seeds for the ink to make Summon Corpse scrolls, so we’re heading for the Eternal Glade,” she told me. “Would be best for you to do this in Djinn form, Xen. Starpods explode when they die, so best to kill them from range.”

“I can practice Imbue Arrow,” I said as I stood up, hopped up a little, and changed form. The human me was replaced by the Djinn me, my feet

hovering just over the carpeted floor, complete with my Arabian clothing. I pulled the bow Savar made for me out of my item storage using the bandolier, then conjured a quiver holding arrows that were slung over my shoulder. No use wasting the good arrows Savar made for me on mat farming.

“You need to practice Evocation,” she chided as she stood up herself. “You need it over two thousand to do real damage, Xen.”

“I’ll get it there eventually,” I told her. “You porting us?”

“I don’t think you have that scion marked, so yes,” she grinned up at me.

She teleported us to a scion I’d never used before—and I made sure to touch it before we left so I could teleport to it using the Rod of Scion Mastery later—and she hopped on a mage disc and led me to the Eternal Glade. It was an eerie place, dark and with tons of levitating monsters and plants drifting lazily over a flat grassy plain and a fairly large pond, which were nestled between two low, gentle hills covered in starleaf trees. They were called that because the leaves had spots of glowing light in them, so they looked like a starry night when viewed in the dark.

“Alright, what we need are those right there,” she said, pointing at a levitating fairly large dark green plant that looked like a giant oversized football-shaped seed pod with roots on the bottom, spread out and downward towards the ground below. “But those flying octopus monsters right there protect them, so when you hit one, they’ll attack us.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“For us? No. I can dagger them to death pretty easily,” she replied, pulling her dagger out of its belt sheath. “The dangerous things here are the pods. They explode pretty hard when they die, so keep your distance.”

“Got it,” I replied, pulling an arrow from the quiver over my shoulder and nocking it.

We spent nearly two hours farming the pods for the seeds that Rita needed for her ink, and it was pretty fun. The monsters weren’t dangerous, so we messed around a lot—and I nearly died a couple of times doing it—and I got in several skillups in both Imbue Arrow and Evocation, when I

started using magic instead of my bow. We managed to farm enough seeds for Rita to make quite a lot of ink in the two hours we were there, enough for her to feel she had enough. We took a short break to get some food in real life, and when we came back, I dismissed the Create Shelter spell we used to be able to delink safely without logging out and we prepared to move to another location to farm other materials she needed for her ink. I was back in human form, my feet hovering over the water of the glade's pond as Emelda sat on a chair I conjured for her, referring to a piece of parchment where she'd written down the recipe of the ink she needed, no doubt debating which recipe component to go after next. Once she was done, she stood up and put the paper away. "Alright, how adventurous are you feeling, Xen?" she asked.

"Fairly, why?"

"I can get the most harpy blood in a short time from the Screeching Crag," she told me. That was a dungeon up on Netherim, in a badlands known as the Howling Rocks. It wasn't a pushover dungeon, however, the monsters there had a fairly high average skill rating, meaning it was meant for players with an average skill rating around 1500. While that wasn't that high compared to us, what made taking on dungeons like that dangerous were the number of monsters we'd have to fight. A couple of 1500-rating monsters were cake, but ten of them beating on us at once, that was an entirely different animal. Added on to that, harpies were a dangerous monster to fight no matter what their average skill rating was, because they were social monsters. That meant that if you attacked one, every harpy around would swarm and attack you in return. If you made the mistake of fighting harpies near their nesting ground, you'd have dozens of them on you in a hurry, and they'd take you down by sheer force of numbers. "Wanna go the safe route and farm harpies in a low skill area, or take on the Screeching Crag?"

"That's a silly question," I said with an eager smile. "Can you port to a scion near it?"

"Of course I can," she said grandly.

She ported us to a scion on a high mesa right in the middle of the Howling Rocks, and after touching the scion so I could teleport back to it, we headed for the dungeon. We landed in front of the entrance, a narrow

crevice between two towering rocks that had a multitude of ropes and vines stretched between them at the top, which prevented flying monsters from easily getting in...and there were quite a few dangerous flying monsters in the Howling Rocks. The extremely vertical terrain of the area gave flying monsters a major advantage, while the high walls and multitude of narrow, twisting canyons severely restricted the movement of ground-bound creatures.

“Give me a few, I need to refresh some buffs,” Emelda said.

“We’d better both make sure we’re ready, it’s gonna get crazy the instant we attack the first harpy,” I agreed. I refreshed my own buffs, put a few key consumables in my Bag of Carrying, and even went so far as to set the anchor point of my Succor at the entrance of the dungeon, just in case.

Taking on the multitudes of harpies in the crag was a major challenge, given there were only two of us, but it was also a ton of fun. I think I’ve said before that Emelda is probably the most dangerous mage archetype on the server, and did she ever prove it once we engaged the harpies. What makes her so good isn’t her spellcasting skill ratings—though those help—it’s how *smart* she is about the spells she uses. Emelda always knows exactly which spell is the most useful in any given situation, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen her cast an area of effect spell without its dimensions being absolutely perfect for whatever situation we’re in. Whether it’s for dealing maximum damage or as a defensive measure to break up large concentrations of monsters, Emelda always uses her magic to maximum effect, and that makes her an absolutely fantastic mage archetype.

It was certainly no cakewalk. The harpies came at us in massive waves, and every fight was a serious brawl that mostly took place in the air. Emelda got to see a lot of the tricks I’d taught myself in fighting while flying, from how it changed how I used my swords to how it freed my feet to be used as weapons, allowing me to deliver punishing kicks. My job was to keep the harpies off Emelda so she could cast freely, given her magic was the more dangerous weapon between the two of us in a situation like this. I couldn’t keep all of them off her, but the threat I posed kept enough of them engaged with me to allow her to get her spells off, and that allowed us to win each fight we picked with the harpies in the crag.

Not easily, though. We both nearly died several times, twice we had to disengage and retreat to avoid getting killed, and it took a lot of healing up between fights as we cleared out the harpies one concentration of nests at a time, which brought dozens of them at us at once each time we attacked a harpy. But we were absolutely raking in the harpy blood, a key ingredient in Scribing when copying Transmutation and Translocation spells. We also got some other useful tradeskill material drops as well, such as harpy wing feathers used for quills in Scribing and some talons that were useful in Enchanting when they were ground into a powder.

In about an hour, we had way more blood than Emelda needed, but we kept at it because we decided to try to kill the first boss monster in the dungeon just for the hell of it, a monster called the Blackwing Harpy Matriarch. Why we kept killing the harpies in the front section of the dungeon was because any harpy we left alive would rush to assist the Matriarch when we attacked her, so they all had to die. Once we had them all down, we paused to prepare for fighting the boss, which would be a serious challenge with just two of us and no reliable healing.

And we both got quite a surprise as we prepared for the boss. “Holy crap, Xen, I have nearly four hundred people watching my stream!” she told me over friend chat, so the viewers wouldn’t hear her say that.

“I don’t have the counter turned on on mine,” I replied.

“Me either, I just brought up the streaming program control panel real quick to make sure the stream was still going without any glitches, and I saw them. Check yours!”

I did so, bringing up the in-game control panel for the streaming program—a feature exclusive to LP Pro and one reason why we were using it—and I was honestly shocked to see that 473 people were watching the stream. That many, and we didn’t even advertise that we were streaming? What, did they check my Arena page to see if I had any new viddies up, see I was streaming, and hang around?

No wait, the notifications. People subscribed to my channel could be notified when I added new content to it, and me starting a stream was one of those things that would set off the notifications. That must have been what brought them to the channel. “I have nearly five hundred,” I told her.

“Nice! I had no idea people would even know we were streaming!”

“I think the channel sends out a notification alert if you have the settings of your channel that triggers one when you stream, and I think that’s turned on by default,” I told her, checking my channel settings through LP Pro, yet another feature that made it so popular with streamers. “Yeah, mine’s turned on.” I switched to party chat, which streamers could hear, and immediately felt a little awkward. “Welcome to everyone watching, though we’re a bit surprised that anyone is,” I said, a bit self-consciously. “We’re just testing out the streaming software, we had no idea people would know we were streaming and actually watch. I mean, we’re not really doing anything.”

“Yeah, thanks to those who stuck it out while we were farming tradeskill mats,” Emelda said, grinning at me. “Maybe us trying to kill the first boss in the dungeon will be entertaining enough for it to be worth staying around.”

“And sorry we didn’t say hi sooner, neither of us have the stream counter turned on. We had no idea anyone at all was watching.”

“You about ready, Xen?” Emelda asked me.

“Almost,” I said, pulling one of Lucilia’s consumables out of my bag and activating it, which boosted my Defense skill. I was going to need that, the Matriarch was primarily a physical attacker. “This will be an aerial fight, Em, so keep an eye on the timer on your disc.”

“I always do,” she replied as she pulled out a Rod of Lightning, which would let her get off some mana-free damage at the beginning of the fight. “You think you have the mana to kill her before you run out?”

“I can always switch to Djinn form if I get low, though that means I lose the healing from my swords,” I told her. “If I have to switch, Em, I’m gonna need some defense.”

“I have you covered, Xen,” she replied, then she cast the spell that created her flying disc. She stepped up onto it and held the rod low at her side. “I’m ready.”

“This is gonna be rough without Savar and her bow,” I grunted, lifting up off the ground, starting to use mana to stay aloft. “Alright, let’s do this.

I'll try to lure her over to that rock formation, it should hem her in a bit," I said, pointing.

"That'll work, I have a great spell I can use on her if you can get her under that overhang."

"I'll do my best," I said, drawing my swords. "Let's do this."

It was a pretty wild fight. I attacked first and drew her over to the overhang, and it became an all-out war between us. Emelda hung back until I had her undivided attention—which was a smart thing to do—which allowed me to use almost every trick I'd learned as I learned how to fight in the air on the harpy. Being in the air made me much harder to hit because I wasn't restricted by the ground or gravity, and the fact that magical flight made me extremely agile and graceful. The harpy had to constantly beat her wings to attack me while we hovered, and that meant that any time she tried to move, she had to time that action with a downstroke of her wings. I used that to my advantage, as well as using my magical flight to stay above her chest, which severely restricted her ability to attack me with her taloned feet, and those were her primary weapons. The fact that she was fighting someone more agile than she was in the air gave me the advantage, though it didn't protect me completely from her attacks. She landed several hits with her talons, and she also had a magical attack, a blast of air like a scythe blade that she unleashed from her wings, which she used on me any time I tried to get over her.

But her tactics changed in a hurry when Emelda joined the fray. Her first spell was a lightning bolt from the rod, which used it up and made it turn to dust, and after that she pummeled the Matriarch with a series of fast-casting spells that she clearly used to gain the boss monster's attention and make it chase her...right to the overhang where she wanted it to go. I ended up having to chase after both of them when it turned on Emelda, seeing her as the bigger threat—and rightly so—but Emelda showed off her skill on her flying disc, evading her initial pass and then staying out of reach of her talons as she let the boss chase her to the overhang. The problem for Emelda was, the harpy could fly faster than her disc could, so she was weaving and banking to avoid getting mauled by the harpy's talons. I scored a few hits on the harpy from behind as I chased after them, and was smacked into the wall of the crag by her wing for my trouble. I slid to a stop

on the side of the wall and sheathed my swords in a smooth motion, quickly pulled my Spider's Fang from item storage, then conjured an arrow already nocked and drew the bow back. The arrow transformed into a lighting bolt when it left the bow after I used Imbue Arrow, and then the bolt slammed into the harpy's back.

And the snare effect took hold.

That was why I still used the Spider's Fang as my bow in human form despite the fact that Savar could make me a much better bow, because the snare effect of the bow still worked even when I used Imbue Arrow, which was very nearly overpowered in my opinion. I fully expected the devs to nerf the bow so the snare effect wouldn't work when using magical arrows or Imbue Arrow as soon as they saw me use it the way I do.

"It's snared, Em!" I barked over party chat.

"Thanks Xen!" she replied. "Get ready to chase her to the ground!"

The snare on the Matriarch was *huge*. It allowed Emelda to outrun her, getting her disc into position under the overhang. She started casting a spell as the boss bore down on her, standing her ground fearlessly, and then she unleashed it just before the harpy's talons reached her. The overhang over her head broke off from the side of the wall and crashed down onto the boss as Emelda skittered back on her disc, the giant boulder very nearly hitting her as it slammed the boss down to the bone-strewn ground below.

That was a damn clever spell!

The avalanche drove the boss to the ground and took a big chunk out of her health bar, but she was in no way beaten. Our tactics changed once she was on the ground, digging herself out of the pile of rocks that fell on her, as me and Emelda almost unconsciously adopted a new strategy without even discussing it. I got over top of the harpy and harried her wings constantly with my swords, which prevented her from easily getting back into the air, and Emelda landed and assaulted her with a series of powerful attack spells, relying on the fact that the snare from the Spider's Fang would slow her down enough for her to stay out of reach, given I wasn't letting her take off again. The only chat over party chat was me constantly giving Em the remaining time of the snare effect, so she'd know when the harpy was free of it and could move at full speed once again.

But the fight was nowhere near over. When she hit half health, she gained more abilities, from what I remember reading about this fight—I'd once researched this dungeon as a candidate to try to clear solo, but the fact that you had to clear all the harpies in the front part made me decide against it—and it was us that was put on the defensive. She gained a charge attack at half health called Doom Swoop, which also cleared all movement impairing effects and she could use when on the ground. I had to switch from dealing damage to protecting Emelda when she started charging, using some of the Ancient Skills I'd picked up in my soloing that were meant for main tanks.

Tanks in this game are very different from any other MMO. In most any other game, the tank has abilities that made the monster focus on him and him only, and his skills and gear are designed around taking damage and living through it. In CO, monsters are *way* smarter than that, so the job of a main tank in this game is to protect the high-damage dealers by getting between them and the enemy. Main tanks in CO had a lot of mobility skills and snaring/stunning/crowd control skills on top of a lot of damage mitigation skills, forcing the monster to go through them to get to the damage dealer they were protecting, and giving them tools to temporarily incapacitate monsters if the main tank was squaring off against more than one. The Taunt ability was also a critical tank skill, which caused the monster to momentarily lose its focus on its current target and attack the taunter. The taunt only lasted a second or two, but a very good main tank knew when to use Taunt to protect the damage dealers behind him. I have Taunt as well, and my skill is 1,638, because Taunt has a lot of use in soloing. Taunt can cause a monster that's running away to turn around and re-engage, and in solo situations, that is critical to prevent monsters from running away and alerting other monsters around.

Taunt's a bit of a weird skill because to use it, you have to actually insult the monster. And the more creative you are with your insults, the better chance it has to work over and above your skill rating.. Really devastating burns give you a bonus to how long the monster focuses on you instead of its original target, so in a way, the best main tanks are really obnoxious people with a knack for annoying the hell out of others.

If Spider-Man or Deadpool were CO characters, they'd be the ultimate main tanks.

I had to resort to using Taunt on the boss to keep it off Emelda, timing it so I used it just before it used its charge attack so it didn't bear down on her, as well as some of the main tank skills that I've collected over my career that would have never gone to me if I were grouped. Most of my defensive sword skills are meant for main tanks, and I had to cycle through them when the harpy charged me, reducing the damage I took as much as possible before the taunt wore off and she went back to trying to get Emelda.

The fight drug on too long. The harpy drove me back with a charge, and my mana was nearly used up from constantly flying. "I have to switch!" I barked in party chat as I sheathed my swords, then I shifted to Djinn form and punched the harpy dead in the face. We were now nearly the same size, her only a little bigger than me, so my punch carried enough weight to make her stagger back. I followed that up with a pair of kicks as I rotated on a horizontal axis, exploiting flight by turning it into a weapon, and that gave me time to draw my swords and use them to block the harpy as she rose up enough to lunge at me with both taloned feet. The contact caused my sword's lightning effect to proc, zapping her and making her screech a little, and I followed that up with a Jolt attack, which conducted through the swords and zapped her again. That made her back off far more than she should have.

It was the first time I'd ever used Jolt in a real combat situation.

"Time to get creative," I said aloud as I used Jolt again without a target, which caused lances of electricity to arc around my body. By constantly channeling Jolt like that, it ensured that any time the boss made physical contact with me, she was going to get zapped. The downside was, it was sucking my mana dry in a hurry. My trick was only going to last about 10 seconds with how much mana Jolt used...and if I was using my human form gear, it would have barely lasted three seconds due to the ridiculous mana cost of Jolt. But the trick *worked*. I rushed at the harpy, crossed my swords, and went into a Blade Dance, and every attack I made dealt extra lightning damage because I was using my other active skill slot on Jolt, combining the two skills into a single attack sequence.

Even I have to admit that I *love* to watch myself Blade Dance when I play back my simsense feeds. It's a deadly skill, but it's also *beautiful*, and

when I use it in Djinn form or when I'm flying in human form it carries the additional aspect of me not having to have my feet on the ground. That turns it into nearly an aerial ballet as I twist, spin, even flip in some parts of the attack sequence, since I've learned how to Blade Dance while flying and not break the attack cycle while doing some acrobatic moves that further confuse and fluster the enemy. I still do the required moves to hold Blade Dance, but when I do it in the air, the attacks come from nearly impossible angles, making it exceptionally hard to parry or break the sequence, which ends Blade Dance. So I'm fairly sure the people watching the stream got a great show when I Blade Danced against the harpy, landing nearly 70 hits in just a matter of seconds, and each one carried the additional damage from Jolt and the lightning procs from my sword. The result no doubt would look like me going ham all over the harpy with arcs of electricity flying all over the place.

Okay, maybe Jolt wasn't as useless as I thought it was, though it did burn 97% of my mana in a matter of seconds...from my *Djinn* mana pool. My human mana pool would have run out barely three seconds into that Blade Dance.

I dealt so much damage so fast that she turned on me without me using Taunt. She stopped chasing Emelda and came after me, and I was just fine with that, because it would give Emelda the time and freedom to use one of her "bunker buster" nukes. And that woman has some *massive* nuke spells. I met her head on after I ended Blade Dance, using Wall of Steel to hold off her furious assault—I'd enraged her, which gave her both a damage increase and attack speed buff—relying on the defensive boost from Wall of Steel and the additional mitigation I got from Blademaster to survive her onslaught. She had me down to nearly 20% health when Em finished casting her spell, one I'd been on the receiving end of before...Cataclysm. I saw it coming and kicked off the harpy then flew straight up as fast as I could, and that pushed the harpy right into the path of the meteor that was crashing down from the heavens.

When it hit, everyone knew it, especially the harpy. It took nearly 15% of her health in one blow, which caused her to shriek in pain and rage and explode out of the fireball caused by Cataclysm and charge at Emelda, trailing smoke and cinders behind her as her wing feathers burned. But she was knocked off her path when I used Sword Blitz from over her, slamming

into her back with my swords leading, driving both of us down away from Emelda as she ascended and backed up. Using it like that damaged me as well, and I was down to 17% when we hit the ground and tumbled across the bone-strewn rocks. Emelda had my back, raising a wall of stone between me and the harpy just as she moved to charge me—I was close and easy to attack—making her bounce off of it and giving me time to pull a healing crystal out of my item storage. I switched back to human form—my mana regenerates much faster in Djinn form and that carries over to my human form mana pool, so I'd bought another few minutes of flight time in human form—drawing my swords. I needed the life drain procs from the Soulblades right now or I wasn't gonna survive the rest of this fight.

But the fight was almost over. The harpy was down to 31% health, and we had her both coming and going. Whoever she focused on gave the other one of us time and opportunity to really hammer her, and since we were about 20 meters apart, she couldn't attack both of us. The result was that the harpy ping-ponged between us, going after whoever hit her with a massive attack last, exploiting her indecision about which of us was the more dangerous foe to keep her running back and forth between us. I held her off with my defensive skills and regenerating health using the Soulblades—but not enough to gain overall health—and Emelda used her large array of defensive spells to hold her off long enough to give me time to whack the hell out of her, me cycling through most every heavy-hitting skill I have and adding in well-timed Taunts to hold her attention long enough for Emelda to retreat to a safe distance using her disc.

It took us nearly five more minutes, but we brought her down. When she collapsed to the ground, I had 6% health left, Emelda had 12% health left, and both of us were almost completely out of mana.

“Holy shit, we did it,” Emelda said in party chat from her disc, hovering just over me as she leaned over, her hands on her knees and out of breath.

I just had to laugh. “Welcome to my world, Em,” I told her playfully. “This is almost what fighting an overworld boss monster solo is like. Especially the part when I end the fight almost dead. But good job, Em, seriously.”

“You too. I almost couldn't believe it when you changed into a Djinn and went crazy on it.”

“I used Blade Dance and Jolt at the same time,” I told her. “I thought Jolt was completely useless. I don’t think that anymore. Once I get both Jolt and Storm Lord up to an acceptable level, Jolt is gonna hit pretty hard, and it’ll turn Blade Dance into a death machine. I seriously have to level it now, to get the mana cost down enough so I can use that combo attack in human form.”

“I had no idea you could sustain it like that.”

“I didn’t either until I tried it,” I admitted with a laugh. “Burned through my entire mana pool in the Blade Dance, though. Every time I landed a hit, Jolt went off and burned mana. No way could I pull that off using my human gear, my mana pool is nowhere near large enough.”

“Well, everyone watching, you just got to see Xen improvise. He’s very good at it,” she winked at me.”

“Trying to not die is the mother of invention,” I said blandly, which made her laugh. “I just hope a dev wasn’t watching. They’ll nerf Jolt hard as soon as they see how it can be used, so I’d better enjoy it while I can.”

“I don’t think so, you might be the only player in all of CO that has both Blade Dance *and* Jolt. I don’t think they’ll nerf it over just one player.”

“May be, but there are other sword skills that land a series of blows very fast, and Jolt will work with those too,” I said. “Blade Dance is just the heaviest-hitting one I have.” I thought a moment. “Though, maybe using it with Flurry or Steelstorm would work in my human form,” I pondered. “Those skills only hit about ten times each, and it wouldn’t use up my entire mana pool to do it. Just most of it.”

“I know what you’re doing tomorrow,” Emelda grinned.

“Yup, new toy new toy new toy,” I drawled, which made her laugh. “Now lets look at the loot that we don’t care about.”

It turned out the loot was something we cared about, because it dropped something truly *magical*. When we opened the harpy’s pouch, we were both almost shocked to see a glowing scroll fall to the ground along with the usual gold and gems. It was a Legendary skill! “Oh my GOD, a Legendary skill!” Emelda literally screamed.

I had to laugh. “And you weren’t sure if you wanted to kill the boss,” I teased. “I already have a legendary skill, hon. So it’s all yours.”

She gave me a look of incredible glee and snapped it up, which bound the scroll to her. She untied it with shaking fingers and unrolled it, and I had to step over and look over her shoulder.

Holy *crap*, it was one of the most powerful Legendary skills in the game! It was Flames of Methrian!

In the game’s lore, Methrian, the character after which our server is named, was the First Archmage, and he was most known for a large variety of fire-based spells that were named after him. His nickname was the Blue Phoenix because his fire spells were so hot, so intense, that the flames from his fire spells were blue, and they could deal damage to fire-based monsters like Salamanders and fire elementals where no other spell could. Flames of Methrian was a legendary skill that would increase Emelda’s damage using fire spells, reduce damage she took from fire in return, and give her the ability to damage creatures otherwise immune to fire-based spells using fire. She also got access to a unique spell called Phoenix Fire, the single-most hardest hitting nuke spell *in the entire game*. It took forever to cast and if she was damaged or otherwise disturbed while she was casting it the spell would fail, but if she had the time and protection to cast that spell, it would melt the face off just about anything it hit.

And like all Legendary skills, it had a utility use as well. When she got the skill to 2,000 (which she would level by casting fire-based spells or taking damage from fire-based attacks), she would gain a new child skill called Phoenix Form, which would allow her to transform into a unique blue phoenix and fly. And like a real phoenix, if she was killed in phoenix form, she would raise from her own ashes and be reborn, which would allow her to resurrect herself without reincarnating at the graveyard, and *without* losing all of her experience points. That could be potentially game-changing for a raider, it would allow Emelda to shift to phoenix form just before she died and be reborn where she died, and since she had the Resurrection spell, she could resurrect the raid without them having to run back to where they died. It would save her raid a ton of time and effort to get back to their corpses and recover.

Emelda could not have gotten a better Legendary skill, and I was ecstatic for her.

I knew so much about it because I'd read up on the various known Legendary skills (there are 370 of them at last count), and Flames of Methrian was one of the most coveted of them all, particularly for mage archetypes. And since Legendary skills were unique on each server, Emelda and Emelda only would have that skill.

"Oh my God. Xen, do you know what this is?" she nearly whispered, her voice quavering and her hands shaking.

"Only the best Legendary skill in the game for a spellcaster," I said proudly. "Congratulations, Em. You deserve it."

She burst into tears, whirled, and crushed me in a powerful hug.

"Looks like I know what you're doing for the next month," I chuckled, patting her on the back. "You have to get it to two thousand as fast as you possibly can. But you'd better officially learn the skill," I urged lightly..

She pushed out of my arms and did so, almost as if someone was going to steal the scroll from her at any moment. The scroll flared with light and then vanished in a puff of smoke and dust, and that was that. From that moment on, all of Emelda's fire spells would be blue instead of red, and she'd be able to deal fire damage to any creature, even those immune to fire. It would be trivial at first, but as she raised the skill higher and higher, the damage of her fire-based spells and the proportion of damage she could deal to creatures otherwise immune to fire would increase, until she dealt full damage with her spells at skill level 1,000. The damage bonus to her fire spells wasn't capped, and would still increase, however. Past that, the skill would reduce the damage she took from fire, until at skill level 2,000, where she would be immune to any and all fire damage. And that only made sense, given that it was at 2,000 that she gained Phoenix Form, which was a creature that was literally on fire. If she wasn't immune to fire, she'd take damage from her own skill.

"Well, I'd say that the people watching got to see something amazing," I told Emelda with a smile. "It's not every day someone gets the best skill in the entire game."

She was both crying and laughing. “This certainly wasn’t planned, but I’m not complaining. I’m so happy, Xen! I’ve wanted Flames of Methrian since I first saw it on the wiki!”

“Well, show it off, girl!” I ordered. “Show off those blue flames!”

She laughed and stepped back, then cast a very simple fire spell called Burning Hands. And true to the name of the spell, her hands erupted in flames...blue flames. She gazed at them in wonder, the flames reflecting off of her luminous eyes.

And just like that, Emelda went from being one of the most dangerous mage archetypes on Methrian to being one of the most dangerous mage archetypes *anywhere*, because of that one skill. Once she got it leveled up, it would make her fire nukes hit like an atomic bomb, and Phoenix Fire *would* be almost like an atomic bomb. And thanks to the way the skill worked, even players and monsters immune to fire would take damage from those mega-nukes. No target would be safe from her fire spells, and given she had a preference for using fire-based magic, that made Flames of Methrian the perfect Legendary skill for her.

We decided to pack it in for the dungeon, because Savar would be finishing her raid soon, and besides, Emelda was too giddy over getting her skill to really be able to focus very well on fighting. I knew how she felt, because that was the way I felt when I got Touched by the Djinn. I spent nearly a full day trying to resist the urge to jump up and down like an over-excited Japanese anime schoolgirl, and I would just stand somewhere and stare at my skill window for minutes at a time, almost in disbelief that *that* skill was in *my* skill window.

Emelda would experience what me and Savar had, because getting a Legendary skill was truly game-changing for the player. Touched by the Djinn was the foundation of my entire gaming strategy, affecting every part of my gaming experience from travel to combat to even leisure time where I didn’t do much of anything at all (weird, I know, having leisure time inside a game), and Savar was the same. She’d raised Time Lord up to where she now used it in all aspects of her gaming, from speeding up her travel times to even speeding up her crafting skills by speeding up time for herself in relation to the rest of the game. That was because she’d unlocked child skills after raising the main skill up, one of which gave her the ability to

haste herself in non-combat situations for much, much longer than she could in combat. And in combat...damn, had she truly mastered how to use it for maximum effect. Since the haste effect had a cooldown equal to the time the buff was applied (exactly the same way Blade Dance works), she used it in short bursts, the way I use Blade Dance, but her ability to slow time on an external target had a duration that was longer than the spell's cooldown, so she could keep it applied to a monster indefinitely. She could only affect one target at a time, however, or it'd be so unbalanced that it would break the game. But thanks to Time Lord, Savar could now solo overworld boss monsters the same way I can by slowing the monster and using her Savasa movement speed bonus to stay out of its reach, then using her haste buff judiciously in "burst phases" when she could unload on the monsters with impunity, then let the ability's cooldown reset when the monster got close to her, as she moved away and got distance from the monster once again. She could kite any monster for as long as she wanted so long as she had enough room to maneuver, and that gave her the ability to kill almost any single monster one on one...provided it couldn't dispel magical effects on itself, anyway. It may take her time to wear it down with her bow, and she did have to deal with any ranged or magical attacks the monster may have, but she could kill it.

It was very fun to watch her solo monsters. She had raised kiting to an art form, and watching her kite things was like watching a professional dancer practice her craft.

Sano had truly mastered her character, including how to best use Savar's racial bonuses for maximum effect even at this stage of the game. And that made her one of the smartest players on the server.

And Emelda wasted absolutely no time. As soon as we got back to my townhouse in Citadel City, we went up to the roof and she started casting fire spells at the practice dummy I keep up there. And while she settled in, I decided to give the stream viewers a quick tour of my townhouse before I ended it. I started in the shop and then went up floor by floor, showing off my Djinn apartment, then my research library, then my living quarters on the top. "I furnished most of it myself using conjuring, one of the child skills from Touched by the Djinn," I said openly, which the viewers could hear. "Truth be told, conjuring was the most useful part of it for me after I first got it. I got very rich by selling things that I could conjure, most of it

being rare and valuable tradeskill mats...then I spent every gold piece I had on this apartment when the Citadel opened on my server," I had to say ruefully. "In fact, I had to borrow thirty thousand gold from Savar," I admitted. "I got the money to pay her back by searching the ruins around Citadel City for treasures chests, and managed to find a piece of gear that I sold that got me out of debt and put some gold back in the bank besides." I had to laugh. "We were so hopeless when the Citadel opened. We're a very small server and we're in like last place when it comes to raid progression, so none of us were in any way prepared for the monsters up here. Baby squirrels were wiping entire raid parties," I laughed. "But things are a little better here now. The top tier raiding guilds have geared up using random loot drops from the weaker monsters outside the city, and now they're selling the gear they don't need anymore, so the lower tier raiders are starting to gear up too. In just a few months, the prices will come down to where just about anyone can afford a couple of pieces of Citadel random drop gear, and that'll really help them out in their questing back on Arca and Netherim. And here's my living room. I think I spend more time in this room than I do in my living room in the real world," I admitted lightly. "Me and Em and Savar hang out here all the time, watching vidy or just talking. We spend a lot of the time not playing the game while we're playing the game," I laughed. "But I think a lot of players do that. Sometimes it's more fun to just kick back and relax in here than it is to do it in the real world." Savar entered the parlor, since she had the ability to enter the house without me having to let her in. "Hey Savar, raid done?"

"Yup," she replied. "We finally cleared the last boss in the Echoing Halls. All we have left is the Dark Tower, and we'll be ready to start up here on Citadel," she said eagerly.

"Just to warn you, I'm still streaming, so don't say anything too personal," I told her in friend chat

"Cool, I'll start up mine so I can test it before we do it for real."

"First thing, though, you need to up to the roof right now. Em has something cool to show you," I told her with a smile.

"Oh, really?" she replied, then she went past me towards the stairs going up to the roof, which were in the kitchen.

“I’ll give the girls privacy for that,” I said to the streamers lightly. But a moment later, I did hear Savar literally scream in delight. “And there we go, now she knows,” I quipped as I started for the stairs myself. I doubted we were going to do anything tonight other than celebrate Emelda’s good luck, but that was fine with me. One of the greatest things about this game was that sometimes, it was more fun to be logged on and not playing it the way it was intended than it was to be out there adventuring. Or, maybe Emelda would want to go right out and start practicing her new skill, I didn’t know. And I’d be fine with it either way.

Tonight was Rita’s night, and I couldn’t be happier for her.

Chapter 12

I could honestly say that I was used to this now.

Sitting at my table instead of in the merge pod, using my interface to connect me to the vidlink, I uploaded a new viddy to my page, which was an exploration guide for the Iceshard Mountains. Since it was a specialty viddy, I didn't expect to see many views on it. I'd finished my exploration of the mountains a few days ago, and I have to say, it wasn't quite as exciting as I thought it would be.

The reason why took me a while to figure out, and it was fairly simple. I outgeared the area. I was in Champion's Raiment, which was low to mid tier Citadel raiding gear, and my gear that wasn't Raiment was random loot drops from the overworld outside Citadel City, stuff I found in chests or stuff I bought from people who farmed them. I noticed how easy it was when I did the giant village rep not long ago, and my exploration of the mountains, and the fights I got into there, had made it apparent. It wasn't as challenging now, and in a way, it made it not quite as much fun. I certainly wanted to finish my exploration of the continents, to have the most complete maps of any player in the game, but exploration wasn't nearly as dangerous now, and that made it less exciting.

Even the five overworld boss monsters I'd killed in the Iceshard Mountains weren't all that exciting. I only died about three times each to them as I learned their abilities, where usually I'd die like fifty times. And I hadn't needed any special consumables to take them down, either. I just needed to learn what they could do, and that let me beat them with only my gear and usual buff spells. And that was...almost disappointing.

I was in a bit of a gray area when it came to my gear. I was too geared for the Twin Worlds for it to be challenging enough to be exciting, but I wasn't nearly geared enough to solo on the Citadel. So, I was more or less stuck just mapping new areas and searching for overworld boss monsters to

fight. As of right now, overworld boss monsters and dungeons were the only really challenging content that I could solo.

I activated the viddy on my channel, making it viewable, and checked over the other viddies there. I had 27 viddies on my page now, a mix of tutorials and several viddies I did about the places I'd explored, and I was still making more than enough money off the viddies for me not to need to touch my stipend or annuity income. I was living off my viddy income, and it was enough to let me afford about anything I wanted...given I didn't have rent or car payments or anything big that came out of that money. My skimmer and hovercar payments were automatically deducted from my annuity payments before it even hit my bank, and my mortgage payments were similarly deducted from my stipend, so I never had to worry about paying them myself. The rest of the money from those two income streams went untouched, piling up in the bank, because the income from my viddies was far more than I needed to live on with the bills I had remaining.

The biggest money-maker viddy for me wasn't the human flight tutorial I did, it was actually a viddy that I hadn't planned on making. It was a duel, a duel between me and Alandra, which we made a few weeks ago. We both recorded it, and released it on our respective Arena channels, letting viewers see the fight from each of our points of view. Alandra created that Arena page more or less just so she could post her side of the duel viddy.

It wasn't a planned viddy. The planned viddy was my human flying tutorial, where I explained how flying could be used offensively for a melee warrior. And to be fair to it, it was a very good viddy and it racked up a whole lot of views. Alandra had come through for me, serving as my partner in the viddy and serving as the perfect counterpart. There weren't very many players on our server with the ability to dual wield at our skill level, and I needed someone was good as I was for my tutorial..

Dual wielding in the game isn't very common, because of both the skill prerequisites and the fact that it took a long, long, *long* time to develop the skill to where it wasn't a hindrance to you. You had to get the skill to 1,000 just to remove the damage rating penalty from your attacks—you attack at a penalty at low skill levels, reflecting most people's lack of ambidexterity—and that's a long road to hoe just to get to where you do decent damage with a skill in this game. It takes time and dedication to the style, and it's one of

the few skills in the game that starts at a penalty that you have to remove through training.

That's what makes the dark elf racial bonus so powerful. Dark elves start with dual wield, and they suffer no penalty when they use it, even at skill level one. It reflects the lore in the game that dark elves are all naturally ambidextrous and exceptionally as a race, and are some of the most deadly melee fighters in the game not because of their size or strength, but because of their grace and their speed..

When I decided I wanted to dual wield—like Xen Quickstrike from *Starblade*—I had to dedicate myself to working through the penalty, which was a long, very painful process given I did it completely solo. I did it by going back to the starter areas and fighting monsters that posed enough of a challenge to give me opportunities to skill up, monsters that took forever to kill because of the damage penalty, and slowly work my way back up to where I'd been when I took up the skill. At that time, I'd just left faction territory and was adventuring in the Umbral Plain, not far to the northeast from the faction border, closest to Jagaara territory. So, I had to, in effect, go back to the beginning and slowly work my way back out of faction territory, raising Dual Wield as I went to reduce the damage penalty, which allowed me to hold my own against higher and higher skill monsters.

Qualifying for Dual Wield takes time. It takes a 1,250 skill in a one handed weapon amenable to being dual wielded, Swords, Axes, Daggers, or Maces, and a minimum *natural* Agility of 50 to unlock the skill, which meant I spent a lot of time hunting for special consumables that raise your base, natural stats, rather than acquiring gear that raise your stats. Those consumables, known as Ioun Stones, are fairly rare in the game, and they only raise a base stat by one point. So, I had to farm up 23 of them to get my natural Agility high enough to unlock Dual Wield. And that was after dumping all my starter points in Agility when I first rolled Xen, making sure he had the absolute maximum Agility possible for a human when he was created.

But it's worth it, my God is it worth it. Once you get Dual Wield to 1,000, you're dealing full damage with both weapons, and you deal more base damage per second (DPS) than any other melee fighter in the game, including those using massive two handed weapons. That's the reward for

sticking with Dual Wield for weeks, months, grinding it out and suffering through fighting at a disadvantage until you master the skill. This game rewards dedication, and you have to show a ton of it to Dual Wield...unless you're a dark elf. That's why there aren't very many Dual Wielders in this game who aren't dark elves.

Anyway, Alandra was a massive help with the tutorial, because she could demonstrate the moves I was doing on the ground while I did them in the air, allowing viewers to see a side by side comparison of how they changed, and she could also hold her own against me when I demonstrated the moves and the style against an opponent. We had a ton of fun recording the segments, and afterward, we decided to have it out for real and see which of us was the better Dual Wielder.

And that was the unplanned viddy. We decided to move to the Arena of Arms in Citadel City, a stadium of sorts open to the public that was a place popular for people who like to duel each other, and we had a duel. An *epic* duel. We decided that we would only use skills, spells, and abilities that both of us knew, so we were on completely even ground, and I wouldn't be allowed to fly. And then we had at it.

For nearly *half an hour*. One duel lasted nearly half an hour. And I swear, I don't think I've ever had that much fun fighting against another player. It was a full-out brawl that was mixed with elements of strategy, tactics, and magic, since both of us are "warrior mage" archetypes, primarily melee fighters but with an array of spells in our arsenals we use in combat to support our hand to hand fighting skills. The fact that both of us have quite a few defensive Ancient Skills was what made it take so long. I had no idea Alandra had so many of them, including skills that usually only went to main tanks in a raiding party.

She had them because she did a lot of dungeons when not raiding—Ancient Skills dropped from dungeon bosses—and the main tanks in her guild already had most of them, so they were handing out the skills that dropped to melee warriors that could use them. She usually only grouped with her guildies, so that meant that she got any skill they didn't need. And like the smart CO player she was, she'd raised them to make them very useful to her, even in a raid. Alandra's defensive skills meant she could

protect herself from boss Area of Effect attacks and adds, and that took the pressure of the raid's healers.

That made her an exceptionally well-rounded and exceedingly nasty opponent in a duel.

We both recorded the duel, and we both released viddy of it on our respective Arena channels—Alandra creating a channel just so she had somewhere to post the viddy—showing people the same fight from each point of view. And to say it was popular was an understatement. It was the first viddy I'd made that exceeded one million views, which it racked up in the first week. It was currently at nearly sixteen million views, a viewer stat that had put *thousands* of credits in the bank. And people were still watching it. Our two viddies had more or less gone viral among CO players, so much so that people from other empires, playing in different server clusters, were watching out viddies.

Posting the viddy was only half of my satisfaction today. Yesterday me and Sano had gone on another date, and we went *big*. We went on a tour of a planet called Axis, Axis Three, which was in another *galaxy*. There was a Stargate that led to the galaxy nearest to ours called the Magnum Dwarf Supercluster, and about three weeks ago, the Stargate had opened to civilian tourism. We'd gone on a tour of the planet, which was being left untouched as a nature preserve, kind of like a safari in open-topped hover transports that let us see a bunch of animals native to the planet. It wasn't a cheap date, that was for sure. The gate passage fee alone was C270 for the round trip, and the safari tour cost me C100. But it was worth it because Sano wanted to go, and when Sano wants to do something, we do it. Besides, I can admit that I had a lot of fun, because I'd liked zoos when I was a kid and the animals we saw on the safari were pretty cool.

Our relationship was definitely progressing, but it was progressing slowly. Before our first date, the shiziki game, I'd honestly studied for that date by reading up a little about Shio society and customs, as well as a little bit about their history, so I didn't say or do anything that might embarrass her. For example, I learned that it was considered improper for Shio who aren't married or blood related to touch each other's bare skin in public, even among friends. It was an old, old custom that was rooted in one of the Shio religions. So, Terran customs like shaking hands were seen as rude in

Shio society. That explained why Shio servers and store clerks always wore gloves, so any incidental contact with a customer was not skin to skin.

I'd learned a bit about dating in Shio society, mainly—and I'm embarrassed to admit I read this—through an article on Civnet that explained how Terrans should act when dating Shio. Despite the tawdry undertones of the article, it was very informative in that it explained the societal expectations of men and women in Shio society when it came to dating. And the biggest thing I learned from that article is that Shio women do not move fast. Their society makes them remarkably like Terran women from the 1950's in that they expect men to pay attention to them and court them for a long, *long* time, and they expect to be treated with proper respect the entire time. The guide said that a Terran man shouldn't even try to so much as touch a Shio woman's hand skin to skin until after the third or fourth date. Shio society didn't have a "hook-up culture" like Terran society did, dating was supposed to be a slow, long process where the two of them felt each other out and learned a whole lot about each other before they so much as kissed. And while Sano lived on Terra, she was a Shio to the roots of her dark green hair, and I knew she'd expect me to act like a Shio man, with proper Shio manners, even if I was Terran. The guide made it clear that when it came to Shio women, they expected their dates to obey the rules of Shio society. And those that didn't really turned them off.

So, armed with that information, I'd managed to be a properly well-mannered man during that first date, but not so standoffish that I failed to have fun. I sincerely enjoy Sano's company, be it in CO or in the real world, and we did what proper Shio are supposed to do and we talked a whole lot. And thanks to the guide, I knew better than to expect Sano to give me a good night kiss when I dropped her off back home.

But she did take my hand when she said goodnight to me, which the guide said was pretty unusual for a first date.

Since then, we've been dating pretty frequently. Since I don't have a real job, I can fly down to Sao Paulo more or less whenever Sano wants, and we've been going out two or three times a week. We mostly just do little things like eat out there in her home city, or go to parks, or catch the planetary league shiziki games or catch Terran soccer and baseball games, both of which she likes. We have a lot of fun together, and I never mind

dropping everything and flying nearly two hours in my skimmer whenever Sano calls and says she has free time. I'm more or less at her beck and call, and I don't mind at all. And my dedication to our relationship had produced results, we'd progressed up to the "goodnight kiss" stage, which only took a couple of months. But in Shio time, that was moving pretty fast.

And I was being serious about it. Last month, I found a non-Faey telepath who knew the Shio language and paid him to insert the language into my memory. Language insertion like that wasn't completely permanent, but it could become permanent with practice. If I didn't use the language, I'd forget it over time. But if I practiced it every day for a few months, it would become permanent long-term memory. So, now I talked to Sano in her language, getting the practice that the tutor told me I needed, and I'd gone out of my way to learn much more about Shio history, culture, and society. I was proving to Sano that I was willing to meet her halfway, to learn her language the way she'd learned mine, and I think she really appreciates my effort.

She'd done what I did, but she did it to be kind to us. She'd had English and Spanish telepathically inserted after she found out, by accident, that neither me nor Rita feel entirely comfortable speaking Faey. Sure, we're fluent, but the language has a lot of bad memories tied up in it for both of us, due to our experience on the work farms. So, she went out of her way to learn our native languages, because she wanted to be able to speak to us in languages with which we felt comfortable. And that said a whole lot about who Sano was as a person, for her to go that far out of her way for us..

Rita was too afraid of telepaths to have Shio inserted, a fact that Sano could easily understand. Hell, the only reason I did it was because I felt I owed it to Sano, and I went out of my way to track down a non-Faey telepath to do it. I found a very nice, kind Colonist to do it for me, one that was very discreet and very gentle. If not for the fact that I was doing it for Sano, no way in hell would I have ever done it.

Today I didn't really have any plans, outside of my usual three hours in the gym. Sano had to work today, so I doubted I'd hear from her until this afternoon. I had no real plans on where to go next in game, now that I'd finished my exploration of the Iceshard Mountains, so most likely I'd log on after my workout and work on Touched by the Djinn, Jolt, and Storm

Lord. Odds were I'd be practicing beside Rita, who had been spending nearly every waking moment in the game raising her Legendary skill, trying to get it to 2,000 as fast as she possibly could. And good Lord, could that woman grind a skill. The only time she wasn't raising the skill, she was sleeping, eating, in the bathroom, or raiding with her guild. She'd only had it for nearly two months, and she already had the skill to 1,828, which was insanely fast. She was in reasonable range to finish it today, if she got lucky and found someone selling a skill crystal.

Her devotion had helped me along as well. I've raised Touched by the Djinn to 1,883, getting closer and closer to 2,000, I've raised Jolt to 1,280, which makes it do real damage now, and Storm Lord to 1,841...which is why Jolt now hits hard enough to matter. Without the Storm Lord boost, Jolt would still be more or less a joke skill. But I will say, Storm Lord has turned my Imbue Arrow into something nasty, to the point where I keep my Spider's Fang out of my item inventory when I'm in human form, keeping it "equipped" in that gray area where I have it on me but I'm not using it. I didn't do that until I got Imbue Arrow up to where it started doing some real damage when I'm in human form, given my human form gear isn't centered around spell damage. My bow shots now both hit hard thanks to Imbue Arrow and snare the enemy thanks to the effect of the Spider's Fang, which is exceptionally useful even for a melee warrior like me.

We've been working on them together any time we're in game and not busy with other things, I've been keeping her company working on my own skills while she works on hers up on the roof of my townhouse. Even Sano's been doing it, she's raised her Bow skill to 2,893, putting her within reasonable striking distance of the ever-important 3,000. All she needs is to blow some gold on some Citadel skill crystals, and she could hit 3,000 in a couple of days.

If she can find any.

Rita spent nearly a million gold on them, and quite literally bought out the market...such as there is one, given how few people can effectively kill Citadel monsters on the server. Any time one came up for sale, she snapped it up, part of her daily routine of checking nearly every shop and stall in Citadel City hunting for skill crystals that had put up for sale the last couple of months. She has enough crystals banked to raise a skill by 165 points,

and she intends to use them once she gets Flames of Methrian up to where the crystals will get her to 2,000. She only needs seven more points, and she's there. So she's very, very close to reaching her goal. In fact, she may get there today, if she gets lucky and finds a skill crystal for sale, even a five point crystal. She could grind it out to get two natural skillups in one day, if she really buckled down and committed to it.

I ate breakfast that the helper unit made for me—I'd named it Stanley, and had caught myself calling it *him* more than once the last couple of weeks—and went up to the gym to get in my three hours. I was now using "real" swords rather than the retractable ones, faithful replicas of my Soulblades in game that I'd had made, real in every way except them being blunted. I didn't spend every moment in the studio, I did my 90 minutes on the treadmill and the other workout machines, getting in my strength training and cardio for the day, then I retired to the studio to do my sword practice. And I have to admit, I've gotten really, really good since I started this. I'll never be anywhere near as graceful as Xen, but I've really gotten to where I look like a master swordsman in the real world, learning how to adopt what I'd learned in the game to real world physics, which made me quite formidable. I would feel entirely comfortable if I were ever put into a position like the one that made me realize I could use my skills outside the game, though I sure as hell wouldn't be looking for a fight. I simply felt that if that fight ever came looking for me, I'd be ready for it.

I did have one more time commitment now, and that was martial arts practice. I was taking lessons in a Rathii martial art called *omi* on Tuesdays and Fridays, two hours a session. *Omi* was like a mixture of karate and wrestling—which I guess means it's most similar to judo among Terran martial arts—it was a martial art that mixed conventional punches and kicks with takedowns, holds, and locks, kind of like martial arts meets wrestling. It was a martial art that didn't look like karate, the punches and kicks were more like boxing or street fighting, so it didn't look all that, well, disciplined, but it was extremely effective. I'd learned a lot in the month I'd been taking the classes, mixing it in with the moves I'd learned from my Unarmed Combat skill in CO to create my own style. I'd stumbled into it quite by accident, seeing an ad for it in another player's vidy I was watching and getting intrigued enough to give it a try, and I have to admit, it's kinda fun. The Rathii that does the lessons is a great guy, really smart,

very skilled, and surprisingly funny. And holy crap, is he a monster in a fight. He'd won the amateur Mixed Martial Arts Championship for North America last year and had placed third in the planetary tournament, proving that he was every bit as tough as he claimed to be.

Deros' win in the MMA tournament had put *omi* on the map on Terra among martial arts enthusiasts, and *omi* trainers were starting to flock to Terra to take advantage of the interest.

After gym time, I went back up to the apartment and got a shower, and I was in the merge pod as soon as I was dry. Emelda was already logged in when I got there, up on the roof practicing, casting a fireball type spell at the target dummy over and over. I'd gotten used to seeing the blue fire after two months, but sometimes I still caught Emelda staring at it, as if she still couldn't believe it was hers. "Hey Em," I said as I came up to her, shifting into Djinn form so I could use Jolt from my much deeper Djinn mana pool. "Any luck?"

"Yes, I got a skillup a bit ago," she replied. "Six to go."

"Awesome," I said as I put my target dummy where I wanted it. Savar had moved it yesterday to practice archery. "I had no luck yesterday, only two skillups in Jolt. Nothing else."

"That's not bad for only a couple of hours," she chided.

"Yeah well, blame Savar for that, she wanted to go to a baseball game after work."

"She has you on a short leash," she teased. "But I don't see anything wrong with it. That's where boys belong."

"Watch it, missy, I know where you live," I warned, which made her laugh.

"I know where you live too."

"Yeah, but you have to get past the doorman to get into my condo, where all I have to do is fly in over your garden wall."

"Be right back, turning on the hard shield," she declared, which made him laugh.

We chatted about nothing in particular as we practiced, each at our own target dummy. I'd raised Jolt up enough to where it now had a range of about a meter, it didn't require me to touch to use it anymore, but despite that, I was using one of the other target dummies if only to avoid having Emelda set me on fire. But our practice was interrupted by something neither of us had never experienced before, a server broadcast sent by a Game Master. *"Attention players, this is Game Master Stravon,"* the broadcast began, as a small hologram appeared in front of both me and Emelda, showing the crest of the United Nations. *"The Terra Emergency Broadcast system has been activated. The broadcast will be projected in game as a hologram for all players living on Terra."* I looked over at Emelda curiously, but she simply shrugged and stopped casting. A moment later, the Secretary General of the U.N., a Korean man named Kim Duk Moon, appeared on the hologram. He began speaking in Faey, which was the official common language used on Terra. *"All citizens of Terra,"* he began, *"A medical quarantine has been issued for Terra, the Faey Imperium, and the House of Karinne, for the following species: Faey, Terrans, Shio, Rathii, Aridai, Sha'i-ree, Subrians, Keelo, Strath, and Muri. A highly contagious virus has been detected in the Faey Imperium that can infect those races, and because citizens of the Imperium have recently visited Terra, the planet will be under quarantine as a precaution to ensure the virus has not spread. I repeat, this quarantine is precautionary,"* he stressed. *"I ask that if you are one of the susceptible species and are not currently at home, that you return home immediately, and remain indoors. If you are not one of the susceptible species, we ask that you try to stay indoors as much as possible and limit all contact with susceptible species, because you may be carrying the virus without it being able to affect you. If you are one of the quarantined species and you need food or supplies, contact the Terra Emergency Response Agency office in your local area and inform them of your need, and they will arrange to have supplies delivered to you. Please keep in mind that this quarantine is mandatory, and any susceptible species violating it without medical authorization will be arrested and detained,"* he said firmly. *"The EBS will remain active to provide all currently updated information in the form of a chyron playing under your vidy program, as well as provide you with contact information with your local ERA office in case you need assistance. As of right now, we*

can't give a solid date when the quarantine will be lifted, so I ask everyone to be patient.

"Because of the quarantine, I have activated the Emergency Action plan for Terra," he continued. "What this means is that effective immediately, all prices for goods have been frozen to prevent price gouging, and all citizens who are under quarantine and have house payments, be it rent or a mortgage, are given a grace period to make those payments. Additionally, no evictions will be permitted during the quarantine. What this means, citizens, is that if you're subject to the quarantine, you don't have to worry about paying your rent or mortgage so long as the quarantine is in effect, but you will still owe that money, which you will be allowed to pay back in reasonable installments once the quarantine is lifted and you can return to work. So plan your finances accordingly. Your payments are waived, as are the mortgage payments your landlords must make to the banks for the properties they own, and the monthly service charge for access to public utilities will be waived for the duration of the quarantine. Those who find they're unable to afford basic necessities can get them through their local ERA office, free of charge. So long as the quarantine is in effect, no citizen of Terra need worry about losing his home, or not having enough to eat. So rest easy.

"As I mentioned, we have no solid date on when the quarantine will be lifted. So everyone please be patient, stay home, and make sure you stay up to date as new information is released. And remember, if you have any questions or you need assistance, contact your local ERA office, and they will do everything they can to help you. With your cooperation, we can return to our work and our lives with a minimum of disruption. Thank you for your time, and good day to everyone."

The hologram faded, and I looked over at Rita, who looked a bit surprised. "Wow, that's the first time I've ever heard of them declaring an emergency," she said.

"Yeah, but at least it's not us," I said. "It's the Imperium. They're just putting us under quarantine because Faey have visited Terra lately, and I guess us Terrans can catch this Faey virus. I don't think it's anything to really worry about."

“So can Sano, they said the Shio were under quarantine, too,” Rita noted.

“All of them he listed are all very human-like,” I realized. “I guess we’re all pretty related, genetically.”

“I’m going to have to call the ERA for my area, I only have a couple of days of food in the house,” she said, pursing her lips. “And I live out so far, I can’t really get it delivered. I’ll need to call and see if they can deliver food.”

“You’d better do it right now, so you’re at the top of the waiting list,” I suggested. “I guess since not everyone is subject to quarantine, they won’t have trouble finding someone to deliver it to you.”

“Good idea. I’m gonna log out and call them right now. You’d better take inventory yourself, Kevin.”

“Yeah. But at least I’m in a building with a shopping concourse that will deliver.”

“Will they? If they have people delivering, that means they won’t because the delivery people are quarantined.”

“That’s a damn good point,” I grunted. “I’d better log out and call down to the shopping concourse and see how things are gonna go. And if I can get stuff delivered, I’d better stock the pantry now, before the building residents get home from work and have the same idea.”

“Call me once you get everything organized,” she said.

“Will do.”

I logged out and immediately called down to the main shopping concourse on the ground floor, and much to my relief, I found out that they could still deliver despite the quarantine. They could do it because they used delivery robots, not delivery people, and robots were allowed out and about so long as they disinfected them before they went out and when they came back. And they had non-quarantined species working down there, so they’d have employees to load the delivery robots. The concourse had a couple of medical E-suits in its emergency supply closet, which would let a non-quarantined worker clean the robot and load it without breaking quarantine, and that meant that the shops were still able to deliver to the

apartments. So, I went through the kitchen with Stanley to see what we had and how much room we had to store stuff, and once I knew how much I could get, I ordered enough food to fill the pantry, the refrigerator, and every cabinet in the kitchen. That was enough food to last me for nearly three weeks, so long as I didn't go nuts with it, and Stanley would have to tailor a meal plan that would use the perishable food before it went bad. He would also be cooking a number of meals and dishes that could be frozen, so I could heat them up and eat them later. That would ensure that nothing I bought that was perishable was going to go bad before I could eat it.

Once I had that all ironed out, I called Rita as I waited for the food to be delivered. Needless to say, the concourse downstairs was suddenly flooded with orders, so I was on the waiting list for delivery. A hologram of her appeared on the vidlink as I sat on the couch, going over what Stanley was going to cook over the next week or so. "Hey, what did you find out?" I asked.

"I'm having enough food to last a couple of weeks delivered from the store in that village over in Belize," she replied. "They usually don't deliver out this far, but they're making an exception because of the quarantine. The ERA office organized it. I gotta say, they were really on the ball. I told them I'm quarantined, I was nearly out of food, and I live outside the delivery area for the stores around here, and they found a store that would do it for me in about five minutes. So, I'm gonna be okay, Kev. What did you find out?"

"The shops down in the concourse can still deliver to the apartments, because they use delivery robots and they have non-quarantined workers down there," I told her. "So I ordered about three weeks' worth of food, just to be safe. If they expand the quarantine to everyone, I want plenty of food stocked up to hold me over until it's lifted. They'll delivery it in a while, right now they're swamped with orders."

"That's not a surprise, there have to be lots of people in a building that big that don't work, work from home like you do, or don't work daytime hours," she nodded.

"We are organizing a meal plan to utilize perishable food before it spoils," the helper unit injected.

“Yeah, Stanley can tell when food’s about to go bad, so he can cook it before it happens,” I said. “That, and he’s gonna cook a bunch of dishes and freeze them so I can eat them later.”

“I just hope Sano’s gonna be alright,” Rita said. “She lives in that small apartment, and the store in her building is notoriously bad. Maybe I should have her come stay with me during the quarantine,” she mused. “She has her hovercar, she can get here easily enough. I’m sure they’d let her come up here instead of go home.”

“You can always ask her, but you know that means she won’t be able to log in,” I warned her.

“She can copy her personal files over onto a datastick and use my vidlink,” she said. “Her merge pod won’t fit in her car, but she doesn’t need it if she logs in from my vidlink with a datafiber. I’m using my merge pod now, so I don’t use the vidlink jack connection anymore.”

“The vidlink still runs the program, Rita,” I told her. “But that’s easy enough to fix. You can enable log ins from multiple accounts and run a second instance of the program from the main features menu. I’m positive your vidlink is beefy enough to handle running two instances of the game, even with both sensory streams set to maximum.”

“I’m sure it can, that vidlink is top of the line,” she said, almost indignantly.

“And you’re overlooking the fact that if she goes home, they may not let her leave her apartment,” I added. “You might want to call the ERA back and ask them if they’ll allow Sano to come stay with you.”

“Yeah, they can arrange it,” she said. “Call you back when I know more.”

“Uh, Rita, why don’t you call Sano first and ask her? You’ll feel a bit silly if you go to all the trouble of arranging it and she says no.”

She gave a sudden laugh. “Yeah, I think I’d better,” she grinned.

I watched the news while I waited for Rita to call back, which was talking about the quarantine. They had a story about the virus in the Imperium, which had been detected on Draconis, the capitol planet of the Imperium, and incited the Imperium Medical Service to declare a full

quarantine of the entire Imperium. And since Imperium citizens had visited Terra and Karis recently, both them and us were also quarantined to ensure the virus didn't spread. And if it did, that would isolate the new cases and prevent it from spreading on other planets. It was a smart thing to do, in my opinion, even if it was going to disrupt my daily routine and put the planet on its ear for a couple of weeks. The news didn't say how dangerous the virus was, only that it was highly contagious and the Medical Service was taking the extreme action of declaring a full quarantine to prevent its spread.

If they went that far, then I'd bet that the virus was pretty nasty. If it was just something like a cold or something, they wouldn't be going that far.

Rita called me back about half an hour later, and she had Sano conferenced in, so my vidlink was showing a split hologram. Sano was in her hovercar. "What's the verdict, girls?"

"I'm going to Rita's," Sano replied. "I'd much rather spend this unplanned vacation in Rita's villa and its private beach and swimming pool instead of my apartment," she grinned. "The ERA cleared it. I can go home and get my stuff, then head to Rio Indio."

"And we want to ask a favor of you, Kev," Rita said. "You said that your skimmer can be flown by remote merge?"

"Yeah," I answered.

"Okay, would you be willing to fly it down here by remote? I talked to the ERA, and they'll allow that."

"Sure. Why am I doing it?"

"Because you're going to pick up my merge pod and bring it here. I'd much rather log in from my merge pod, it's kind of spoiled me," Sano answered. "It's too big to put in my hovercar. I can put a hoverpod on the merge pod that I can access by remote, and I can open my apartment door and the cargo door for my floor by remote, so nobody has to be there to get the pod into the skimmer. You take the skimmer down and hover it by the cargo door, I'll bring the pod to the skimmer and put it in the cargo hold, then you fly it to Rita's house."

“Sure, I can do that for you,” I said. “You want me to put anything else in the skimmer? I can order it from the concourse downstairs, have them deliver it, then have the skimmer come up to the garage and load it in.”

“No, I think we’re good, Kevin,” Sano said. “Since not everyone’s being ordered to stay in their houses, I’m sure we’ll be able to order anything we need and get it delivered.”

“I already increased the food order so we don’t go hungry,” Rita agreed.

“Alright then. I’ll get the skimmer started on its way to Sao Paulo as soon as the ERA clears me to fly it down, girls,” I told them. “I’ll call you when the skimmer’s nearly there, Sano.”

“You have to call the ERA and tell them what you’re doing, Kevin,” Rita warned. “If you’re flying by remote, they’ll give you an exemption to allow your skimmer to be out and about.”

“Got it.”

“Okay, let me get home and get my stuff organized. I should be on my way to Rio Indio in just a little bit,” Sano told us. “I just need to stop by the apartment, grab some clothes and stuff, and put the hoverpod on the merge pod, and we’ll be good to go. I just hope the ferry to Miami is still running,” she said soberly. It was like 6,500 kilometers to Rio Indio from Sao Paulo, and that was about a seven hour trip by hovercar using high-speed cross country corridors. But there was a system on Terra to get hovercars around the planet in a reasonable amount of time, and that was the ferry system. There were ferries for hovercar drivers going long distances, which were hovercar carriers that went from one city to another, just like an old-fashioned boat ferry. Lucky for Sano, there was a ferry that ran from Sao Paulo to Miami, and it departed about every four hours, three times a day. Sano would board the ferry in her hovercar, it would take her to Miami in about an hour and a half using a high orbital arc (ferries were allowed to go much faster than skimmers because they flew in dedicated travel lane vectors that we skimmer pilots have to avoid), and she would then drive from Miami to Cancun, Mexico, which would take her about 80 minutes. There was a high-speed corridor that ran from Miami, over Cuba, and then on to Cancun, which would only take about 60 minutes. The reason why is because the speed limit over the ocean is way higher than over land,

allowing hovercars to go supersonic—most hovercars are capable of speeds up to Mach 2, which was the maximum allowed speed limit for any hovercar, skimmer, or dropship in the atmosphere that wasn't leaving or entering orbit, but speed limits keep them way under that most of the time. The max speed limit along the West Cuba Corridor while over water is 1,500 kilometers an hour. That's about 300 kph faster than the speed of sound, which is 1,238kph (I know that because it's on the Class 3 license test). Drivers had to slow to 650 kilometers an hour, which was below the sound barrier, when going over Cuba, and they only had to run at that speed for about 15 minutes because the West Cuba Corridor passed over the narrow bottleneck on the western side of the island. Using the shortest pilot's arc, it was only about 1,300 kilometers from Miami to Cancun, and Cancun was only about 20 minutes away from Rio Indio by hovercar, so it would take her about 80 minutes to get to Rita's house once she got off the ferry in Miami. So, it would be about a three hour trip for her, provided she didn't have to wait a few hours for the ferry to leave.

Sano liked the fact that the ferry stopped at Miami, because it meant she was close to both me and Rita from that central location. It took almost the same amount of time to go from Miami to Rita's house as it did to go from Miami to my house, about an hour and a half, because the cross country corridor that ran from Miami to Jacksonville had a much lower speed limit than the one that went to Cancun. The Atlantic Coast Corridor, or the ACC as it was known here locally, went over Florida's Atlantic coast and thus went over a heavily populated area, so the maximum speed along the high speed travel layer of the corridor was 500 kilometers an hour. And it's about 620 kilometers from my house to Miami. Add in the acceleration and deceleration times and the fact that you had to deal with way more traffic than you did in the West Cuba Corridor, and the trip took about 90 minutes.

The distances involved messed with my travel times in my skimmer as well. It took me an hour to get to Rita's house from Jacksonville, but only two hours to get to Sao Paulo, despite it being *way* further away from me than Rio Indio. The reason for that is because I can't use a high suborbital arc to get to Rio Indio, it was too close to allow that navigation trick, so I had to go the "slow" way and fly there at about 20,000 meters at Mach 2, the maximum allowable speed for a skimmer in the atmosphere. And I couldn't go in the shortest available pilot's arc because of Cuba, I had to

swing wide to go around Cuba so I didn't have to slow down. If I went over Cuba, I had to reduce to subsonic speed, even at 20,000 meters. No sonic booms were allowed when traveling laterally over populated areas, no matter your altitude, that was the rule. It was about 1,700 kilometers to Rita's house from mine, but it was about 8,500 kilometers to Sano's apartment from my house. And yet it was only an extra hour to Sano's house compared to Rita's house because I could use a suborbital arc to cover that much greater distance in only an extra hour.

It might be faster for her to wait for me, however, because I could tow her hovercar using my skimmer.

"I'm sure they are, since not everyone is being quarantined," I said. "You can always check. And if they're not, or you'll have to wait too long, you can always wait for me to get down there and I'll tow your car to Rita's house."

"Or you could just take her, she won't need her car here," Rita injected.

"True," Sano said. "Lemme call and see if the ferry's running, and when it leaves if it is. Call you guys back in a few."

Sano's idea worked, and we had to use it because she got lucky and got onto the ferry just ten minutes before it was scheduled to leave...and she wanted to take her car so she wouldn't have to have me take her back home. The ERA office in Jacksonville cleared my skimmer to fly once I explained what I was going to do, and assured them I'd be flying by remote merge, and I had it in the air and on the move ten minutes after I got clearance. Flying by remote merge is a lot different from being in the cockpit, but I've done it before, so it wasn't all that difficult. It's just different because you're seeing through the skimmer's cameras instead of through the windshield and the skimmer's instrument data is fed directly into your mind via the jack. But, it's a bit annoying because the rules were, when you flew by remote merge, you had to stay merged to the asset you were controlling at all times. I couldn't just put the skimmer on autopilot and go watch viddy or something, I had to stay actively merged to the skimmer. But, that didn't stop me from watching viddy from inside the merge while the skimmer flew down on autopilot, the rules only said I had to stay actively merged to the asset at all times while it was in operation. I noticed that there was a lot less traffic in the sky as I flew down, because the vast majority of Terran

citizens were species that were now under quarantine. There were still some skimmers and dropships moving around as I executed a nearly sub-orbital arc to get from Jacksonville to Sao Paulo quickly, but not nearly as many as usual.

I had the skimmer down in Sao Paulo about two hours after taking off, and I called Sano, who had was off the ferry and about halfway to Rio Indio. We then executed the loading operation without a hitch. I brought the skimmer to the cargo door for her floor, which they used to move furniture in and out, and opened the cargo hatch in the back of the skimmer. I used the skimmer's rear camera to line up the hatch with the cargo door, and Sano's merge pod was sitting on the other side of it when it opened. She then whisked her merge pod into the back of the skimmer by operating the hoverpod attached to it by remote, using the camera in the hoverpod to let her see what she was doing, and once it was safely in the cargo hold, I closed the hatch and slowly inched away from the building as the cargo door closed.

How was that for feeling like I was living in the future? Me and Sano had just loaded her merge pod in Sao Paulo from my house in Florida and her hovercar, which was flying over the jungles of southern Mexico.

It took me about an hour to get the skimmer to Rio Indio from Sao Paulo using a high sub-orbital arc, landing it on the pad behind Rita's house, which held Rita and Sano's hovercars. There was barely enough room for the skimmer to land, but I managed it. Rita and Sano were out there waiting for it, Rita in a tee and jeans and Sano wearing a pair of shorts and a bikini top—which made it hard for me to not fix all my cameras on her, Sano was a sexy woman—and Sano used the hoverpod attached to the merge pod to unload it once the skimmer was down and the hatch opened. *"You girls got it?"* I asked through the speaker in the cargo hold.

"We've got it, Kevin, thank you very much! You're a total sweetheart!" Sano replied, waving at the skimmer as the merge pod drifted over to them, then set down in the grass behind them.

"We owe you, Kev!" Rita agreed. "See you in game when you get home!"

“I expect a Savar Special meal sitting on the table waiting for me when I log on!” I demanded.

Sano laughed. “You got it! I’ll get started on it as soon as we set up my merge pod and I can log in!”

Sano was in the game by the time I got home, Savar greeting me as I came out of the bedroom I use to log out. “Hey Xen, as you can see, we’re all set up over here,” she smiled.

“Any trouble setting it up?”

“Nope,” she replied. “Rita’s vidlink is as powerful as you’d expect, given her house. It’s not having any trouble running two instances of the game at full merge, with merge pods. Not like mine. Mine would be melting right about now,” she laughed.

“I told you I’d buy you a better vidlink,” I told her.

“And I told you, your money is your money,” she replied patiently. “You bought me the merge pod for *Bisu em Sedla*”—that was a Shio holiday kinda like Christmas that was about a month ago—”and that was more than enough. So stop trying to waste all your money on me.”

“It’s not wasting it,” I accused as I walked past her.

We didn’t do all that much in game, because what was going on out in the real world was a little strange. Savar did make me my super-meal, then we went up onto the roof and practiced skills. I had the viewing crystal up on the roof, and we were watching INN while we practiced skills, which was on breaking news coverage mode of the quarantine. The *entire* Imperium had been quarantined, and that meant there were news stories about it from all over, how they were arranging supply lines with quarantine rules in effect and how they were supplying individuals. The views they showed didn’t show completely empty cities and skies, however, because merge-driven vehicles were out and about, as well as bionoids, cargo robots, and Faey in medical E-suits. Much like here on Terra, they were using non-living assets to move goods and supplies around whenever possible, which would allow them to keep everyone supplied with food without risking exposure.

To exactly *what*, even INN didn't know, and they'd run a couple of stories about them trying to find out. The Imperium government wasn't saying anything about the virus, and neither was the Medical Service. All they would say was that the virus was a danger, it was extremely contagious, and because of that, the Imperium, Terra, and Karis had all been quarantined, because people known to have contracted the virus had visited Terra and Karis recently. INN was doing its best to keep everyone calm, however, reporting that the quarantine was only precautionary, and that the only reported cases of the virus were on Draconis.

So, we were all stuck in our houses as a precaution, and I'm sure that some people were looking forward to the impromptu vacation they were going to get, while others were probably already chafing at being stuck in the house or were worried about the loss of income from not being able to work. I was just glad that since I'm financially secure, and that I also work from home. So long as the quarantine didn't mess up my ability to get food, I'd be just fine.

Or so I thought.

Two days later, we found out exactly what the virus was, and what it did, and I honestly didn't know what to think.

We were again up on the roof of my townhouse when the news hit INN. Emelda and Savar were there, but so were four other people, Alandra, Meldo, Bullox, and Braggan. They were here because the seven of us were discussing trying the Burning Mountain raid as a group, and live streaming out attempt. We'd decided that we needed a dedicated healer and at least one other person that could act as a main tank—because of boss monster mechanics that would make it impossible to kill them without at least two main tanks—and we kinda ended up with Braggan and Alandra because they got word of what we were doing and were interested in going along. That was a couple of people too many for what I felt we were trying to do, but then again we were doing it for fun, and Braggan and Alandra are friends of mine in game, so it would be kinda dickish of me to tell them no when them going didn't really matter.

In the raid, I'd be acting as the other main tank because my defensive sword skills were higher than Alandra's, Alandra and Braggan would be the primary melee DPS and add control (*adds* were extra monsters summoned by the boss during the fight, and virtually all raid boss monsters had adds), Savar and Emelda would be providing the ranged DPS, and Meldo would be our only healer...the poor guy.

It would be seven of us taking on a raid designed to challenge a group of a minimum of thirty players, but the balancer was that all seven of us were Champions, all of us had extremely high skill averages, and we were all Citadel-level geared. So our combined power would be about equal to the skill and gear level of a raid of 30 that the raid was designed to challenge. The key of victory for us was that nobody could die. Losing just one person would cripple us, and it would guarantee that we'd lose the fight, what we call a *wipe*. That was when the boss monster wiped out the raid and won.

The others could use the distraction. Savar, Braggan, and Meldo were working class in real life, and they were already starting to worry about the loss of income...though Rita and me certainly weren't going to let Sano get evicted or go broke if she got behind on her bills. Alandra was a college student, and was still on summer break, so thus far the quarantine hadn't really interfered with her outside of keeping her inside. Bullox owned his own business in real life, he owned a small pub in Manchester, England, and he'd been forced to close because he and all his employees were under quarantine, so he was worried as well. And we were all playing the game to try to forget about what was going on out in the real world.

But the real world intruded as we sat on chairs and benches I conjured up on the roof and discussed the raid, when we were going, who was doing what, and the fact that all seven of us were going to stream the attempt on our Arena channels. For Braggan and Bullox, that meant they had to start Arena channels and get the streaming software, which they were willing to do because they were worried about money and they were hoping to get some income out of the stream. We'd helped them get all that set up, to the point where Savar had called Bullox in real life to walk him through setting up the streaming program and linking his Arena channel to his bank so he could collect revenue. I still had the viewing crystal up on the roof, so we could catch any breaking news—like hopefully that they were ending the

quarantine—and I had the hologram on but the sound muted so we could talk without it bothering us.

“Whoa, turn up the viewing crystal!” Braggan blurted, pointing at the hologram. It was behind me, so I couldn’t see it. I turned on my chair and looked, ordering the viewing crystal to return to normal volume.

“—didn’t think that was possible,” the anchor said to someone out in the field on another window on the screen. Since it was INN, all of them were Faey. Reporters were allowed to go out during quarantine, which was why the reporter, a young, handsome man, was wearing a medical E-suit.

“Given that it was part of an official Medical Service release about the virus, it has to be true,” the reporter said. “The Medical Service has no reason to lie, especially about this. The report came from the office of the Director of the Medical Service herself, so it could come from no higher within the service.”

“Has the Medical Service commented on any potential medical complications for those infected by the virus?”

“Not as yet, all we’ve received is the press release,” the reporter answered. “They did say that a future release will address what will happen for those who have been infected by the virus, and one source that wished to go unnamed said that the House of Karinne has offered assistance. They’re the only ones that can help train them.”

“For those who have just tuned in,” the anchor said, “the Faey Medical Service has just released a report about the virus that has triggered the quarantine. It’s not a standard illness. It is a *retrovirus*, and the report claims that it is suspected to be the original retrovirus that created the Generations that are members of the House of Karinne. Somehow, a three thousand year old virus has come back, and it can infect and transform its hosts into people known as Generations.”

Nearly all of us gasped.

“If you’re not familiar with the Generations, they were a product of genetic engineering experiments carried out by the House of Karinne over three thousand years ago, experiments that are now illegal in the Imperium *because* of those experiments,” she explained. “There are only about three to four hundred known Generations, and they are all in the House of

Karinne. The most famous of them is the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, ruler of the House.. Generations are genetically engineered to be powerful telepaths and telekinetics, and have the ability to communicate with the telepathic computers employed by the House of Karinne. They can also have their psionic abilities augmented by those telepathic computers, increasing their power. The technology is known as *biogenics*, and it's one of the most guarded secrets in the entire galaxy. Only the House of Karinne can build biogenic devices, and their history of protecting that technology from being stolen is nearly infamous within the Confederation. The Generations fighting in the Syndicate War made quite an impact due to their ability to warp space using their telekinetic abilities, which protected their ships from damage during battle.” The window beside the anchor changed to show stock footage of that, of a huge bolt of plasma being bent away from a Karinne ship, who all shared that triangular design that always reminded me of a Star Destroyer from *Star Wars*. “The press release certainly explains both the quarantine efforts here and on Terra. Given that the ruler of the House of Karinne is a Terran Generation with a Faey ancestor, it proves that the virus can infect and transform Terrans as well as Faey.”

“It does, Maira,” the reporter agreed. “Though many in the Imperial Government don't necessarily see this development as a bad thing, the fact that the virus is so contagious is why that many in the government fear that a pandemic might grind the Imperium's economy to a complete halt, which would cause economic chaos.”

“Is there any word on what's happening to those who have already been infected?”

“Right now, very little,” he answered. “They haven't been rounded up by the Imperial government, and those infected have been told to stay in their homes and continue to obey the quarantine, even though they're no longer in danger from the virus. They're being told to stay quarantined so they don't risk infecting other Faey. They're carriers of the virus. As to what will happen to them after the quarantine is lifted, nobody will say. But the simple fact is, they will be Generations, and right now there's no word on what the Empress Dahnai Merrane will do about that.”

“Holy shit,” Bullox grunted as we watched. “I did not expect that.”

“If it can affect Terrans too, no wonder we’re locked down,” Alandra grunted. “But it doesn’t explain why Savar’s quarantined too. She’s Shio.”

“I guess it’s an abundance of caution,” Savar said. “They quarantined ten species, and all of us are most likely closely related genetically. They must be afraid we’re able to get infected. That, or maybe Shio and the others can carry and transmit the virus without being affected by it.”

“Yeah, I’m quarantined too, and I’m Strath,” Braggan said.

“Really? I had no idea, I thought you were Terran,” Alandra told him.

“I’ve lived here long enough to be corrupted by you guys,” he grinned. “I came to Terra as a teenager when my parents moved here to get jobs, and I’ve lived here long enough to lose my Strath accent.. And you couldn’t tell I was Strath just by looking at me. Strath and Terrans are virtually identical, about the only way we’re different is we Strath are taller than Terrans and we can have hair and eye colors that Terrans can’t. And since my hair is black and my eyes are brown, I just look like a really tall Terran.”

“Which is most likely why you’re quarantined,” Emelda said clinically. “And since you play a dwarf in game, no way would we ever know who’s behind the avatar.”

“I’m tall in real life, I wanted to see what it was like to be short,” Braggan laughed.

“One of my friends is a Pai, and she went the other way. She rolled a Jagaara so she could see what it was like to be able to see over counters,” I said, which made the others laugh.

“Mrima is such a dear,” Savar said. Mrima and Savar had struck up a friendship over the last couple of months, and they talked both in game and in real life. As had Rita, and she too called Mrima just to talk from time to time. Mrima had effectively charmed them the same way she’d charmed me.

“Still, I think things are gonna get nuts,” Alandra said. “I did some research on the Generations for an Academy class, and the big thing about them is that the Karinnes are like savage when it comes to protecting them and their biogenic machines. The whole Confederation knows that if you even *try* to steal those secrets, the Karinnes will declare war on you. I bet

there's a lot of screaming going on between the Empress and the Grand Duke, 'cause now there are gonna be Generations in the Imperium. They may even go to war, cause the Karinnes will want them to join their house."

"I doubt that, the Grand Duke's son is married to the Empress' daughter," Bullox said dismissively.

"I didn't know you were a Royal watcher, Bullox," Sano said lightly.

"I'm British, dove, we have a thing for royalty," he grinned in reply. "Even when they're not *our* royals."

That made us laugh. "I don't think there'll be a war over it," Emelda said. "The Grand Duke doesn't seem like that kind of person."

"How can you know that?" Alandra asked.

She glanced at me. "We've met him, kinda in person," she admitted. "Did we tell you how we got the money?"

"You said the DFM paid you what they owed you," Braggan said.

"Yeah, but it was the Grand Duke that made them do it," she said. "And he came and talked to us in game, to talk about it. He was really nice," she said with a fond smile.

"Whoa, he came in person?" Alandra asked.

I nodded. "He was a Jagaara, so sorta in person," I added. "He came to talk to us about how the DFM had been treating us, and he wanted to hear our answers himself instead of sending someone else to talk to us. It wasn't long after that that the U.N. busted a bunch of people in the DFM for stealing the money meant for farm workers. Ever since then, the DFM has been really easy to deal with."

"The Grand Duke kept his promise," Emelda said in a charged voice. "He said he'd take care of us farm workers, and he did. I've talked to other farm workers that say that the DFM is really helpful now."

"Damn, Em, I had no idea you were on the farms," Alandra said in a compassionate voice.

"Me and Xen were," she said. "It's why we stopped fighting. When we found out we were both on the farms, it was over. I would never fight with a

brother. *Never*,” she declared adamantly.

Savar put a hand on Emelda’s wrist, then took her hand. “Yeah, let’s change the subject. I don’t like making them talk about that,” she said gently.

“Amen,” Alandra said.

“I read some of the news reports,” Braggan said. “I don’t need to hear any more.”

We went quiet and listened to the INN broadcast again, but they didn’t really say anything new. They were discussing the ramifications with a series of experts, from political pundits to retired doctors that once worked in the Medical Service, who now acted as medical experts for INN. They did do a pretty in-depth report explaining what a retrovirus was and how it worked, how it could give someone psionic powers. And they even explained why people like Savar and Braggan were quarantined. “I’ve studied what information the Medical Service has on the Generation retrovirus, and I can understand why they’re being so cautious with the quarantine,” the doctor said, a handsome middle-aged Faey with dark blue hair. “Anyone can carry the virus, even if the virus can’t affect them, so it creates a risk of exposure for Faey and Terrans. The key to stopping this outbreak before it gets out of control is to have everyone stay indoors, minimize contact with others as much as Faeyly possible, and isolate anyone carrying the virus until a cure can be found for it.”

“Are those infected in danger?” the anchor asked.

“From what I’ve read, no. The virus attacks the immune system first, and once it disables it, it attacks the rest of the body. That’s a very, very important thing,” he said strongly. “With the immune system disabled, the virus can convert the rest of the body’s cells without the immune system attacking converted cells, thinking that they’re foreign invaders. The immune system recovers and resumes normal function after the transition is complete. The greatest risk to infected Faey is secondary infections that take hold while the immune system is disabled. The way this virus works, there’s virtually no chance of the patient suffering major side effects or complications. In that one regard, we’re all very, very lucky. If it didn’t work like that, any adult Faey exposed to the virus could very well be killed

by their own immune system as it fought to destroy the cells the virus altered.”

“Are retroviruses rare? This is the first I’ve heard of them.”

“Retroviruses in general aren’t very common, but ones that can affect Faey are indeed quite rare. And one that can change a host body’s cells to the degree that this one can is *extremely* rare, as in so rare that I doubt that such a retrovirus could occur naturally. Remember that this virus is a recurrence of a three thousand year old retrovirus that was artificially created by the original House of Karinne. As to how it’s resurfaced after all this time, I can’t say, but that doesn’t really matter right now. Right now, the important thing is for the Medical Service to stop the virus from spreading.”

“How much you wanna bet the Medical Service leaked that to him to prevent a panic,” Alandra said.

“Probably, but I bet there are some people wishing that it gets here,” Bullox said. “I think it’d be cool to be a telepath. And a telekinetic. Think, you’d never have to get off the couch to get something again. Just whoosh,” he said, holding out his hand.

I said nothing. My mind was filled with the things that the Trillane guards had done to me, things so unspeakable that I wouldn’t even be able to describe them. The idea that someone like me, who had once been tortured by telepaths, would become one...I just didn’t know how to process that concept. On one hand, I’d never be tortured like that again, not after I learned how to protect myself. But on the other, I’d look at myself in the mirror every day and know that I had become what I feared most.

I don’t think you guys can understand just how much courage it took for me to get Shio inserted into my memory. Sano is one of the few things that can motivate me to allow a telepath into my mind, and even then, I had to go find a non-Faey telepath to do it. If it had been a Faey, I may have died from a heart attack induced by the terror.

And what about Rita? Rita was even more afraid of telepaths than I was, half the reason she moved to a remote village in Mexico was so she wouldn’t have to even look at a Faey. All her neighbors in those fancy houses on the beach near hers were Shio. God, I was so glad Sano was there with Rita right now.

The news didn't really say anything new or important, and I wasn't all that interested in talking about it either. So, I more or less begged off the gathering and logged off to work on a vidy I had planned, using some of the simsense recordings I had in my library. With the quarantine, right now everyone would be at home, and this was a good time to put out a bunch of viddies and try to capitalize on that captive audience to make a little more money.

Even though I was financially secure, something told me that it might be a good idea to put a few extra credits in the bank. Just in case.

Things deteriorated here on Earth very rapidly over the next few weeks.

The quarantine didn't lift. In fact, after about ten days, the entire planet was quarantined, *every* race was ordered to hole up in their homes. That effectively shut down the entire planet, and let me tell you, it was almost eerie to stand on my balcony and look out and see nobody. No one on the beach, almost no hovercars in the air. There was a little bit of air traffic, but it was almost all police and TERA vehicles, making sure that nobody was out and about. We had no idea why they expanded the quarantine, and the rumor was, it meant that the virus was found on Earth. Since anyone could carry the virus, it did make sense. If the virus was on Earth, then they couldn't let anyone out and about to spread it, even those who couldn't catch it.

What it did was put a massive crunch on basic life. With everyone under quarantine, that meant that there was nobody to deliver food to homebound residents. There were robots and bionoids, but there weren't enough to make it quick or easy. So, for over a week now, what was going on was that we were all on a food delivery schedule where food was delivered to us every four days, and that food was basic staples. You couldn't shop for whatever you wanted. You were given what they had available, and almost all of it was canned, boxed, or otherwise preserved. Fresh meat, dairy, and produce quickly became a memory, for about everyone but me.

I saw this coming, almost from the start. That was why I had the concourse downstairs deliver more and more food over the first days of the quarantine, particularly meat, which I then froze in two stand-alone freezers

I bought and put in the utility room. I had enough meat in those freezers to last me two months. And I'd also bought a food preservation unit popular on Shio that was used for fruits and vegetables, kind of like vacuum packing food, and what it did was keep perishable fruits and vegetables fresh for nearly a month. I had that unit stuffed with perishable produce, managing to get the last of it out of the shop up at the top of the building before the building ran out. Those units were really big, they were meant more for restaurants than houses, and they weren't cheap. It took up a big chunk of my utility room as well, which made me have to park my hovercar down in the underground garage, managing to just barely squeeze it in beside the skimmer so I didn't have to rent another space. But I didn't care, those freezers and that unit meant that I'd be eating food not out of a can or a sealed container for a good month before I had to start using up my canned food stores.

Those stores were taking up the rest of the space in my utility room. My utility room almost looked like some survivalist's food hoard. I had cases of canned, dried, and boxed food stacked wherever I had room, and in total, I had maybe four months' worth of food in my apartment that I'd bought to hedge against a food shortage on Terra due to the quarantine.

I wasn't just hoarding food for me, though. Twice I'd sent my skimmer down to Rio Indio by remote merge with loads of food, after arranging it with the ERA, and delivered both some fresh food and some canned food to Rita and Sano. The stores in their area ran out of perishables, and since they were so remote, the ERA would only deliver to them every nine days, and what they delivered was the most basic of staples. Rita and Sano were more or less relying on me for some variety in their diets, eating more than bread and cheese.

It got so bad that they were taking advantage of the ocean and were fishing for dinner, which they were allowed to do because Rita's beach was private, it was on her private property. Rita had bought fishing rods and they spent a portion of each day out on the beach, trying to snag some fresh fish for dinner. They'd been moderately successful, at least after they got over having to clean the fish. Hunger for more than canned food had driven them to get over their squeamishness and clean the fish they caught.

Nearly three weeks after the quarantine began, we got the official word that most of us suspected. The virus was on Earth. And what made it such a huge deal was that the virus had mutated, and it didn't only affect Faey anymore. Now it affected humans as well, and that meant that a virus that could turn people into telepaths was loose on a planet with some seven *billion* people that it could affect.

And it was far more insidious that I think anyone ever believed.

It was all anyone could talk about, both in game and in real life. The news was dominated with stories about the outbreak, which had been detected in New York City, Norfolk, London, Tokyo, Cape Town, Cairo, Rome, and Arelle City, the largest city on Antarctica. The doctors had no idea how it was spreading despite the quarantine restrictions, and almost every hour, they added hundreds to the tally of those known to be infected. They were both humans and Faey, and there were tons of stories about what they were going to do about a whole bunch of humans that were suddenly going to be telepaths, very soon.

I was watching the news on the viewing crystal in my shop in Freeport after restocking—it had become quite profitable because the goods I offered in it were sold to both other players and Djinn NPCs—waiting for Savar and Emelda to finish their raid. They were on the last boss in the last raid in the Twin Worlds, and they would start Citadel progression afterward. The four top guilds on the server had formed an alliance, banding together to get them done, which was a good idea since none of them particularly cared about the loot that would drop from the raids thanks to gearing up on the Citadel. When they finished them, the four guilds were going to separate and work on Citadel progression on their own, so this would be the last day that the Dark Riders, Seva's Band, Pactum, and the Golden Crusaders would be raiding together. Each of them had built a raid force that could handle it out of new recruits, even the Golden Crusaders—what they did had largely been forgiven on the server—and they'd have to go through a period of gearing up their new recruits with Citadel overworld trash mob loot drops and quest rewards before they started the first step of official progression, and that was the dungeons around and within Citadel City. The further from the city you went, the harder the dungeons became.

The three weeks had been very good to the three of us personally as well. Emelda had gotten Flames of Methrian past 2,000, so she was now rocking her very sweet Phoenix form and had cemented herself as the most powerful mage archetype on the server. Savar had gotten her Bow skill to 2,500, and had earned a pretty awesome new child skill that increased her range with a bow and also increased the damage she dealt with unboosted arrow fire, which meant arrows she shot where she wasn't using one of her other bow skills. And I had managed to get Defense over 3,000, which had unlocked two new child skills. The first was called Steadfast, which had the *absolutely huge* ability to allow me to apply a portion of my Defense skill to my Magic Resistance, which would further reduce the damage I took from magical attacks. The percent increase to my MR was dependent on my skill in Steadfast, and it was raised by taking magical damage.

And I could cheese that by taking ticky-tack damage from low-power magic spells cast by other players, or even from *myself*. You can easily use area of effect spells against yourself in the game by including yourself within the area of effect. Players are not immune to their own spells. If they're in the area of effect, they take damage along with everyone else.

I can't tell you how major that is. I think I told you that MR is one of the most important stats in the game, and having the ability to buff that stat a new way was a massive, massive boon.

The second child skill was called Stoic, and it was pretty interesting. What it did was allow me to take progressively less damage if I was trapped in something that dealt constant, sustained damage over time. Like standing in fire or being stuck in a room with deathly cold air. The longer I was in the damaging effect, the more the skill mitigated the damage, up to a cap dictated by my skill level. That may not seem like all that much, but for raiders—and for me, who solos boss monsters a lot—it was a very useful ability, since many raid bosses and overworld boss monsters had abilities that dealt constant damage to everything in a certain area or within a certain distance of them. After all, attacking a fire elemental meant you had to be close enough for its intense heat to burn you even without touching you, so everyone within two meters of one took constant fire damage from it. The amount of damage the skill mitigated depended on the skill level, naturally, and I could see that once I got the skill up, it was going to be very useful in my soloing endeavors.

That wasn't the only progress I'd made. I'd managed to get Djinn Form to 1,938, so I was within reasonable striking distance of my goal of 2,000. If I could score just a few decent skill crystals, I could conceivably get it there in the next week. I'd also raised Jolt just past the threshold of 1,500 and Storm Lord had hit the threshold of 2,000, which made my lightning-based attacks hit *really* hard now. Jolt now had a nearly two meter range, and it hit for enough damage to make it useful for more than zapping annoying insects. And Imbue Arrow was now *dangerous* thanks to Storm Lord, to the point where I was able to dish out some considerable damage at range when I needed to do so.

Storm Lord was quickly turning into the MVP of the skills I'd gained from Gift of the Djinn.

I wasn't all that into practicing right now. I'd been really tired all day, and that had bled over into the game. I hadn't done much of anything today either in the real world or in game, even restocking my two shops had been a chore, so I mainly just sat around and tried to get over my lethargy. I had to fight to stay awake as I waited for Emelda and Savar, yawning constantly and finding myself nodding off any time I found a comfortable position on the couch. Really, the way I felt, I should just log off and send them a message telling them I didn't feel up to doing anything tonight, but that would be letting them all down. I was going to go to a party for the four guilds hosted over at Pactum's guild HQ that would celebrate them finishing all the raids in the Twin Worlds, which was worth celebrating. Just about my entire friend list was going to be there, except for Mrima and her cubs.

She was in a bit of a pickle at the moment. She'd been on vacation with her cubs on Paian to see her family, and the quarantine more or less trapped them there. They weren't allowed to come home. She'd been doing her work for 2M from Paian while her cubs did their coursework over Civnet, but it wasn't easy for her. She was the supervisor of the Accounting department in the Norfolk office, and that wasn't easy to do from home. But she was managing, there was little that Mrima couldn't do when she put her mind to it, and I talked to her almost every day. But, she was so busy that she had no time to play CO, so she hadn't so much as logged in since the quarantine was put in place..

I really was just exhausted. So exhausted that I wasn't sure if I was going to make it to the party, let alone make it through it. I logged off to go to the bathroom, and nearly staggered down the hall and into the bathroom.

I never made it back to the merge pod.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital bed. I was in a small room that was very plain and bare, the walls painted a soft blue and no window, and there was an energy shield completely surrounding the bed. It ran from floor to ceiling, with the shield emitters in the ceiling above me, which I could see because I opened my eyes laying on my back. There were air vents up there as well, beside a single light panel. Almost as soon as I sat up, honestly confused, a hologram winked on and a Faey man's face appeared. "Don't try to get up, Mister Ball," he warned. "You'll find that you're still a bit weak."

I looked at the face, a rather handsome Faey man who looked young, with soft rose-colored eyes and dark chestnut colored hair, and all I could feel was the rising fear I felt whenever I was confronted with a Faey. "Where am I?" I asked.

"The Jacksonville medical annex," he replied. "Your apartment's helper unit called EMS when you fainted. You were very smart to program it to respond to emergency situations," he said approvingly.

"I...I did? I don't remember doing that."

"Perhaps it was turned on by default," he said with a gentle smile. "But either way, it saved you a lot of trouble, sir. You broke your nose in your fall and had lost a considerable amount of blood before the EMTs got there."

I put a hand to my face, touching my nose. It didn't hurt, and felt just like it always did, which meant that it had been repaired while I was unconscious. They must have fixed it while I was unconscious. They have the tech to fix broken bones and cartilage in a matter of minutes, like something out of *Star Trek*, at least very simple breaks. The device is called a bone fuser, and I've had one used on me many times.

Many times.

"What happened? Why did I pass out?"

He took on a more serious expression. "I'll be to the point, sir. You were infected by the retrovirus, and it has completed its work. You are now a Generation," he replied, which made me gasp and gawk at him.

"What? *How*? I never left my apartment!" I said hurriedly.

"You're not the only one who's reported that," he answered. "We don't know how the virus is being transmitted. You're not the only one in your building to be infected, Mister Ball," he told me. "Nearly a quarter of the Terrans and Faey in your building are infected. We believe that, somehow, the food delivery units were contaminated and spread the virus," he told me.

I leaned back on the bed, trying to wrap my head around that. I'd been infected! And if the Faey was right, then I'd already gone through the transition, and was now a Generation! Me, a Generation! That meant that I was now a telepath and a telekinetic! But I didn't feel any different, I wasn't hearing any thoughts, and nothing was moving around me. I felt just fine, and completely normal, outside of being very tired and having a very faint headache. What would this mean for me? What would they do to me? Was I going to be shipped to some education camp? Was I going to live out the rest of my life inside this hard shield, to prevent me from infecting anyone else? Would I *disappear*, carted off into a waiting dropship, never to be seen again?

I was so confused. And more than a little frightened.

The Faey gave me a gentle look. "Calmly," he said in a soothing voice. "It's going to be alright, Mister Ball. We'll answer all of your questions and explain to you what's going to happen next. It's going to be alright."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"As soon as you're medically cleared, you'll be sent back home," he told me. "Your building is going to be medically isolated, so those who were infected will be allowed to wait out the quarantine in their own homes. You'll be able to move freely about your building, so you'll be able to do your own shopping in the building concourse and take advantage of your building's other amenities," he explained, which sounded pretty good to me. I'd love to be able to go back to the gym up near the penthouse. "So you'll be in medical isolation for a while, but you'll be isolated in your own home,

with the ability to move around a little bit,” he said reassuringly. “They’re doing that work right now, and as soon as they’re done, you’ll be released to go home. You’ll have to wear a medical E-suit for the trip to ensure you don’t infect anyone else, but you’ll be allowed to take it off once you’re back in your apartment.”

“O-Okay,” I said, sitting back up. “How long will I be like that?”

“I honestly can’t tell you,” he replied.

“And what about after? Will I be left alone?”

“Do you mean will you be allowed to go back to your job and your life? Yes,” he replied. “At least once all of this blows over, anyway. Once we stop the virus, the people who have been infected will go back to their lives. But, you will have to undergo some training,” he warned. “You’re now a telepath, Mister Ball, and you have to learn how to control it so you don’t pose a threat to people around you. You’ll receive instruction on the basics of telepathy that you need to know so you don’t pose a danger to yourself or others, then you’ll be allowed to go back to your daily routine. If you want to learn more about telepathy, what you can do with it, it will be solely and completely your decision to pursue that education,” he told me in a serious voice. “You will only be required to learn the bare minimum to not be a hazard to others. That’s all.”

Well, that didn’t sound so bad. So, they’d basically teach me how to not cause problems for other people and leave it up to me to learn more if I wanted to know more about it. And I could live with that. It meant that I’d have control over my situation, and that calmed me down somewhat.

“I don’t feel any different. I’m not hearing anyone thinking.”

“That’s because you haven’t expressed yet,” he replied. “And we honestly have no idea when that will happen. We have very little information about people who have been infected, Mister Ball. You may express today, you may express next takir, you may express next year, there’s no way to tell. Not even Faey medical science can predict when a telepath will express.”

“Oh. What...what will happen? Will I know when I do?”

“Yes, you’ll know,” he said with a gentle smile. “Usually, the first sign of it is that you start to hear other telepaths send. Afterward, you’ll start hearing the unshielded thoughts of people around you, which requires more sensitivity for a telepath to pick up. Sending is much, well, louder, to use a term, so it’s usually what you hear first.”

“So, it’ll be like hearing someone talking to me through my jack? Hearing it in my head instead of with my ears?”

“Precisely so,” he nodded. “And I must say, the fact that you’re experienced with your jack may help you with what’s coming.”

“I’ve had it for a few years,” I said absently. “What about the other thing? Telekinesis?”

“We’re not going to teach that to anyone, because it’s not required knowledge and I’ve been told that it can be very involved. You won’t be using it by accident, so it’s safe for us to not teach you unless you want to learn. If you do want to learn how to use it, you can sign up for classes through the Academy,” he told me. “So, if you want to learn how to use it, you can pursue it on your own. I know I will,” he said with a smile.

“You were infected too?”

He nodded. “It’s one reason why I’m working in the isolation ward. I’m a pediatrician by trade, but I’ve been moved to the containment ward because I’ve already been infected. It doesn’t matter if I enter your containment field and my E-suit suffers a tear or something. You pose no risk to me,” he explained.

“Oh. I guess that make sense,” I mused. “How did you get it?”

“I have no idea. I’m like you, Mister Ball, I have no idea how I got infected, or who gave it to me. I woke up from the coma just yesterday.”

“Coma?”

“That’s why you passed out,” he explained to me. “When the virus reaches your brain, it triggers your brain to all but shut down so the virus can do its work without complications. You go into a coma while the virus is changing your brain cells. And it happens without warning. From what your medical report says, they think you literally passed out mid-stride in your living room. It hit you that fast.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “But I’m okay now?”

“You’re just fine,” he smiled. “Now, I’m going to need to come into the room and take a blood sample,” he told me. “After I’m done, we’ll send you up something to eat and let you rest, okay?”

“I—okay,” I replied, feeling a bit nervous. The idea that a Faey was going to be in here with a needle did not sit well with me, and I’m sure the doctor could pick that up from wherever he was. Odds are, he was very close to my room, maybe at the nurse’s station in the ward.

Understand, I don’t hold Faey doctors in the same regard as everyone else. Faey doctors are still Faey, and their doctor’s oaths mean about jack shit to me. When I was on the farm, I was sent to the infirmary there on the farm dozens, maybe even hundreds of times, due to getting hurt out in the fields due to there being little to no safety precautions and the injuries the guards inflicted on me. The medics there just patched me up and sent me back to the fields, despite me telling them what they were doing to me, despite me all but begging and pleading for them to make it stop. They didn’t care what the guards were doing to us, even when the guards tortured us, like the time they strapped me down on the ground and had a blade tiller roll over me, as a warning to the rest of the dorm when they found contraband. It damn near cut me in half, and came within about two centimeters of cutting my aortic artery, which would have made me bleed to death in a matter of seconds. If not for them sending me to an annex for care, I’d be dead now.

And even after that, after such a horrific injury, the doctors in the annex just sent me back to the farm after I spent nearly a month there, a month I spent trying to tell them what was happening on the farms. They would just pat my hand and tell me everything would be alright, and then they shipped me back to that hell without so much as a goodbye.

I have that scar on my back, running across my over my lower shoulder blades, and it’s *ghastly*. It’s why I never go shirtless.

The doctors knew what the guards were doing, and they didn’t care. They didn’t care about us, they only cared about getting us out of their clinics and their annexes as fast as possible so they didn’t have to listen to us tell them what was really going on. It’s one of the reasons why I avoid

doctors whenever and wherever possible, why I won't go to my appointments and I won't let them anywhere near me.

They knew what was happening to us, and they did *nothing*.

So, when the doctor entered the room wearing a medical E-suit, my anxiety level shot through the roof. I had to actively keep myself from jumping off the bed and running when he stepped through the containment field. But, when he looked at me, when our eyes met, I had the strangest sensation run through me, like a chill up my spine, and it actually calmed me down a little. The doctor didn't seem quite so threatening after I met his gaze. It was almost like I recognized him, despite the fact that I'd never seen him before. "You can feel it too, I see," he said to me.

"Feel what? That whatever it was?"

He nodded as he prepared to take my blood. "From what I was told, it's something that we all feel. We can tell who's a Generation just by looking at them, like we can sense each other," he explained, and he distracted me enough to where I was surprised when I felt the needle prick me. "I look at you, and I know you're a Generation. It makes it easy to know who's been infected and who hasn't," he added with dry amusement as he finished, applying a tiny dab of clear gel over the needle mark. It prevented it from bleeding. "We have to look at each other in person, though. It doesn't work over holograms."

"Huh," I said as he looked down at me.

"And I'm done here. I'll clear out and order your meal, so you can rest comfortably," he told me. "There's a datafiber on your left you can use to jack into the annex's computer, if you want to surf Civnet or play some games," he told me, pointing at the vidlink console. "If you want to watch viddy, you don't have to leave the bed. The viddy emitters are on this side of the containment field, so you can see clearly if you want to watch rather than merge. But don't get too involved. You need to eat something after your transition, so I'll have your meal sent up as soon as I can get the order down to the kitchen."

"My what? Transition?"

"That's what we're calling it," he nodded down at me. "The process of becoming a Generation. Transition."

“Oh. Alright, I guess. Is there something on the annex mainframe about what happened to me?”

He nodded, giving me an approving look. “Public domain, there’s a series of files available for download about what’s going on and what you’ll be doing next, as well as what you’ll be able to do now that you’re a Generation. There’s quite a few files about telepathy that you can read to prepare you for your upcoming lessons. Feel free to access it and read up on the process. I’m sure it’ll make you feel better knowing exactly what’s going to happen over the next few days.”

“Okay. Can I call my friends and tell them I’m okay?”

“Of course you can,” he smiled. “You can access Civnet from the mainframe portal, and the vidlink in the room is capable of making outside calls. You’re not a prisoner here, Mister Ball. In fact, you may be out of here by sunset,” he said soothingly. “As soon as we’re certain you’re okay and the engineers finishing installing the medical isolation units in your building, you’ll be released to go home.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he smiled. “Your meal should be here in just a few minutes, so please don’t merge until after you’ve eaten.”

“Alright.”

I called Rita almost as soon as he left the room, and she picked up the call almost instantly. A holo popped up at the foot of my bed showing her very stylish living room, her and Sano sitting on the couch. “Thank God!” she blurted in Spanish. “Kevin, are you okay? Are you still in the hospital?”

“Yes, and yes,” I replied. “I passed out in my apartment...I don’t know when. I just woke up.”

“It was two days ago,” Sano said with emotion. “You didn’t log on for the party, and you wouldn’t answer your calls. We called the ERA to have them check on you, and they told us you’d been taken to the hospital. What happened? Did you hit your head or something?”

“It’s definitely or something,” I said hesitantly. I was almost afraid to tell them. Would they be afraid of me after they found out? Rita was afraid of telepaths, would she ever let me in her house again if she knew I was one

of them now? But it wasn't fair to hide it from them. They were my friends, my best friends along with Mrima, and they deserved to know. I sighed and looked down, then looked back at them. "I was infected by the retrovirus," I declared.

They both gasped. "Are you okay?" Rita asked hurriedly.

"I'm fine. It got into our building and infected a whole bunch of the residents," I told them. "They told me nearly a quarter of the building got infected, and I'd bet that includes just about every Faey and human that lives in the building. I just woke up from the, the, what did he call it... transition. The transition, like ten minutes ago."

"So, you're a Generation now?" Sano asked.

"Yes," I admitted, giving Rita a worried look.

She seemed a little surprised for a second, then she smiled. "What does it feel like?"

"It doesn't feel any different from normal," I answered. "The doctor said they're going to send me home as soon as the ERA people medically seal off my building. We'll be allowed to move around inside the building, so at least I'll be able to leave my apartment once they send me back home."

"Yeah, if the virus is in the building, it's a moot point to keep everyone in their apartments," Sano said clinically. "They can just isolate the entire building. After all, there's no point in trying to decontaminate the building until after they're sure that the virus isn't spreading outside of it. The building would just get contaminated again. Best to just encase the whole thing in a medical isolation shield and let you guys wait it out inside, it keeps both you and the building quarantined."

"They have them that big?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, they can put an isolation shield around an entire city, Kevin," she replied. "And they just might do that to Jacksonville if the virus is loose in the city. That kind of shield isn't like super-powerful, it just has to block microbes from passing through it. You can step through one easy, you just don't like stop halfway through the shield. If you stay in it like that too long, it'll burn you."

“The doctor stepped through the one around my bed,” I realized. “Anyway, the doctor said I may be home by sunset, that they were almost done setting up the isolation around my building. So, hopefully, I’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

The door opened, and a Faey in another of those red E-suits came in carrying a covered tray. She stepped through the isolation field and set it on the rolling table beside the bed, and she got close enough for me to see that she had silver-white hair that was pulled back away from her face and dark gray eyes. “Your meal, Mister Ball,” she told me. “After you’re done eating, you may get out of bed. Just don’t leave the isolation field, okay?”

I looked up at her, and again felt that shiver up my spine. She was a Generation too. “Okay. Thank you.”

She smiled through the faceplate of her E-suit, then stepped back through the field and left the room.

“I see they’re not taking any chances,” Sano said.

“It wouldn’t matter. I’m not sure why they’re wearing the E-suits,” I replied absently. “She was infected too.”

“How do you know that?” Rita asked.

I looked back at them as I pulled the table over to where I could easily get at the tray. “From what I was told, people who were infected can, well, we can sense each other,” I explained. “I look at her, and I *know* she was infected, that she’s a Generation too. So I’m not sure why she’s wearing the E-suit if she’s already been infected.

“She’s a carrier, Kevin, she’s wearing the E-suit to minimize the risk she infects someone else,” Sano replied. “She’s not wearing it to protect herself, she’s wearing it to protect everyone else from her.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah, that makes sense,” I said as I took the cover off the tray. Beneath was what looked and smelled like grilled white meat fish, Shio *brudi*, which was a dish kinda like mashed potatoes with bits of other vegetables mixed in with it and sprinkled with a kind of Shio cheese called *ebra* that I really like, green beans, a banana, a large cup of coffee, black with sugar and cream on the side, a container of milk, and a slice of pecan pie for dessert. There was a lot of food there, the portions were pretty big,

but that worked for me because I was suddenly starving, as if the fact that I haven't eaten for two days roared up to the forefront at the smell of the food.

It suddenly felt like a last meal, and I had a surge of nameless dread well up. I took a deep breath and quelled it, not wanting to look nervous or afraid with Sano and Rita on the vidlink, it might upset them. "It looks good," Rita said.

"I hope it's not like regular hospital food," I said, unrolling the silverware. "You girls mind if I eat while we talk?"

"You're not hanging up until they're about to send you home," Sano told me strongly. "And then you're calling us right back once you're there."

I had to give her a grateful smile. Sano really was something special. I was so, so lucky to be dating her.

The girls kept me distracted and relaxed as I ate, talking about nothing in particular, but we did venture back into some more serious talk after I was done. I felt *way* better after eating, both full and not nearly as weak, as if the food was flushing energy back into my body. "So, what do you think?" Sano asked. "About being a telepath?"

That made Rita's eyes tighten a tiny bit. "I don't know what to think," I replied. "I don't really like telepaths, Sano, because of what they did to me on the farm. And now I'm going to be something I'm usually too afraid of to be in the same room with. I may have a panic attack the first time I look in the mirror," I said darkly.

"Look at it like this, Kevin. If you're a telepath too, they can never do that to you again," Sano told me seriously. "And it's more useful than you may realize. I don't think I ever told you this, but Mikki and my dad are both telepaths," she admitted.

"They are?" Rita asked in surprise.

"Yup. But me and my brother and my mother aren't. So I grew up with telepaths in the house, and while it was a pain in the butt sometimes, it's not nearly as bad as you think it is."

"Pain how?" I asked. "Did Mikano ever, like zap you or something?"

“Oh goodness no, Dad would have beaten her half to death if she ever, *ever* did something like that,” she replied immediately. “Just imagine for a moment that you’ve just hit puberty and you live with a sister and a father who always know if you’re lying to them,” she said.

Rita suddenly laughed. “*Dios mio*, that would be awful!” she blurted.

“Yeah,” she said in a tone that made me laugh too. “But despite things like that, I wouldn’t trade it for anything. When I was a little girl, I got lost in the city. And just when I realized I was lost and got really scared, Dad was there. He realized I wasn’t with them and used his talent to track me down. I resented his power when I was a teen and wanted to keep my secrets, but I always felt so safe and secure when I was a little girl, because I knew Dad would know if I was in trouble and would come to my rescue. Mikki expressed fairly young, when she was nine and I was seven, and she used to talk to me where nobody else could hear, and she could do it from a long way away. I cheated *so* much in school by asking Mikki answers to questions on tests,” she laughed. “It was like we had our own private little way to talk, and it made us very close. It used to drive our brother nuts, because Mikki wouldn’t include him in it.”

“I’d find that, I dunno, creepy, knowing that they can hear what I’m thinking all the time.”

“Well, you gotta understand, Kevin, that most telepaths in the Federation don’t do that,” she told me. “Faey do, but Shio talents don’t. It’s considered a major invasion of someone else’s privacy to listen in on their surface thoughts, and in the Federation it’s a serious crime to use your talent against someone else for personal gain. There’s an entire division of the FIS dedicated to investigating and prosecuting telepathic crimes. It’s a little different inside a family, the rules aren’t quite so strict, but Mikki found out really quick that I really, really didn’t like it when she did that to me, and she stopped doing it because she didn’t want me to hate her my entire life. Dad was always very discreet about it. He never just listened in whenever, he only really listened in when he was trying to get to the bottom of something me or Mikki may have done. I told you guys, me and Mikki were...a handful when we were kids,” she said lightly. “And it’s why we did most of what we did to Mom. Dad would always know we were up to something.”

“Well, I was an only child, so I don’t really know what it was like to have siblings,” I said. “And I guess this won’t feel real until after I express. They said they were going to teach me the bare minimum of what I need to know, then leave it up to me if I want to learn more.”

“What about the telekinesis?”

“They said they don’t teach that because you can’t do it by accident,” I replied. “But if I want to learn how to use it, I could sign up for classes they teach in the Academy.”

“Why would they teach that in the Academy? I thought telekinetics were really rare,” Rita said.

“The Pai,” I answered. “Mrima’s telekinetic, Rita, but she’s not telepathic. All Pai have telekinesis, every one of them, so they teach classes on it in school like any other subject. Kinda like the way the Faey teach telepathy in school like it was social studies or something. It’s the Pai that teach those classes in the Academy, and they do it mainly for the other Pai that are in the Academy. But I guess now they’re gonna get a lot more students,” I mused.

“Are you gonna do it?” Sano asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe. Probably,” I replied. “Bullox was right, it would be kinda neat to be able to fetch things from the couch without having to get up. But telepathy...I don’t know. It would be like I was learning how to be a monster,” I said in a quiet voice.

“It wasn’t telepathy that made the guards monsters, Kevin, it was just the tool they used to express the monsters they were,” Sano told me soberly. “That’s all it is, Kevin. A tool. In their hands, it was something terrible. In your hands, it will be something beautiful, because you would *never* misuse it.”

I gave her a long look, and she just gave me that gentle smile of hers that always made me feel like I was floating.

The doctor entered the room again. “Good news, Mister Ball. You’re free to go,” he announced. “They’ve finished setting up the isolation system in your building, and your tests are all normal. So you’ll be free to go as soon as you get dressed, mainly because we need this bed for another

patient. Your clothes are in that bag right there, and I'll have an E-suit brought in. You'll have to wear that if you leave the isolation field. You'll wear it home, and once you're inside the building, you'll be allowed to take it off. And you'll be keeping it for a while," he added. "Just in case you need to use it again. When the quarantine is over, you'll return it to the annex. Until then, keep it in your apartment."

"Okay," I told him, then looked back to the hologram. "Well, girls, afraid I'm gonna hang up now. I don't want to dress to an audience."

"You're no fun," Sano winked.

"That's me, Mister stick in the mud," I quipped. "I'll call you back when I get home, okay?"

"We'll be waiting. Good luck, Kevin. We love ya'," Rita said.

"Love ya, Kev," Sano smiled, and then the hologram winked out before I could reply.

That made me feel almost giddy. I know she didn't mean *love* love, but to hear her say it, just to hear the words, it made all the fear and anxiety over what had happened just melt away.

"They seem quite lovely," the doctor said.

"They're my best friends," I said in a warm voice as I threw off the covers and slid my legs out of the bed. I saw that I wasn't wearing a hospital gown, it was like a pair of pajamas, with a top and pants that ended just below my knees.

"They a couple?"

"No, Sano's staying with Rita during the quarantine because her apartment is really small," I answered. "We all met inside a merge game, and have been best friends ever since."

"I met my wife in Vanguard," the doctor laughed.

"You play Vanguard? Isn't that a little, well, violent for a doctor?" I had to ask.

"It's just a game," he grinned through his faceplate. "Besides, it's great therapy for when I have to deal with obnoxious children. Remember, I'm a

pediatrician,” he added lightly.

I had to laugh. “That’s a fair point,” I replied.

I got dressed, then they brought in a medical E-suit for me. A human nurse helped me get it on, which was more complex than I expected, then I was led out of the room and to a waiting ambulance. I suppose they wanted to use an ambulance to make sure I didn’t rip my suit or anything, but at least they didn’t make me lay on a gurney. I rode in a seat in the back of the ambulance, so I didn’t get to see what they’d done to the building until they got me there, backing up right to my garage door. They’d enclosed the entire building in a shield, like the one around my bed! I could see one of the hovering shield generators way up over the roof. The shield was built of flat planes, like a giant block enclosing the entire building, with shield generators at the borders of the shields. Sano was right, they *could* just enclose the entire building in a shield! And with me inside the shield, now me and everyone else was medically isolated from the rest of the city.

Since they backed up right to my own garage, I didn’t have to really go very far. I stepped down and looked back, and the ambulance driver gave me a thumbs-up. “Remember, keep your E-suit in good working order,” he called. “Put it in a bag and keep it in your closet, in case you need to use it.”

“I will,” I called.

I came into my apartment, and saw that nothing had changed. The helper unit dropped from its socket in the ceiling and greeted me. “*It is good to see you well,*” it told me. “*Shall I restart the meal schedule?*”

“Yes please,” I replied, sitting on the couch. I did what the doctors said before I left, and I brought up the public domain page of the annex while I waited for someone from the annex to call me, which had the datafiles about being a Generation.

From what I read, there were four things that set Generations apart from other people, even other telepaths. First, all of them—of us—were telepaths, but we were capable of a different type of telepathic communication called communion. The datafile didn’t explain exactly how it was different, but it was. Only people who could commune could understand communion. Secondly, all Generations were telekinetic, like the Pai. They weren’t going to teach me anything about it, but I was welcome

to sign up for classes from the Academy that would be given for free, and I didn't have to be an official Academy student to take them. Thirdly, a Generation's brain was wired differently than other people, even other telepaths. Where the vast majority of living things could only focus their attention on one thing at a time, a Generation didn't. Their minds worked in parallel, like a multicore processor in an old-fashioned computer, where they could divide up their attention and accomplish multiple tasks simultaneously. There were lessons available on the Academy mainframe that taught how to master using it, since it wasn't easy for us people whose brains had worked in serial all our lives and suddenly could work in parallel. Fourth, and oddly enough, Generations were highly resistant to radiation. This didn't make much sense to me, because it said I could still sunburn, and sunburn was when the skin was damaged by UV rays...which were radiation. If I could easily live when exposed to the sun's solar wind, without the magnetic field blocking it, how could I get sunburn?

I was curious enough to look that up, and I found that while a Generation's resistance to radiation was very strong, it wasn't an *immunity*. And on top of that, the Generation retrovirus didn't change some aspects of how my body works, which considered radiation to be a bad thing. Human Generations could sunburn because UV rays damaged their cells only temporarily, and if the body didn't react to that damage so quickly, the cells would repair themselves. Sunburn was literally your skin cells committing suicide to prevent dividing with damaged DNA, and becoming a Generation didn't alter that behavior despite the fact that it was no longer a risk, because Generation DNA could self-repair. They reacted to an overdose of UV rays by killing themselves to prevent possible skin cancer, and being a Generation didn't change the behavior despite the fact that the DNA of the cells could self-repair.

That tickled at my memory, something I learned in high school biology. Aging, the effects of aging, was because the body's DNA got damaged over time and spread as the damaged cells reproduced, and the DNA in those damaged cells couldn't repair itself. Well, if Generation DNA could self-repair, didn't that mean that I wasn't going to age like a normal person? Did that mean I'd stay relatively unchanged well into my elderly years, or did it mean I would age rapidly as soon as it started to happen? I had the feeling that it meant that I'd stay relatively unchanged well into my elderly years,

and only when I was really, really old would I look it...much like the Faey did. But it wouldn't stop me from aging and dying, because I recalled that it was some other process that governed that, some kind of cell structure called a telomere or a telomar or something. Those went bad over time, and they caused cells to die once they reached a certain point or something. But it was the reproduction of cells that had damaged DNA, causing that damage to spread, that caused the *effects* of aging. If my cells weren't going to be damaged by time, then I'd stay relatively healthy and in good shape right up until the end, when the telo-things finally hit the end of their lifespan and I died from old age.

So, I'd have the same life span, but I wouldn't become an old man until right at the very end. I may even die in relatively good shape, die because the telo-whatevers finally gave out.

After nearly half an hour, I finally received the call from the Medical Service. A doctor or staffer or something barely said hello before going into what was going on, explaining the stuff I read in the file in much greater detail, explaining what a Generation was, how I was now different from other humans, and how it was going to change my life...but not *too* much. I'd become a telepath, and if I wanted to I could learn telekinesis, and that was basically it. I'd still have my job as a pro gamer and would still live my life, I'd just be different from what I was before. No mandatory military service, no labs, no doctors. Just learn how I'm different and go back to living once the quarantine was over.

We then spent nearly half an hour going over what would happen over the next couple of weeks. Basically put, I was restricted to the building, could move about freely within it, and we'd all be staying here until the quarantine was lifted. The woman explained in detail what I should look for to know that I'd expressed, and when I did, to call them. In the meantime, there were recorded seminars and tutorials on the Academy site that would teach me some basic exercises that may help me after I express but before I got formal instruction, which would teach me how to do something called close my mind, which she said was the absolute most important thing I had to learn, learn first, and learn *fast*. She said so long as I couldn't close my mind, I was in danger of suffering something called a *schism*. She didn't explain what it was, and I didn't ask, because it didn't sound very good at all. Once I expressed, they would then arrange a teacher to teach me the

basics as I practiced the exercises the Academy seminar taught me to try to close my mind on my own. But we hit a major snag when it came to that, because I flatly refused to have a Faey teach me. The person I talked to over the vidlink certainly wasn't happy about that, but there was absolutely no way in hell I was going to let a Faey in my head. Not again.

Never again.

After going around about that a while, she moved on without much discussion to the other stuff. She asked me if I wanted to enroll in telekinesis classes, which I could start even before I expressed, and I was curious enough about it to do it...just not soon. I was put in a class that would start in early October and run through til January, which would be done over Civnet. I'd be one of several thousand students in the online class, which would be taught by a Pai, but I was given access to part of the Academy's mainframe that held all the coursework and reading material so I could start studying on my own before the classes started.

We then more or less wrapped it up, because there wasn't much more they could tell me or do for me until I expressed. I ended the call, and almost immediately my vidlink was beeping with two incoming calls. One was from Rita, and the other was from Mrima.

I answered Rita first, who looked anxious. "Sorry, I was on a call with the Medical Service. Mrima's also calling, you mind if I conference her in?"

"No," she replied as Sano entered the picture. I put her on hold and answered Mrima, who was at her parents' home on Paian. Her parents' home was very neat and orderly, and everything was sized for a Pai, so it looked entirely normal. "Hey Mri," I said after putting on my interface so I could get Pai translation. Mrima still couldn't speak Faey, and I don't speak Pai well enough without my interface to be understood...but I'm working on it. Mrima has been teaching me Pai here and there during our calls. "I'm on a call with Rita and Sano at the moment. Do want to conference in or call me back?"

"You can conference, I don't mind," she said. I did so, with Mrima on the left side of the hologram and Rita and Sano on the right, both of whom were putting on their interfaces so they could talk to Mrima. "Thank Paira

you're alright, Kevin," she then said with a relieved look. "Sano called me and told me what happened. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Mri," I replied. "I don't really feel any different at all, and as you can see, I'm back home now. They released me as soon as they were sure I didn't suffer a concussion from when I passed out. They said I broke my nose when I fell."

"That was nearly two days ago," Sano reminded me.

"To me it was just a couple of hours ago," I said with a grunt. "Anyway, I've already done all the stuff with the Medical Service, and I'm quarantined inside the condo building while I wait to express. They said they can't do anything else for me until that happens. They have the entire building in a quarantine shield, so at least I'm not restricted to the apartment anymore," I noted in a relieved voice. "I'm allowed to go anywhere in the building, so at least I can shop for myself and use the gym now."

"It's more or less business as usual here, outside of me not being able to get back home," Mrima said with a grunt. "They have travel restrictions up to four other members in the Confederation, but outside of that, it's pretty normal here."

"Not here, we're quarantined inside the house," Rita said. "But at least Sano is here, so it's not all that lonely."

"Am I glad I am, being stuck in Rita's house is way better than being stuck in my apartment," Sano laughed. "She has a pool and a private beach. I have a view of the next building over."

"Don't forget the kitchen," I said lightly.

"A kitchen we don't use," Sano replied. "She has a helper unit that does all the cooking. I know I'm shaming the Shio race, but I'll admit it. I'm a bad cook."

"And I'm not much better," Rita grinned.

"Wait, Mri, you said there are travel restrictions up for *four* members?" I asked, realizing what she said. "Who are the other ones?"

“The Imperium, the Kirri, the Grimja Union, and the House of Karinne, but they’re usually restricted anyway.”

“Why would they have the Kirri and Grimja quarantined?”

“Dunno, but they are,” Mrima answered. “Guess they detected the virus there, but since neither of them can catch it, they’re making sure no visitors catch it either.”

“That does make sense,” Rita mused. “How are you handling being stuck back on Paian, Mrima?”

“I’m dealing,” she said with a dry smile on her muzzle. “Now that I’m used to proper gravity again, anyway. Living on Terra the last couple of years without using an inducer made me soft,” she said accusingly. “I’m doing my work over Civnet, so I’m still employed, and the cubs rented bionoids to use to go to classes in person, though they don’t like them all that much. They’re *human* bionoids, and they said it’s almost driving them crazy not having a tail while merged.”

“I know that feeling, I always deal with phantom tail syndrome after logging out of CO,” Sano laughed.

“My parents are a bit annoyed at having us in the house, but they do like spending more time with their grandcubs,” she smiled, glancing to her left, no doubt at one of her parents.

“Fifteen years working to kick you out, and here you are, right back in our business!” came a good-natured retort.

“Don’t blame me, Dad, blame Terra!” she shot back. “Anyway, I have to ask, Kevin. What’s it like? And how do you feel about it?”

I knew what she meant, leaning back on the couch and putting my elbows on my knees. “I’m really not sure what to think,” I told her. “I’m afraid of telepaths, Mri, for obvious reasons, and now here I am about to be one myself. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to look at myself in the mirror when it happens. All I can really say is that I’m for damn sure will *never* be the kind of telepath the Faey are,” I said adamantly. “I won’t ever do to someone else what was done to me.”

That made Rita give me a compassionate look.

“Given that I’m afraid of telepaths, most likely, I think I’ll just learn how to not hurt myself and then just not use it unless I have to,” I ventured. “I mean, what else can I do with it? It’s not like I really have any use for it.”

“All I can say, Kev, is that you shouldn’t close that door until you see what’s on the other side of it,” Mrima told me. “Learn more about it, see what it’s like, *then* make your decision on what you want to do with it. But there is something you *are* going to learn about, and I’m going to teach you,” she said eagerly.

“The telekinesis?”

“You bet,” she replied with a grin. “Be lucky you have a Pai for a friend, Kev, because I’m gonna teach you all about it,” she promised. “I taught my cubs, who are very skilled if I dare say so myself, and I’m more than happy to teach you everything I know about TK. And not to brag or anything, but our family’s very good at it,” she grinned. “Strong TK runs through my family. My grandmother was a Master and everything, and she taught me everything I know.”

“Well, I did sign up for the remote vidlink classes they’re offering in the Academy, so sure, why not?” I said with a smile. “I think I’ll enjoy learning from you, Mrima.”

“Now I’m feeling jealous,” Sano laughed.

“Hey, if you girls end up getting it too, you’re more than welcome to join the class,” she smiled at them. “You two *are* my friends as well, and I’m damn sure I can do a much better job teaching you than some over-Civnet remote class can.”

“You’re going to teach *me* over the vidlink, Mri,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but you won’t be competing with like a thousand other students for the teacher’s attention,” she told me with a smile. “Personal instruction is always best when it comes to the gift, Kevin.” *The gift* was what the Pai called telekinesis. “Sure, we teach it in school with the other subjects, but all Pai learn how to do it from their parents or families first. School is just to expand and refine those first lessons, and to teach skills that the parents may not know or be able to use.”

“Well, as long as you don’t mind teaching me, I’d be happy to learn from you,” I told her with a smile.

“Long as you don’t call me in the middle of the night,” she amended. “I’ve just gotten used to a proper day cycle. That twenty four hour cycle on Terra is sooooo weird.”

“What’s a day on Paian?” Rita asked.

“In your time, about twenty six and a half hours or so, give or take,” she replied. “Believe me, the day being shorter than you’re used to really messes with you over time, at least until you adjust to it. It’s like you’re not sleepy at all when it’s time to go to bed, and the morning comes earlier and earlier.”

“You’re gonna be a mess when you come home,” Sano grinned.

“Yeah, so you want to avoid me for a couple of weeks, guys,” she replied impishly, which made us laugh. “You should know what that’s like, Sano, you’re not Terran either.”

“Shio has very nearly the same day cycle as Terra. I think it’s only like half an hour longer,” she replied. “So it wasn’t that hard at all to adapt to Terra.”

“Lucky,” she sounded.

We talked for a while longer, mainly just the three of them doing what they could to make me feel comfortable, and I have to admit, it worked. After nearly an hour, I finally ended the call, and ended up standing on my balcony, looking through the medical quarantine shield out to the ocean. Things were different now. I was different now, but I didn’t feel like it. I almost felt like I was going to wake up any moment, because it was all nothing but a dream.

But it wasn’t a dream. Things were going to be different for me from here on out. If they were right, then I was a telepath now, I’d possess a power that I greatly feared...and I still wasn’t entirely sure how to process that. I would take Mrima’s advice and at learn a little bit about it before I decided how to approach it, but there was one thing that I knew for certain, something that gave me just a little bit of comfort.

And that was the fact that a telepath could resist another telepath. If I learned how to protect myself, then perhaps what happened to me would never happen again.

That was probably all I'd ever do with it. The very idea of using telepathy just made the old memories roar into the forefront of my mind, memories of torture, of humiliation, of being telepathically dominated and watching through eyes I couldn't control as I choked the life out of my best friend, as the guards laughed and then collected their wagers once Ethan was dead.

The laughing. I still hear it in my nightmares, those Faey bitches laughing as Ethan died, laughing as my entire world shattered, just laughing.

Laughing.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head, trying to get control of myself again, because my grip on the railing was so strong that I was about to break my own fingers. Just the thought of Ethan's name always sent me into an abyss of depression and anxiety, but the only saving grace in all of it was that I knew that he didn't blame me for killing him. He knew I had no control, because he also had no control. It wasn't him that slashed my face with the knife and cut off my earlobe, it was the guard controlling him. And it wasn't me that strangled him to death, it was the guard controlling me. And both of those guards were still in prison, and would never, ever leave it. They were both sentenced to life without parole for what they'd done to us, and I don't think any guard got a sentence any shorter than twenty years. Even the ones that did nothing were prosecuted, because they *did nothing*. They didn't try to stop what they knew was wrong, they just looked away and pretended that nothing was happening as the guards tortured us... sometimes to death.

And now I'd have the same abilities as them, meaning that I could become the monster that I feared the most.

The very thought of that scared me to death.

Chapter 13

They said that I could express at any time, that it may be the next day, or the next year.

They were only one day off.

It's hard to explain what telepathy is like for people who don't have it, and mine started off almost exactly the way they said it would. At first, I was hearing faint voices in my head, like thoughts that weren't my own. I was editing a new viddy, pulling footage from my archives to make it, and I started to notice it. I was hearing two people having a discussion of some sort, but I couldn't make out any details. It was like a murmuring in my mind, and the words...they weren't words. They were like concepts, feelings, thoughts, and they didn't seem to make sense until I started trying to actively listen to them.

It was then that I realized that I was hearing two telepaths who were "talking" to each other. They call it *sending*, and the Medical Service said it would be the first thing I'd hear because it was much "louder" than other thoughts.

And it scared me. I had to get control of myself when I realized I was hearing telepathy, and I was on the vidlink to the Medical Service so fast that I think I broke something. They'd given me a special contact number to report that I'd expressed, and the holo popped up to show a very young Faey man, barely more than a teenager. I swallowed my fear seeing that face and told them what I was hearing, and after just a couple of questions, the kid confirmed that I'd expressed. He then tried to arrange for me to talk to a telepath instructor that would walk me through how to close my mind over the vidlink, and when he couldn't find one that wasn't Faey, he told me he'd have them call me back. And in the meantime, I should try the exercises they'd sent to everyone that had been infected, to see if I could learn how to close my mind on my own.

Those lessons weren't very good ones. The datafile read like stereo instructions, and I couldn't understand what the goal of the lesson was. I just said several variations of *focus your thoughts through the distractions, and the distractions will disappear*. The file said that the key to closing your mind was both wanting it to be closed and "tuning out" what you were hearing like you were ignoring a barking dog.

Well, clearly I wasn't very good at it. I tried and tried, for hours I tried, and I could still hear the other telepaths in the building. I heard more and more of them—I was honestly surprised there were so many in the building—until it was a constant dull roar in my mind, threatening to drown out my own thoughts.

It was hard to think. It was hard to concentrate on my own thoughts. It was hard to do much of anything, even play CO, because the thoughts, the voices, they were bleeding through the merge, they were still audible.

That started three days of absolute hell. As the hours passed, the voices got louder and louder, and then I heard more and more of them as I started to hear the non-telepaths. I couldn't relax, I couldn't rest, I couldn't sleep. I called the Medical Service again and again, even at one point outright begging for help, but they wouldn't offer any teacher other than a Faey, and there was no way *in hell* I was going to let a Faey into my mind. It was like being stuck in a football stadium with every seat filled, every person holding a bullhorn, and all of them pointed right at me as they shouted at the top of their lungs.

I endured that for three long, exhausting, horrific days.

And after that? I honestly have no idea.

It was the same thing all over again. One moment I was laying in bed at four in the morning, desperately trying to tune out the voices so I could sleep, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in a bed that was not my own. The voices were gone, it was completely quiet, serene, and I almost thought I was dreaming, at least until I opened my eyes. I woke up not in my room, not even in the annex, but in the back of a fairly large skimmer or dropship that had a hospital bed in the back of it, in which I was laying. The back cargo hatch of the vehicle was open, showing a white sand beach, and I could feel the warmth, smell the sea, and hear the waves crashing just

meters away. I put a hand to my head and sat up, trying to figure out where the hell I was, if I was dreaming, if I was somehow merged and this was a simsense, until I got out of the bed and stepped to the back of the ship, looking out. There was a human woman sitting on the beach about five meters away, a woman with red hair who was leaning back on her hands, her feet bare and one of them kicking idly in the air. She was wearing a blue tank top and a pair of khaki cargo shorts, her feet bare. Her skin was very fair, and she had freckles on her shoulders and upper arms. I could tell that she was a Generation just by looking at her, despite the fact that I couldn't see her eyes. She didn't look back at me, but it was clear she knew I was awake. "Finally woke up, I see," she said, looking over her shoulder at me. Her accent was exotic, and it took me a moment to recognize it as Scottish. "An' how are ye feelin'?"

"Confused," I replied. "Who are you?"

"Rahne. Rahne Karinne," she replied, patting the sand beside her. I walked down the ramp, over to her, and sat down. "Jason sent me."

"Jason? The Grand Duke?" I asked.

She nodded without looking at me.

"What happened? Where are we?"

"Right now, we're on a small deserted island in the Pacific," she answered. "The nearest open mind is a thousand kathra away. I figured this would be the best place ta' take ye."

"Why?"

She looked over at me. "Ye suffered a schism," she told me. "Do ye ken—understand what that is?"

I shook my head.

"It's when a telepath loses control and lashes out at everyone around him," she replied. "Ye were overwhelmed by the thoughts o' everyone around ye, by the voices that ye couldn't tune out, and ye lashed out, tryin' ta' make them stop. They had ta' send the Imperial Marines ta' rein ye in," she said evenly. "An' och, even they had a hard time subduin' ye. Understand, Kevin, that emotions fuel yuir power. Ye were so keyed up, so agitated, that it took five Imperial Marines ta' bring ye under control."

Methinks the fact that they were Faey was what drove ye ta' such a state," she mused. "When Faey tried to rein ye in, ye attacked them out o' fear. I canna' say I blame ye."

I just looked at her.

She glanced over at me. "So, here we are, in a nice quiet place, where ye won't be hearin' any voices tryin' ta' distract ye as I teach ye how ta' close yuir mind," she told me. "Once I'm sure ye've got that mastered, I'll be takin' ye home. Once ye can close yuir mind, yui'll be fine ta' be around other people again. After yui've had a little time to rest and settle in, open yuir bandwidth a bit, then we can start on yuir other lessons."

"What other lessons?"

She looked at me. "Kevin, yuir one of the most powerful telepaths on this *planet*," she said seriously, which made me nearly gape at her. "Yuir so strong, ye may be as strong as Jason himself, and Jason is the documented most powerful human or Faey male telepath alive. Yuir more powerful than the Marines that tried ta' stop ye, which is why it took so many o' them to bring ye ta' heel. That kind o' power means ye need someone ta' teach ye how to control it, one on one. When Jason found out about it, he sent me ta' help ye. I'm a human, so ye dinna' need ta' worry about having ta' learn from a Faey, and ta' be honest, I'm stronger than ye are. As strong as ye are, ye need someone stronger than ye ta' teach ye in case ye lose control again."

I took in what she said, as she fell silent and let me ponder her words. So, I'd lost control of myself and went crazy, and it took soldiers to subdue me. And I was so strong that this woman—Rahne—had brought me out to the middle of nowhere so she could teach me without any distractions. If anything, that told me that she wasn't joking. She was a Karinne, so that meant that she had to be one of the original Generations...and I figured she had to be like stupid strong, since she wasn't afraid of me. If I lost control again, she must be confident she could subdue me herself.

"I...hope I didn't hurt anyone," I finally said.

"Nothing a night's sleep won't fix," she said with a smile over at me, which was quite darling. "Lucky for ye, there was a squad of Marines only

a few blocks away when ye lost control. They reacted within a minute after ye became a danger ta' others. Ye were within their telepathic range."

"Why don't I remember it?"

"That's normal. When yuir in that state, yuir brain is unable ta' form new long term memory," she answered. "So everything that happened is forgotten, as well as some o' what happened before it."

"Huh," I said, leaning back on my hands, processing that. "Is it hard?"

"Closing yuir mind? Naw, it's easy, but some people canna' learn it from a datafile. That's why I'm here," she replied. "But there's much more ye need ta' know. A telepath as strong as ye needs ta' be taught well beyond most others so ye dinna' pose a danger ta' those around ye. I'd plan on daily lessons for at least the next month, possibly two, Kevin," she said evenly, looking over at me. "Depending on how quickly ye pick things up."

"Oh. Okay," I said mildly. "When are we starting?"

"Whenever ye feel up ta' it," she replied, kicking her foot idly, kicking a little sand further down the beach. "Ye just woke up, after all, I dinna' mind if ye wanna rest a bit before we get started. There's some food in the dropship if yuir hungry. Just mind, we willna' be leavin' this island until ye can close yuir mind. So how long we stay here depends on ye."

"I am a little hungry. Mind if I eat, and then we start?"

"Fine wi' me," she smiled over at me. "Galley's on the left, just past the bed."

I got up and turned around, and realized that I'd never seen that kind of ship before. It was pretty big, with a sleek, long body that widened at the stern for the stern ramp, which opened to the cargo area where the bed I'd been in was secured to the deck. There was a galley past it, on the left, and there was a table with two seating benches built into the bulkhead on the right. "What kind of ship is this? A dropship?"

"KP-E111, built by the Karinnes," she answered. "It's a military dropship, not a skimmer, used primarily by the KES for extended exploration missions on a planet. That's why it has a galley and room for beds in the back, because the crew may be on the planet for a while as they

do their research. If ye look close above the stern door frame, ye'll see a gunport."

"Is it yours?"

"Nay, I have a skimmer, but they decided ta' bring me over in a military ship rather than me fly over in my skimmer. I'll be stayin' on the ship while I'm here rather than stayin' in a hotel."

"Wait, what about the quarantine? Aren't you breaking it by being here?"

"Aye," she replied, getting up herself. "But that's a moot point now."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess it's okay ta' tell ye," she said. "Jayce didn't say ta' keep it quiet. The quarantine has failed," she told me. "There's a new strain o' the retrovirus on Terra that can infect *anyone*, which is the same strain that's infected Karis. Me bein' here didna' bring the new virus to the planet, because it was already here."

"Whoa! You mean even like my Verutan and Keelo neighbors can catch it?"

"Aye," she replied evenly.

"And you're taking me back, putting me *inside* the quarantine shield in my building? Won't I infect everyone else?"

"Aye, ye will," she replied bluntly. "But at this point, Kevin, it doesna' matter anymore. The virus canna' be stopped. Me takin' ye home only means that the people in yuir building will be infected sooner than later. It's in the symbiotes."

"In the...the what?"

"The Kirri carry microbes call symbiotes," she explained. "They saturate all planets in the Kirri empire. But they're not a disease, they're beneficial. They live in symbiosis wi' the Kirri, and they're harmless ta' everyone else. Well, the Kirri have been on Terra long enough, an' in enough numbers, ta' spread their symbiotes across the planet. These symbiotes are different from other microbes, Kevin, because they can move easily in an' out of a host body. The virus gets into the symbiotes, the

symbiotes bring them inta' a host through the body's usual defenses, then the virus leaves the symbiotes an' infects the host. So, it's the symbiotes that are what's infecting everyone. Kim is goin' ta' announce that the quarantine failed and tell everyone about the new strain o' the virus," she told me. "The new strain of the virus is spreadin' like wildfire as we speak, an' the only way ta' stop it is with complete medical isolation, an E-suit or a quarantine field. An' there's no way to put every building on the planet in quarantine," she said evenly as we walked back towards the dropship. "So, Kim is gonna do what we did on Karis."

"What's that?"

"Offer everyone a choice," she replied as we started up the ramp. "Anyone who wants ta' be a Generation will be released from quarantine, an' those who don't, the Medical Service is gonna do what they can ta' make sure they're not infected."

"Whoa, you mean like *everyone* on Karis is a Generation now?"

"Just about," she nodded. "An' if they're not, they soon will be. The people there, they know us, so they're not afraid o' us. They've seen what we can do, an' they want ta' do it too. Canna' blame them," she said musingly as we went past the bed and to where she said the galley was. "I dinna' know what it's like to be anythin' other than a Generation, but I can ken that people who aren't would like ta' be, ta' do what we can do."

"So I was right. You *are* one of the original Generations," I blurted.

"Aye," she smiled over at me. "One o' only two original Terran Generations. Me, an' Jason. Up until about a month ago, we two an' my son Sean were the last o' our kind. But not anymore," she added lightly. "Ye are as much a Generation as I am, Kevin. The fact that ye weren't born a Generation means nothing. Ye *are* a Generation. I look at ye, and I *know*."

"That is a bit weird."

"Ye get used to it," she grinned as she opened a refrigerator, then pulled out a pre-made plate of food. She handed it to me, then pulled one out for herself. "Let me tell ye, it's been the strangest thing ta' see people I dinna' know who are Generations. There were only about three hundred o' us before, and now they're like everywhere. I sometimes feel like I have whiplash."

I had to laugh.

We talked about other stuff as we ate, as I got to know her. She was a really nice woman, was older than I expected—she looked only in her twenties, but she was in her thirties—and worked in the Karinne government’s version of the Department of the Treasury. She was one of the people handled the finances of the house, both her and her husband, who was named Adam. They had a son, Sean, and I was surprised to find out she was pregnant with a daughter. And since she didn’t show at all, she had to be very early in her pregnancy. “We just found out a bit ago,” she said, putting her hand on her stomach lovingly. “We’ve decided ta’ name her Mary. Mary Elisa Karinne.”

“Congratulations,” I told her. “Looking forward to it?”

“Oh aye, aye!” she replied happily. “At least this time, me an’ Adam will know what ta’ do,” she added with a grin.

I had to laugh. “You’re an expert by now.”

“It’s truly a blessin’ ta’ have a baby, Kevin. I hope ye get to experience that joy yuirself someday. Now, then, feel up to a little practice?”

“Given neither of us can leave until I get home, yes. Let’s do this,” I answered.

We went back out to the beach, and she first explained to me what we were doing, in terms that made it much easier to understand than that online self-study course. “Closing yuir mind accomplishes two very important goals, Kevin,” she said as we sat down in the sand, facing each other. “First, it closes yuir mind ta’ the stray thoughts o’ others. It quiets the voices,” she explained. “And that’s critical ta’ keep yuir sanity.”

“Tell me about it,” I growled. “I spent nearly four days hearing the thoughts of other people in the building, and it nearly drove me insane.”

“As strong as ye are, ye were probably hearin’ the thoughts o’ people up ta’ fifty kathra away,” she said seriously. “There had ta’ be so many, I dinna see how ye lasted four days before suffering a schism. Anyway, the second thing closing yuir mind accomplishes is that it seals away yuir own thoughts from others, including other telepaths,” she continued. “With yuir mind closed, other telepaths canna’ hear what yuir thinking, an’ the only

way they can hear them is ta' literally attack ye. So, Kevin, learnin' ta' close yuir mind with stop the voices an' protect ye from other telepaths hearing what yuir thinkin'."

"That sounds wonderful to me," I said seriously. "But if your mind is closed, how can you hear what other telepaths are saying?"

"Sending?" she asked, and I nodded. "That's because sending is, in a way, louder than yuir thoughts, loud enough for ye to hear it with a closed mind. Think of closing yuir mind as wearing a set of headphones, and sending is someone talkin' loud enough for ye to hear them through them."

"Oh. Okay, that makes sense. So, how do I do it?"

And that started my first lesson in being a Generation. The reason she was there in person, I found out, was because she needed to be able to touch me to help me learn. She said that telepathy is stronger, more powerful, when the telepath is touching skin to skin—the Shio custom of not touching skin to skin suddenly came to mind—and she taught me not with words, but with thoughts. We sat there in the sand on the beach of that tiny deserted island facing each other, holding each other's hands, and I learned how to close my mind by her talking to my mind instead of to my ears.

It took me about an hour to figure it out, and when I did, I felt almost stupid. It seemed, well, *easy*, and I'd spent nearly a week trying to wrap my head around an idea that seemed simple as two plus two after Rahne walked me through it. But she didn't just declare me good to go and take me home. She kept me there for nearly four hours, walking me through it again and again, then testing my closed mind by creating "noise" that I had to actively tune out. She went one step past that and started teaching me the very basics of sending, of how to project my thoughts beyond the bounds of my own mind that other telepaths could hear, but that was more explaining the theory behind it than having me actively practice it.

We were there long enough for us to hear the official announcement. A camera pod came out of the dropship and projected a hologram in front of us, which showed the Secretary General, Kim Duk Moon. We listened as he basically repeated what Rahne had said, that the quarantine effort had failed and that a new strain of the virus that infected *everyone* was now on the planet. "The Faey Medical Service has determined that there is simply no

way to stop this virus,” Kim said soberly. “But what is more, the appearance of a mutated form of the virus has caused them to worry that the virus may mutate into something that could be dangerous to us all. Because of that, the empires infected by this virus have decided to stop trying to contain it, and we shall follow suit.

“What that means, citizens of Terra, is that you are now being offered a choice. If you want to become a Generation, you will inform the Terra Medical Service of your interest and they will release you from quarantine. You will be free to return to your job and your life, and when you become infected and transition, you will enter into a training program being set up by the Academy to teach you how to use telepathy. If you do not want to become a Generation, then you will inform the Medical Service, and they will do what they can to prevent it from happening. You should understand, however, that this will require you to enter complete medical isolation, quarantine within a containment facility for however long it takes for the virus to die off. This could be months. Maybe even years,” he stressed. “But the option is there for anyone who does not wish to be changed. If you don’t want to be a Generation, the Medical Service will do whatever it can to help you. But be warned,” he said strongly. “Because the virus is already loose on the planet, you may already be infected, so you may be changed whether you want it or not. And if you want to avoid becoming a Generation, you have to tell us right now, so you can enter medical isolation as quickly as possible. Just keep in mind that if you enter isolation and change your mind, you will be allowed to leave isolation and become a Generation. Remember, understand, that you cannot be changed back if you do. If you make that choice, it is permanent,” he warned.

“Those who have already been infected by the virus are now officially released from quarantine,” he continued. “If you’ve been infected and have transitioned, you are cleared to return to work and your daily lives. Law enforcement will no longer enforce the quarantine efforts, so if you’ve decided to become a Generation, you may leave your home. Just remember that you have to register with the Medical Service so they can schedule you for your classes after you transition.

“I know that this is going to create a great deal of change and upheaval on Terra,” he said simply. “And for that, we apologize. But we Terrans are a strong people, a resilient people, and I know that we can adjust to this new

normal and move forward stronger and better than we were before. I ask that all of us, Terrans, citizens, visitors, students, show kindness and consideration for one another during this time of change. Everything will be alright so long as we be kind to one another. Information will be appearing on your vidlinks and interfaces in the next few moments about these changes. That is all. Have a pleasant day, everyone.” And the hologram winked out.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“I know,” Rahne nodded. “But I dinna’ think it will cause too much trouble. Things are very orderly on Karis, an’ we’re much further along.”

“I don’t—I’m not sure how people are going to react to that,” I said, putting my hands on my knees.

“Well, how did ye react ta’ it?”

“I’m not most people,” I told her. “I’m still not entirely sure about this. After what the guards did to me, I’m afraid of telepaths. And now I am one,” I grunted.

She gave me a compassionate look, then reached out and took my hands. “I can promise ye, Kevin, that after I’m done teachin’ ye, no one will *ever* do that to ye again,” she said seriously. “As strong as ye are, ye can knock most any telepath on her arse, like ye did those Imperial Marines that tried to subdue ye. With a little trainin’ an’ a little practice, yui’ll never have that happen again.”

Now that sounded...nice. Good. Like a wave of relief washed through me. I guess in the back of my mind, I’ve always been afraid of having something like that happen again, that I’d be helpless to stop it, defenseless. Well, if I was a telepath, and as strong as she was saying, then I’d be able to defend myself if I were ever attacked like that again. “Well, then, teach on, professor,” I said, which made her laugh.

Three hours later, after she was confident I had mastered closing my mind and wouldn’t suffer another schism, we were on our way back to Jacksonville. I was riding up in the front, and I was mystified by her ship. It had no manual controls at all, and the backglass indicators were all turned off. I’d heard about ships like this, but had never seen one. The ship could only be flown by interface or by merge. But she clearly knew what she was

doing, because we were in a high orbital arc that would bring us down in Jacksonville, a trajectory that would take us about 90 minutes. We'd travel from early afternoon to well after dark in an hour and a half. We talked as she flew us home, talked about telepathy and being a Generation, as she explained what commune was and how it was different from telepathy. "Communion is a bit hard to explain," she said as we came up out of the atmosphere. "It's telepathy, but it's like its on another viddy channel compared to standard telepathy. Only people who can commune can understand it. It's something that I won't really have ta' teach ye, either. The ability to commune is instinctive, it's a part of the genetic programming that's a part o' ye," she told me. "But ye can't commune until ye can send," she added. "And ye have to learn about standard telepathy in order ta' use those same techniques in communion. They use the same basic approaches, just executed differently."

"Oh, okay. Why can't telepaths hear communion?"

"Some can, but they canna' understand it," she replied. "Communion is telepathy with way more bandwidth, Kevin. We don't send our thoughts in a linear fashion. We send it all at once, kinda like over multiple telepathic frequencies, all at the same time. It'd be like having your vidlink at home put up a bunch of different viddy channels at the same time, each on its own hologram, and each one carries a piece of the message. Ye canna' see the message unless ye can see all the holograms together at the same time. Regular telepaths can hear communion if they're very skilled or very powerful, but they canna' understand what they hear, because they can only see one or two holograms out of twenty. Their minds don't work like ours do, they're restricted ta' focusing on one thing at a time. They canna' decipher communion because they can only process one little piece o' what's actually goin' on."

"Ohhh, I get it. And all Generations use the same frequencies? They're all tuned to the same viddy channels?"

"Aye, which is why we can understand each other," she nodded. "And biogenic computers. Can ye hear it?" she asked. "Open yuir mind a little and listen. Yui'll hear the biogenic computer in the skimmer communicatin' with the destroyer in orbit that brought me here. Ye won't be able to

understand what it's sayin' because it's communing raw data, but yui'll be able ta' hear it."

I glanced over at her and did what she'd taught me when I wanted to lower my mental defenses a little bit, which made me more open to things I'd usually block out. And she was right. I could hear it. It was going incredibly fast, so fast it nearly made me dizzy, and it was just sending out what sounded like gibberish to me. But I could definitely hear it, I could hear the telepathic computer."

"I...I hear it," I said hesitantly, putting two fingers to my temple. "It's like a buzzing, it's going so fast."

"An' that tells me that yuir bandwidth is startin' ta' open up," she told me. "When it's fully open, ye'll be able ta' actively commune. But first, ye need ta' learn how ta' send, which is what we'll be workin' on tomorrow," she warned.

"I'm not sure what good it'll do me, since all my friends live far away, but I'll learn if you think I need to."

"Ye need ta'," she said firmly. "As strong as ye are, Kevin, ye need to have full command o' yuir talent, else yui'll pose a risk ta' yuirself an' everyone around ye."

"If you say so. I don't feel all that powerful."

"No offense, but that's because yuir workin' wi' *me*," she said, grinning over at me. "Trust me, Kevin. Yuir strong. *Damn* strong. Ye'd give Jayce a serious run for his money," she said impishly.

"But since you're a girl, you're stronger."

"Generally that's the rule for Faey," she nodded, "but Terrans are a wee bit different. Male Terrans aren't very far behind female Terrans. Women are generally stronger, but not by very much. Ye, Kevin, are stronger than most telepaths *period*, man or woman, Faey or Terran or Colonist or whatever. Yuir what we call a top ten percentile telepath. Ye could tie most telepaths in a knot if ye wished, and that's why I'm here to teach ye, so you don't do that by accident," she told me. "An' ta' make sure that if ye do it on purpose, ye had a damn good reason ta' do so."

"Would you teach me that? To protect myself using talent?"

“If ye want,” she replied immediately. “Because I know ye’d never abuse it. I’ve seen inside yuir mind, Kevin, an’ I know that yuir not the kind to abuse the power ye have.”

“Well, that’s a bit embarrassing.”

She laughed. “I didn’t peek anywhere else, I promise,” she winked over at me. “I wanted ta’ make sure ye could handle the responsibility that comes with the kind o’ power ye have. And ye didn’t disappoint me one bit,” she told me, reaching over and patting me on the arm.

“Well, thanks for the compliment. Will you teach me the thing where I can do two things at once?”

“We call it splitting, an’ I surely will,” she replied. “But to warn ye, I won’t be teachin’ ye telekinesis. That can take a while, an’ I doubt I’ll have that much time.”

“That’s okay, my friend Mrima wants to teach me.”

“She has ta’ be Pai with a name like that.”

“She is,” I affirmed with a short laugh. “I take it that’s a common name?”

“Almost all Pai names start with the *mrr* sound, the *prrr* sound, the *grr* sound, or the *brr* sound,” she told me. “Given there are so few phonetic sounds in the Pai language, I suppose it’s not much o’ a surprise.”

“I noticed that when she taught me some Pai words and phrases. They just use the same sounds over and over again.”

“Aye,” she nodded. “It’s a marvel they invented enough words out o’ so few sounds ta’ cover the basics. But I’ll give the Pai one thing. They are *damn smart*,” she said admiringly.

“You said it. Mrima is like super-smart, like a genius,” I agreed emphatically. “Proves you don’t have to have a big brain to be intelligent.”

“Aye, aye. I have a Pai who teaches me telekinesis, Mrar. And she’s smart as a whip.”

“The Pai teach you guys?”

“Have been for a while,” she nodded. “Mrar is one of the Pai Masters, and my God, ye should see what she can do with TK. It’s like bloody magic.”

“I’ve seen viddies on Civnet, I believe it,” I agreed. “That’s the one part of this I was most interested in. The telekinesis.”

“It’s useful, but be prepared ta’ work yuir arse off,” she warned. “It’s not easy, not easy ‘tall.”

“I guess I’ll find out soon. With the option to ignore the quarantine, maybe Mrima will decide to come back home. She was visiting her parents on Paian when the quarantine hit, so she’s been stuck there.”

“She will, because Paian has been infected with the virus,” she told me. “They had their first cases show up just yesterday. So it won’t matter if she comes back to Terra.”

“Whoa, really?”

She nodded. “She’ll be a Generation soon, either there on Paian or here on Terra.”

“Huh,” I sounded. “Just how many members of the Confederation are infected?”

“Several,” she replied, glancing at me. “The Imperium, the Urumi Collective, the Grimja Union, the Kirri, the Sha’i-ree, the Pai, and the Muri. An’ if I’m right, others will be soon. It’s in the Kirri symbiotes, an’ it’s just a matter o’ time before an infected symbiote slips through quarantine in another empire. It just takes one infected symbiote in a cargo shipment ta’ infect an entire planet, that’s how contagious the virus is,” she told me. “It’s why they’ve simply stopped tryin’ ta’ fight it on Karis an’ in the Imperium, an’ they’re switchin’ ta’ helping the population transition smoothly an’ without complications. Simply put, Kevin, the virus won.”

“Does that make you original Generations mad?”

“Not me,” she replied. “I kinda like the idea that others get ta’ enjoy the perks o’ being a Generation,” she smiled over at me. “I wouldna’ trade being who I am for anythin’ in the world, Kevin, and I was honestly overjoyed when my non-Generation friends were infected. It was like they became part o’ the family.” She turned towards me. “Ye have ta’

understand, Kevin, that since there's so few o' us, or there were until this started, we see ourselves as a family. A big family ta' be fair, but a family. We call each other 'cousin,' an' that isn't just a term of endearment. The other Generations *are* my cousins, they *are* my family. And now that yuir a Generation, ye are too. So I would be honored ta' call ye *cousin*, Kevin," she said, offering her hand to me.

"I know what you mean. It's why I call the other farm workers brother or sister," I said, taking her hand and shaking it with a smile. "Because we were connected by something beyond simple bloodlines."

"Aye," she said, turning back to face the windshield. "Then ye know exactly what I mean."

"I do indeed. Cousin," I added.

She spared me a bright smile.

We talked about less important things on the way back, and when she came in over Jacksonville, I saw that there had been some changes. The medical quarantine shield around my building was gone, and there were people down in the park beside the building, walking around and talking to each other. She brought the ship down to my garage door and swung it around, and I opened it using my interface. "I'll call ye tomorrow," she told me as she walked me back through the dropship, the stern ramp extending down into my garage so I didn't have to make the rather scary jump out over empty space to get inside. "An' don't worry about infecting anyone. I infected the entire city when I opened the stern hatch," she said with a bit of a silly smile.

"I just hope nobody in the building doesn't want to be a Generation," I grunted as I walked down the ramp and into my garage.

"I checked. Nobody opted out," she replied. "Everyone in the building agreed ta' become a Generation, so rest easy. An' thanks ta' us, they'll get their wish much sooner," she said with a sly tilt to her voice.

I had to laugh. "More cousins for you, eh?"

"I like a big family," she grinned. "So, I'll call ye tomorrow, but I'll call late. I'm sure yui'd like a little time ta' rest before we get started in earnest."

“That would be nice. I still have to process all of this.”

“Oh, and yui’d better call yuir friends. They’re worried about ye,” she added. “And if they’d like ta’ get a head start on things, ye might go down there and visit them,” she said liltingly.

“I dunno about that,” I said seriously. “Rita may have a panic attack at the idea of becoming a Generation. She’s terrified of telepaths, to the point where she lives in a remote area of Mexico just to stay well clear of them. Sano...I don’t know. I think she might like the idea, since she grew up with a telepathic sister.”

“Mikano’s sister?” she asked.

“You know her?” I asked in surprise.

“I know Mikano,” she told me. “She’s one o’ my friends.”

“Huh. Small world,” I mused.

“Sometimes it is indeed,” she agreed. “So, rest up today an’ tomorrow, an’ I’ll call ye tomorrow afternoon yuir time so we can arrange things. Then prepare ta’ get serious,” she warned.

“Okay. Talk to you later.”

She waved as the hatch closed, then I watched as her dropship pulled slowly away from my garage, turned, and started ascending in a trajectory that made it clear she was leaving the planet. She was going to that warship she said was in orbit, she said she’d be staying on it while she was here.

I came into my apartment considering everything that had happened, and what I’d learned. There was a new virus, one that could infect anyone, and now *everyone* was going to be a Generation. Me, the Keelo next door, the Verutans on the other side, everyone on the floor, everyone in the building, everyone in the city. Everyone on the planet. It would pose a major problem for people like Rita, who may not want to be one, who may have to spend the next few months living in a medical isolation shield, and I could see some chaos coming as people like me expressed and then couldn’t handle it.

I was almost embarrassed that I’d caused so much trouble, especially now that I’d learned to close my mind and knew how easy it was. I’d

attacked other people, attacked the Marines that came to stop me, and I didn't remember any of it. I just hoped I didn't hurt anyone.

I wondered how it was going to change things as I came into the main living room, and Stanley dropped out of the ceiling over the kitchen island on the far side of the room, moving to greet me. What was it going to be like for everyone on the planet to be a telepath? What would it be like when everyone could use telekinesis? Would waiters even bother to carry trays in restaurants anymore? Would people like warehouse workers be filling bins and boxes using their ability rather than their hands? Would using telekinesis become part of football, or baseball, or would they ban it?

Things were definitely going to change on Earth, and I had no idea if it would be good or bad. All I could do was wait and see what happens.

I did have the common decency to call my next door neighbor Envarr before it got so late that they went to bed, and warn him that I was carrying the virus that could affect him and Straremai, and that if they didn't want to be infected, I could go stay in a hotel or something. Their reaction was to come over and have a nightcap coffee with me to deliberately be infected, and I found out it was by order of his Emperor. All Verutans in the Empire were to allow themselves to be infected as quickly as possible, an order that was sent down just like an hour ago. Envarr was a diplomat, he worked for the Empire, so he'd gotten that order very quickly once it was sent down. Despite being ordered to be infected, he and his mate were honestly interested in it, because they had seen the usefulness of being a telepath from Envarr's last posting in the Nine Colonies, how life was much more convenient for a telepath compared to someone who wasn't, and they wanted it for themselves.

I could respect that.

I didn't have the Keelo's number next door—I didn't even know his name—so I sent him an email over Civnet, which I could do because I know his address. He responded by knocking on my door moments later and joining me and the Verutans for coffee.

Turned out he was awake too, his name was Sarko Ven, and he was an artist, a very famous artist in his home country—empire, whatever, who had moved to Terra to continue his art career without all the fanfare that came

with fame. That explained why he was always so secretive, and he never seemed to leave his apartment except to go shopping or go down to the beach. He too had decided to become a Generation, because he felt it would help him find a new dimension to his art.

What a world, I've been living next door to a famous artist for nearly three months, and had had no idea.

Gotta say, though, that his art is *awesome*. He works primarily in conventional paints, but he also does pottery and paints designs on the things he makes, which he does more as a hobby than anything else...but that doesn't make his pottery any less gorgeous than his pictures and portraits. He showed us some holos of his work, and even treated us to a sneak peek at one of his works in progress. The guy's super-talented.

After I spent a pretty enlightening hour with my next door neighbors, I finally got around to calling Rita and Sano...which I'd put off a little bit because I was almost afraid to tell Rita what was going on, as well as not being sure if they were still awake. I wanted to give it time so she could find out on her own and have a little time to think about it before I told her what happened.

Rita picked up my call before I had the chance to settle in front of the hologram, her and Sano sitting on her couch. "Are you okay?" she asked immediately.

"The Medical Service told us what happened, they called us because you put Rita down as your next of kin contact," Sano elaborated.

"Yeah, I'm alright," I answered. "I don't remember what happened. Rahne said that you can't remember what you did when you have a schism, and I'm not sure if that's a blessing or a curse. I'm worried that I might have hurt somebody, and I'll never know it."

"Who's Rahne?" Rita asked, as Sano got an expression like she'd heard that name before but couldn't quite place it.

"She's a Karinne, one of the original Generations," I answered. "She came here herself to talk to me, because of what happened. Turns out, I'm like way stronger than most other telepaths," I said, a bit self-consciously, trying not to sound braggish. "She said that I'm so strong that I need special

training to make sure I don't hurt myself, or anyone else. Rahne's gonna teach me how to control it."

"That's right!" Sano blurted. "She's one of Mikano's friends!"

"The Grand Duke sent her," I said, feeling a bit sheepish at the idea that people so important were paying any attention at all to someone like me. "She's really nice. So, I'm okay, girls," I said reassuringly, giving them a smile. "And thanks to Rahne, I've learned a trick so I won't have another schism. So I'm gonna be okay."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Rita said as Sano gave me a look of both relief and concern.

"I'm more worried about you, Rita. Did you see the broadcast?"

"Yeah, we did," she replied. "I decided that I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna become a Generation," she declared. "If I'm a telepath, then I won't have to be afraid of them because I can protect myself from them. I'm going to learn everything there is to know about it so I'm so good at it that they can never do anything like that to me again."

That was a bit of a surprise to me, but it did make a kind of sense, because I'd considered that myself. I wasn't sure if she'd embrace the idea of it, or be so afraid of telepathy in general that she'd not want to a Generation.

"Besides, you're a Generation now, brother," she said. "And if you're not afraid of it, then I won't be either. I'll always have you there to help me."

"Always, sister, always," I told her sincerely.

"And I'm actually eager for it. Like I said, I grew up with telepaths, so I know how great it is to be one," Sano said. "I can finally find out what it's like myself."

"Well, it turns out I can help with that a little bit," I said wryly. "I told you that Rahne came to talk to me in person. Well, actually, I woke up in her dropship, and we were on a deserted island so I'd be far away from other people," I admitted, glancing away from them in a bit of embarrassment. "She took me there so I could learn to close my mind without distractions. Anyway, she's carrying that new virus, the one that

infects anyone. And since I was with her for most of the day, that means I'm a carrier."

"Then why don't you come down here and we can have dinner?" Sano asked with dancing eyes.

"Are you sure? Are you sure about this, girls? If I do that, then you get infected."

"Well duh, that's the only reason we're asking," Sano teased. "It's certainly not because we like your company."

I laughed when Rita elbowed Sano in the ribs lightly.

"We'll do this together," Rita declared. "The three of us. Just the way friends should. And it's best if we do it now, so we're not jockeying with millions of other people for slots in the classes they said they're gonna have."

"That's a fair point. Better to be in the front than the back," I mused. "How about this. I come down and stay in the other guest bedroom for a few days," I offered. "That way when Rahne comes to train me, we can do it there at Rita's house, and you can meet her and maybe pick up a few tricks before you transition. She did say that she'd teach you too if you transitioned before she leaves," I told them. "So let's all be in one place for her."

"You know you don't have to ask, Kevin," Rita smiled.

"You're sure? Remember, Rita, I'm a telepath now."

"You're my brother. I don't care if you're a telepath or not, my brother would never look inside my head, my brother would never hurt me," she answered strongly. "Just make sure you bring some of your food. We're running a bit low on fresh stuff."

"The quarantine is lifted, Rita, go to the store and buy it," I reminded her.

"Oh! Oh yeah!" she realized, then laughed when Sano slapped her gently on the top of her head.

"I'll bring some of it anyway, if only to get it out of my apartment," I said. "I still have tons of meat in the freezers. Hell, I'll just bring one of the

freezers, and bring Stanley too. He's loaded with some pretty good recipes."

"Sure, your helper unit can upload them to mine, and this way my helper unit doesn't have to cook for three people by itself. And don't forget to bring a copy of your personal files so you can log in from here."

"Run three instances at full merge? What did that poor vidlink do to you to make you torture it like this, Rita?" I asked.

She laughed. "They said it was the best they had. Now it's gotta prove it," she grinned.

I hung up after talking with them a bit more, then got ready to spend a few days down in Rita's villa. I packed some clothes, set my vidlink so it forwarded all my calls to Rita's vidlink, backed up my personal CO files and settings on a datastick, and then loaded one of the freezers holding the food I was going to take with me onto the skimmer—I was going to let her keep the freezer, that would get it out of my utility room and she could use it to store extra food—and added a few boxes and cases of the stored food I had. I then had Stanley get in the skimmer, and we were on our way. The skimmer had its own helper unit occupying the skimmer's socket, so Stanley had to sit in the co-pilot's seat, holding onto the one of the seat belts for stability. It couldn't hover while the skimmer was on the move, its grav pods weren't *that* advanced. I thought a whole lot about what was going on here on Earth on the way down, so much so that I was honestly surprised when I arrived just outside Rio Indio and was landing on Rita's landing pad. They came out to greet me as I powered down, then I took a breath and opened the rear cargo hatch, which for sure would expose them to the virus.

But it was what they wanted, so I felt no guilt over it. They were both in typical garb for them, Rita wearing a tee shirt and pair of shorts and Sano in a tank top and knickers, both of them barefoot.

They came up into the skimmer and hugged me in turns as I came back to unload the stuff, and Sano even dared give me a kiss. "It's too late now," I told her.

"Keep talking like you're doing something I didn't want," she winked as Stanley floated past us and picked up one of the boxes holding some of the food I brought.

"Where shall this be stored?" he asked in his mechanical voice.

“Talk my helper unit, it’ll tell you where this stuff goes,” Rita told it.

“*Yes, Rita. Contacting your helper unit.*”. Stanley knew both of them from the times they’d visited the apartment. It then floated out towards the house carrying the box, no doubt having talked to Rita’s helper unit.

“You sure you’re ready for this, Rita?” I asked, taking her hands. “Not that you have a choice now, but you’re sure?”

“I’ll be fine as long as you and Sano are here with me,” she said with a trusting smile, looking up at me.

“We’ll be here as long as you need us,” Sano told her. “Even if I get fired from my job,” she added with a laugh.

“You can always come work for me. I could use a maid,” Rita replied impishly, and I laughed when Sano chased her out of the skimmer and across the lawn. They were acting like a couple of little kids.

Eh, it was good for Rita. That was probably why Sano was doing it. She usually wasn’t anywhere near that silly on our dates.

I’d been to Rita’s villa many times, so I was able to easily settle in. Both me and Sano have guest bedrooms here that Rita decorated for us, so I dropped off my stuff and helped unload the last of the food I brought, including helping set down Rita’s new freezer in the food pantry in an underground room accessed from the kitchen. Her pantry room was pretty big, more than big enough to hold three freezers on top of the food storage shelving, and it also had a wine bottle rack along one wall that held quite a few bottles. Rita was a big wine fan, and thank God she wasn’t an alcoholic, which was a common malady for many of us farm workers.

Once we had everything squared away, we had a well-past-midnight snack and glass of wine in the living room, where I told them what happened with Rahne in much more detail. I told them what she’d told me about the Generations, about telepathy, and described what it was like to close my mind. “So you can’t hear me thinking at all?” Rita asked.

I shook my head. “Right now all I could hear is if another telepath was sending,” I answered. “I *could* hear your surface thoughts, but I’m not gonna do that. No way in hell would I violate the privacy of a sister, or a friend,” I declared in a powerful voice. “The way she described it, though, it

doesn't seem nearly as scary as it did before. The telepathy, I mean. And the fact that I'm so strong makes me feel much, well, safer. Like Rita said, if another telepath ever attacks me again, I'll be able to fight back. And if I'm as strong as Rahne says I am, I can kick their ass."

"Well, I feel much safer with you around, Kevin," Sano winked.

"Our knight in rusty armor," Rita grinned, which made me laugh.

"Hey, I don't wear armor," I protested. "I just hope that I can get back to something approaching normal when this is all said and done. And not just me, but the planet. Things are going to change, girls, really change. And I'm not sure if it'll be bad or good."

"That'll depend on us more than anything else," Sano said sagely. "But I think everything's gonna be okay. It may take a while for things to settle down, but they will."

"I hope so," I said.

We chatted for a little while, then Rita went to bed. I stayed up a bit longer, going outside to stand on the balcony that overlooked the ocean, which was just beyond a wide patio with the swimming pool on the side of the house, and Sano came out and joined me. She leaned with her back on the railing and looked over at me. "I wonder how long it'll take for me and Rita to change," she mused, speaking Shio.

"I really don't know. I have no idea when, or even how, I got infected, so I can't tell you how long it was for me," I answered in Shio. "I know I'll be a nervous wreck while you guys are asleep. I know they said you don't have to go to the annex unless you have complications, but we're so far out here, I'm not sure how long it will take them to get here if you guys do. And I'm not sure how I'll know you're having complications."

"There's a big datafile on that on the public access site on Civnet. We read it after we talked about the news," she said. "There's even a module we can upload into the helper units that will let them monitor us and warn the Medical Service if we start having trouble, so it's a good thing you brought Stanley. They said that what you look for is a high temperature or changes to your breathing or heart rate. So, just remember that when I'm asleep, that normal for me is a deadly fever for Rita," she said with a light smile.

“I’ve always wanted to ask,” I said, daring to reach out and take her hand. “Do I feel cold to you?”

“Not really,” she replied, lacing her fingers with mine. “I mean, you’re not as warm as a Shio, but I kinda like it. What does this feel like to you?”

“That I’m holding someone’s hand who has sunburn,” I said honestly, which made her laugh. “But it’s kinda comforting. It’s like a warm blanket on a cool winter night.”

She gave me a radiant smile, which reminded me yet again just how beautiful Sano was. She let go of my hand, and surprised me a little bit by raising her hand and deliberately putting her finger on the scar on the left side of my face. It was the first time she had ever done something like that. “I wish I could have been there to comfort you when this happened,” she said softly, sliding her finger over my cheek and under my ear.

“As much as I appreciate the thought, Sano, you should never wish that you were anywhere near that hell,” I told her honestly. “I never told you how I got this scar, or what it means.”

“And you don’t have to now,” she told me.

I looked away from her, out over the ocean. “I’d been on the farm for over two years,” I told her distantly, as the memories of the worst three and a half years of my life washed over me, speaking English. “Someone had broken a rule. I don’t remember what it was, or who did it. As punishment, they picked the two pickers that had been on the farm the longest, telepathically dominated us, then made us fight to the death,” I said without emotion. “I was one. My best friend was the other. We’d been put on the farm together, and had survived that hell by relying on each other. I killed him, Sano. I killed my best friend,” I told her without looking at her. “But it also wasn’t me. When they took over our bodies, we knew everything that was going on. It was like I was a spectator in my own body, pushed aside while someone else moved me like a puppet. It wasn’t me fighting, it was the guard controlling me, but I could see everything, hear everything. They did it like that on purpose, to make sure that whoever survived remembered every second of it. I—” I closed my eyes and bowed my head. “I was slashed in the face during that fight. It cut off my earlobe. But I was the one that survived, when I strangled Ethan with my bare hands. I saw the light

fade from his eyes, Sano. I watched him die, and it was my hands around his neck. And I couldn't do anything to stop it." I took a deep, cleansing breath, but I didn't look at her. I felt too ashamed to look at her. "They fixed my earlobe, but left the scar. And after we were let off the farms, I wouldn't let them remove it. This scar is so I never forget what happened, and that I never, ever forget Ethan. Since he doesn't have a grave, the only way I can honor him is to be reminded of him every time I look in the mirror. This scar is Ethan's tombstone," I told her heavily, "and I will carry it with me until the day I die."

She was silent a long, long time, until she put her finger under my chin. She raised my head, then turned it so I had to look at her. She had tears in her eyes, but also had a fierce expression on her face. She then leaned forward, and much to my surprise, she very gently kissed my left cheek, kissed where the scar was. She then put her forehead against mine, that gesture that brought me so much comfort when she used it in the game, and brought me comfort once again.

"I'm so sorry," was all she said, a bare whisper, then wrapped her arms around me and gave me a gentle embrace.

I said nothing. I couldn't say anything. All I could do was stand there and feel the old pain...but also feel the warmth of her trying to drive it away. I put my arms around her and held her close, almost clinging to her like a frightened child seeking solace in the embrace of a parent. But in a way, I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from me. I'd told Sano one of my darkest secrets, and she had not looked at me like I was a monster. I'd always been afraid that my past would frighten her away, that if she knew the truth of what happened to me, to us, that she would want nothing to do with someone as damaged as I was. And yet here she was, comforting me after finding out the truth behind the scar on my face. It made me feel a fierce loyalty to her, to one that would stand with me despite knowing what I'd done. It made me feel *human* to confess so grave a sin to a woman I loved, and be granted absolution by her.

All I knew was in that moment, I had truly, fully, and completely fallen in love with Sano Strongblade. I belonged to her now, the one woman on Earth that would have me despite everything that had happened to me, everything I had done, both the things she knew and the things she didn't.

The one woman on Earth that could chase away the pain with nothing but the touch of her hand.

I was truly blessed to have her.

Rahne highly approved of my decision to stay with Rita for a few days, because she absolutely loved Rita's villa.

When she called me, I told her where I was, and she came down about an hour later. Since there was no more room on the landing pad for her dropship, she gave us a bit of a treat by coming down in the military warship that was hosting her. It landed in the water just offshore, a nearly three hundred meter long ship that was sleek and elegant, and held that triangular design common among all Karinne warships. I had no idea that their ships could land, let alone land in the water, but that one did. It stayed about half a kilometer offshore, in water deep enough to accommodate it, and she got over to the beach on a hoverbike. She came wearing a crop top and a pair of shorts, with a wide-brimmed white hat to protect her face from the tropical sun. I introduced her to Sano and Rita, then Rita showed her around the house, which she did for just about everyone.

After the tour, she brought me out onto Rita's deck while the girls logged on to play CO, mainly to give us privacy, and we sat at the round stone outdoor table as she explained to me what telepathy was, how it worked, and what could be done with it. After that, she started me on my first ever lesson, teaching the basics of what they call *sending*, which was the projection of thought outside the mind that other telepaths could hear. And if done right, non-telepaths could also hear it, but that required a special technique that I had to learn separately. I honestly had no idea that telepathy was so involved, because I learned a lot about it that I hadn't even considered. I learned that a telepath's power dictated their range—which made sense to me—but I also learned that there was a delicate balance in sending at the edge of your range and not hurting those right next to you. Telepathy required skill and subtlety to use effectively, she explained to me, and since I was so strong, I had to focus on the subtlety so I didn't cause pain to people around me.

We then started on the actual practice part of it, and I can proudly say that I managed my first sending only about two hours after learning the theory behind how to do it. Rahne said it was garbled and nearly unintelligible, that she also said that that was normal, and that my clarity would increase with practice, practice, and more practice.

It was well after lunch when we finally stopped, when my sending improved to merely a little fuzzy, and I found it...easy. And more than that, it was also kinda fun. I hadn't expected the lessons, and being able to do it, to be fun. I thought I'd hate it, that I'd learn it just because I had to, but that wasn't the case. I was honestly enjoying the lesson, and I liked sending because it let me express myself much better than with words. I'm not a very good speaker, I often get my words tangled up and say what I don't mean because I can't find a way to express it, but it wasn't that way with sending. With sending, I wasn't sending words, I was sending *thought*, and that thought wasn't based in words, it was based in *meaning*. And it was the mind of those that heard my thought that converted it into words, so my inability to find the right words to express myself didn't matter. It was a much purer form of communication, one where I was able to convey much more than what words could express.

And it went beyond thought. You could convey images, smells, sensations, feelings, even emotions over telepathy, which made it much more comprehensive. It was like...like telepathy was the original simsense, and now that I was a telepath, I could experience it for myself.

But that didn't mean I was going to use it all that much. I wouldn't feel comfortable sending to strangers, and my friends all lived far away from Jacksonville.

By early afternoon, Sano and Rita had rejoined us, and she went over what they could expect after they finished transition and expressed. I sat there holding their hands as they talked about it, Rita with a little trepidation and Sano with eagerness, making it clear that Rita was only doing this because she didn't want to feel different from me and Sano, to feel excluded. But I have to say, Rahne charmed Rita quite a bit, to the point where they were giggling and carrying on by dinnertime, and her explanation of things really settled Rita down quite a bit. The way Rahne

described being a Generation, it made all three of us want to be one too. And well, we either already were or we would be.

We also got to meet something I'd only read about, a CBIM...at least sorta. It turned out that there wasn't a single living person on Rahne's ship except for Rahne. The entire ship was run by bionoids, and all of them were being controlled by one of those CBIMs. They were living computers, the most powerful computers that existed the news reports said, and all the bionoids on the ship were being controlled by a CBIM named Cybi. That was a name I knew from the news stories, because it was the CBIM that survived the destruction of Karis in the Faey civil war. We got to meet her when she brought three bionoids that looked like Faey to the villa, all having the same face, like triplets, and used some kind of medical scanner on Rita and Sano to estimate when they'd go through transition.

I could...could hear something when the bionoids were there. It was like a faint buzzing in my mind, something I couldn't quite make out, and it was then that I realized that these bionoids had telepathic computers in them, those biogenic machines. I was hearing the biogenic machines talking to the person controlling them, which in this case was another biogenic machine.

We were all a little intimidated by the idea that the bionoids were being controlled by a living computer, but I have to say, the computer certainly didn't act like a machine. She seemed to have sincere emotions as she talked to Rahne, was very nice and polite, but also had something of a sense of humor that I didn't expect.

That broke the ice a little, at least with me. I worked up the courage to ask a question. "Why is the ship being run by bionoids? I mean, Sano's sister is a ship captain, so I assume it means that ships usually have crews on them."

"It's an experiment," the computer answered. "To see how well we CBIMs can run a ship from remote."

"Aye, an' it's a wee bit creepy," Rahne added, giving the bionoid a sly look. "It's quiet as a church mouse on the ship. Cybi doesn't have ta' have the bionoids communicate with each other ta' run the ship. So it's like being surrounded by the Borg."

I had to laugh at that comparison. “I had no idea you were a *Star Trek* fan, Rahne.”

“There’s tons ye dinna’ know about me, Kevin,” she grinned.

“Sano, Rita, both of you are definitely infected,” the bionoid told us. “And the virus is rapidly reproducing. I estimate that Rita, you will begin transition roughly late tomorrow evening. Sano, you will begin transition sometime in the early afternoon the day after. You’ll both be asleep for about twenty-two hours, and then you’ll wake up Generations. So Rita, at about eight o’clock tomorrow evening, you need to lay down where you intend to sleep through it and stay there until it happens. That can be in a bed, on a couch, or even in a merge pod, just make sure you stay in a resting position so you don’t risk passing out on your feet and potentially hurting yourself in the fall. Sano, you need to do the same at around noon the day after tomorrow.”

“Which is what happened to me,” I grunted. “Though I don’t remember it.”

“Why the different times if we were both infected at the same time?”

“Because you’re not Terran or Faey, Sano,” the bionoid answered. “The strain of virus you have will affect Terrans and Faey immediately, but has to adapt itself to affect any other species. The virus has to adapt to your DNA before it can affect you, which it has already done and is now starting to reproduce inside you. So, that means that you’ll transition later than Rita, since it got a head start on her, so to speak.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense,” she nodded.

“I’m a little nervous,” Rita said, trying to sound brave.

The bionoid put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “There’s nothing to fear, Rita,” she said in a gentle voice, giving her a kind look. “The transition will be painless and quick, and when you wake up, you will be like Kevin and Rahne. And you could have no better teacher than Rahne, child. She is both powerful and skilled, and she will help you become the best you can be,” she smiled.

If the machine was trying to comfort Rita, doing it in a bionoid that looked like a Faey wasn’t having the intended effect. I felt Rita’s grip

tighten on my hand when the machine leaned in and put its hand on her. “It’s just a machine, Rita. It’s a bionoid, not a Faey,” I told her soothingly.

The machine gave us a surprised look, then removed her hand from Rita’s shoulder. “Oh dear, I am so very sorry, Rita,” she said in a gentle voice. “I had no idea that you feel uncomfortable around Faey. I’ll have Terran bionoids brought to the ship and use them if I have to come back over here, alright?”

“Okay,” Rita said. “And it’s not your fault. I just can’t help it.”

“You never have to apologize, to me or anyone else,” the machine said strongly. “You have every right to feel the way you do, and don’t let anyone ever tell you that you don’t.”

If anything, that warmed Rita up to the computer fairly quickly. But the bioinoids didn’t stay more than few minutes longer, packing up their medical instruments and returning to the ship on a flying platform.

Rahne only stayed about an hour after that, since I was getting a little tired. I had no idea that just using telepathy could be so strenuous, but it is. There were times when I was out of breath, and once my nose started to bleed, just from trying to send. It was like telepathy was physical work, because I sure felt like I usually did after a heavy workout after we were done for the day. Rahne stayed for dinner after the lesson, getting to know the girls better as I sat on the couch and rested, then after the meal, she returned to the ship and it returned to space. After she was gone, we had a long talk about everything that happened that day, from what I’d learned to what she’d told us to what I’d been feeling, so the girls would know what to expect when it was their turn.

In a nutshell, it wasn’t nearly as bad as I expected it to be. I thought I’d be afraid of telepathy, would hate it, but in reality, my first forays into the world of it had made me curious to learn more, not be afraid of what I found there.

Sano had been right. It wasn’t telepathy that made the Trillane guards monsters. It was the instrument by which they showed their monstrous natures to the world.

It was a tool, nothing more, nothing less, and it was up to me to use it the right way.

The machine's predictions were very accurate.

Rahne returned the next day and trained me more on the basics of sending, coaching me as I learned how it worked, and I have to say, by the end of the second day I was much better at it. She again stayed for dinner, and when she left, Rita settled herself in her bedroom. And she passed out almost mid-sentence as she talked to us using a hologram while we sat in the living room, just a little after 9:00.

We kept an eye on her over the night, and through the morning, using a vital signs monitor that Rahne had brought for us. She was sleeping peacefully, and when a bionoid from the ship came in the morning to check on her, we found out that she was doing just fine and would wake up sometime around seven o'clock that night. But Sano wouldn't be awake to greet her, because the machine said she'd go to sleep and start her transition sometime around noon.

And it was right again. Sano made sure to retreat to her bedroom at 11:00, and she was passed out and in that coma state just before noon. That left me and Rahne alone in the house, and I split my time between monitoring Sano and Rita's vital signs and practicing. By the time we finished practicing for the day, I was again tired, had suffered three nosebleeds over the day, and I felt like I was competent when it came to sending to someone in the same room. Rahne said my sending was no longer garbled or fuzzy, and she was honestly surprised by how quickly I'd picked it up.

Rahne stayed long enough for Rita to wake up, which she did almost exactly at 7:00pm. We rushed into her room to greet her after the little monitor told us she was moving, and she gave us a reassuring smile once her eyes were open. As I looked at her, I could feel it. I knew that she was a Generation. "So, how do you feel?" I asked her, taking her hand.

"The same as I did when I went to sleep," she replied, then she gave me a strange look. "I understand what you were talking about. I look at you, and I, I can feel it. I *know* you're Generations."

"Which proves that ye've completed transition," Rahne told her with a smile. "Welcome among us, cousin."

“Cousin?”

“That’s what we call each other. Cousin,” she elaborated. “I told ye, we Generations see ourselves as one big family. We’re all related by the fact that we’re Generations. And how ye’ve joined our little family, which isn’t so little anymore.” She laughed softly. “There were only three hundred or so o’ us just a few months ago, and now there’s billions.”

“So, I’m a telepath now?” Rita asked.

“Aye, but ye haven’t expressed yet. That will come in time,” she told her. “An’ I canna’ tell ye when it will happen. It may be tomorrow, it may be next month, there’s no way ta’ tell. An’ when it does happen, I’d be happy ta’ teach ye the basics.”

“I’d like that,” she smiled.

“I’m gonna have one o’ the bionoids come over an’ give ye a quick check over, an’ if it says yuir good ta’ go, ye can get out of bed,” Rahne told her.

“Okay. I feel alright. I’m a tiny bit tired, but I feel fine to get up.”

“Nothin’ a good meal won’t fix,” she smiled. “Kevin, can ye have the helper unit make somethin’ for Rita?”

“Sure.”

A human bionoid came into the house, and a few minutes later, as I was arranging something for Rita to eat, the bionoid left. Rita and Rahne came into the massive living room a moment later, Rita walking on her own and looking just fine. She came through the living room and to the table-like area on the other side of the wall where the kitchen was—the kitchen in her villa was easily visible from the living room, with a big hole in the wall between it and the living room which had a tabletop installed on it to create an informal dining area—and sat on one of the stools that sat by the table construct on the other side of the wall. “Feeling okay?” I asked her.

“Just fine,” she replied. “Is Sano asleep?”

“Yeah, til around noon tomorrow,” I answered. “She’s in her bedroom if you want to check on her.”

“Does she, you know, feel like us yet?”

“Not the last time I looked in on her,” I replied.

“She won’t til she’s almost done,” Rahne supplied. “An’ I hate ta’ greet an’ run, guys, but I’m gonna go back to the ship. I want ta’ merge to my house bionoid and check in with my husband and son.”

“Sure, we don’t mind,” Rita told her. “Thank you for waiting for me to wake up. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem, Rita,” she smiled, patting her on the shoulder. “With luck, yui’ll express while I’m here an’ I can teach ye the basics before Kevin returns home. But I’ll still be teachin’ him, so ye could always go ta’ his apartment and keep learning’ if ye want.”

“What else are you going to teach him?”

“Quite a bit. Since he’s so strong, he needs a strong command o’ the basics so he doesna’ pose a threat ta’ himself o’ anyone else. There’s even more ta’ it than that, o’ course, but he’ll need ta’ learn the advanced skills after he’s had a little practice with the basics. We still have splittin’, commune, and the exercises the Pai use ta’ coax out a person’s TK ta’ go when it comes to the basics I want ta’ teach. Commune will take maybe ten minutes for him ta’ learn, which usually a new Generation canna’ do until a few days after he expresses. Splittin’ may take him a few hours, but once he figures it out, he doesn’t need me ta’ teach him that anymore, he can work on it alone. The TK exercises only take a few hours ta’ learn, but there’s no tellin’ how long he’ll have ta’ practice them before his TK comes out. TK works different than telepathy. It doesna’ express at the same time, because it has nothing ta’ do with telepathy. And it doesna’ happen spontaneously. Ye have ta’ actively work ta’ unlock yuir TK.”

“Which is why you can’t do it by accident,” I realized.

“Aye,” she nodded. “Trust me, it’s not easy. Yuir gonna be workin’ yuir arse off when it comes ta’ TK, Kevin. Just ta’ warn ye. It’s not easy ta’ awaken, and when ye do, it takes a whole lot o’ time an’ effort ta’ learn.”

“Is it worth it? Is it fun to use?” Rita asked.

“Aye, it is,” she smiled. “Ye’ll be cursin’ and screamin’ an’ feelin’ like ye were dragged over broken glass by a hoverbike when ye first start, but when ye finally get good with it, it’s soooooooo worth it,” she smiled. “An’

since ye have a Pai friend that can teach ye more than the basics, ye'll find it way more useful than ye believe. As ta' fun, well, it's not fun 'tall when ye start, but it gets fun when ye get good with it."

"Now I'm really curious," Rita said eagerly.

"I'll teach ye the exercises ta' awaken it, if yuir curious. Ye dinna' need ta' be expressed ta' do that, an' the sooner ye start, the faster ye awaken yuir TK."

"I'm staying here until Sano has to go back to work, which is in a few days, so sure. We can all learn them together," I said.

"I'd love to learn them," Rita added.

"I'd be happy ta'," Rahne smiled. "So, I'll be back tomorrow morning, guys."

"You want us to make breakfast for you?" I asked.

"Oh, aye, that would be kind o' ye," she smiled.

After she left, I stood at the table on the kitchen side as Rita ate, leaning down on it. "You feeling alright?" I asked her. "Like for real?"

"I feel just fine, Kevin, so stop worrying," she smiled at me between bites of a leftover tamale I'd warmed up for her. Rita wasn't a very good cook, but her helper unit had been programmed with a ton of traditional Mexican recipes. "And I'm not nearly as nervous or worried as I thought I'd be. After hearing you talk about telepathy for the last couple of days, now I'm starting to get honestly curious about it. You seem to like it, so maybe it's not so bad after all."

"Yeah, I'm a bit surprised myself," I admitted. "I thought I'd look in the mirror and have an anxiety attack, knowing I was looking at a telepath, but I don't at all. And I think Rahne has a lot to do with that. The way she talks about it, the way she explained what I was feeling when I started doing it, she doesn't make it seem scary at all. I'm honestly intrigued now, and I think I'd like to learn more than what she promised to teach me. If anything, it will guarantee that what happened to me, to us, will *never* happen again," I said seriously. "If I'm really as strong as she says I am, and I know what I'm doing, no telepath is going to get control of me ever again."

“That’s why I want to learn, so I can protect myself from them,” she agreed with a nod, taking another bite.

“That’s all the reason you need,” I told her with a nod.

My absence from the game was noted.

The next morning, before Rahne arrived, I checked the usual sites and forums to see what I’d missed in the week or so I’d been out of the game, and much to my surprise, I’d again made the top of the *CO Today* site. The headline read *Virus Hits Home: Popular Players Infected*. The article below read: *If you’re wondering why you haven’t seen any new viddies from some of the most popular CO players and streamers, it’s most likely because they’ve been infected with the Generation Virus that’s sweeping across Terra. We have confirmation that several very popular viddy makers and streamers have stopped posting or logging in, including Crushcrush, Sampi, Xen, Eldrik, and Vakra, and have all been infected by the virus. No one knows how they’re doing, because all of them have not contacted anyone since they stopped logging in or posting viddies.* How in the hell did they find out I was infected? Did someone I know tell them? *Quite a few others have announced on their pages or channels that they’ve also been infected. By our count, nearly a quarter of the most popular CO players in the Terra server cluster have been infected, and among the rest of us masses, there has been a marked decrease in the number of active log-ins in the game for the last two weeks. It seems that the virus has indeed hit home here in CO, in the form of a large number of players not logging on because of the virus, or its aftereffects. To inform the readers, none of the staff here at CO Today are infected, but in my personal case, the virus is present here in Sacramento, and we’ve already been warned that infection is more or less guaranteed at this point.* The article went on to talk about how players in game are dealing with the virus, both in how it was reducing players logging in and how life had changed for those who were back after transition. The writer of the column really did his homework, interviewing several players from in game—the author played on the Stratomi server—and giving a pretty fair and accurate account of what it was like to be infected and how things changed once it was done.

It incited me to post on the site's forum, since I was mentioned by name in the article...which flattered me quite a bit. According to them, I was one of the more popular CO content creators, I guess because of the duel viddy I did with Alandra. *I'm Okay* was the title, and I wrote *Just a quick head's up for everyone, since the site mentioned me by name. I'm alright. I was infected by the virus, but I've recovered and have been too busy to log in for a while. I'm embarrassed to admit that I suffered a schism, which is when you get overwhelmed by the "voices," the unshielded thoughts of the people around you, and you kinda lose control and attack them to make them stop. Thankfully I'm fine, and so is everyone else. From what I was told, there were Imperial Marines within range of me when it happened, and they stopped me before I did anything that would hurt myself or anyone else. I've been taking individual training so I can get control over my telepathy, and I hope to be logging back on in a week or so. Until then, I'm afraid I won't be logging on, and I won't be posting any new viddies. But I promise to try to at least drop by the forums or the chat channel on my viddy page every once in a while to keep everyone apprised of how I'm doing.*

I won't lie, it was a bit of a rough start for me because I expressed almost immediately after I woke up from the transition. They didn't have anyone available that could teach me, and that caused me to have some real problems because the online courses they made didn't really help me. But now that I'm getting instruction from a teacher, I'm doing much better. I've got about a week or so to go, my teacher says, then I'll be okay to return to my usual routine.

If you've caught the virus and transitioned, let me say this: don't be afraid. It is a little scary at first, but don't let that discourage you. Now that I've learned how to close my mind to block out the voices, I'm starting to really get interested in learning more about telepathy, and I'm even thinking about taking some of those advanced classes they're offering through the Academy. Despite my rough start, I'm honestly enjoying learning about my new abilities, and I think you will too if you give it a chance.

I'll be back in game as soon as my teacher says that I'm good to go, which I hope will be in about a week. Until then, wish me luck.

I felt that was good enough, and about then Rahne's destroyer landed off the coast, so it was time to get to work.

I got a lot done before Sano woke up. Rahne felt I'd progressed enough in sending to attempt communion, and I found that to be *easy*. Once she explained what it was and how it was different, I managed to commune within five minutes of actively trying. And wow, is it different. It's like regular telepathy, but it's like it engages a lot more of your mind instead of just one little piece of it, but even then it doesn't dominate your attention. You can convey much more through communion than through telepathy, both in how much and how detailed it is. When you convey sensations, feelings, or emotions over commune, they're much richer, much more complete, almost like comparing the difference in simsense between a first gen and a third gen rig. Telepathy seemed quite *limited* after I learned how to commune, and I could understand why when Rahne told me that Generations prefer to use communion over anything else when they talk to each other.

Rahne decided to ease back on the lesson so I could sit with Sano, to be there when she woke up. I sat vigil over her from about ten in the morning onward, sending with Rahne to practice sending to someone I couldn't see—which was harder than I expected it to be—holding Sano's hand as I practiced with Rahne, who was laying out on one of the loungers on the beach, talking with Rita, explaining things to her so she'd be ready when she expressed. I was rewarded for my determination around noon, when Sano's eyes fluttered open. I leaned over her and patted her hand, giving her a relieved smile. And when our eyes met, I felt that shiver that told me that her transition was over. She was a Generation.

"Hi," she said in Shio, giving me a beautiful smile.

"Hello there," I replied gently, reaching over and stroking her dark, greenish hair from her face. "How do you feel?"

"A little tired. A little sleepy," she said, then she yawned. "I understand what you were talking about. I look at you, and I *know*."

"I know, right?" I smiled. *Rahne, Sano's awake. Can you tell Rita? Surely. We'll be over in a minute.*

Sano's eyes widened. "I...I *heard* that!" she blurted.

"Whoa, really? You mean you already expressed?" I asked in surprise.

“I guess so,” she laughed. “Guess I don’t have to wait,” she winked.

I blurted it out as soon as Rahne and Rita came into the room, and Rahne sat down on the bed beside Sano and put a hand on her forehead. “She’s not the only one ta’ wake up expressed. It happened to a friend o’ mine too,” she replied.

“Well, I feel like the odd one out now,” Rita laughed.

“When ye express has nothin’ ta’ do with how strong ye are,” she told her with a glance. “Well, it does for those born with talent, but for the new Generations, it doesna’ make any difference. After all, Kevin here is bloody strong, an’ he didn’t express for a couple days after transition. So just be patient, Rita. It’ll come in its own time.” She looked down at Sano. “So, the first thing ye need ta’ learn is how ta’ close yuir mind,” she told her in a strong voice. “Once ye have that down, we’ll start workin’ on the other parts o’ it.”

I wasn’t Rahne’s only student anymore, but that didn’t make much difference. I got my first taste of something I hadn’t considered, the fact that a Generation could do multiple things at the same time. Rahne simply did something she called *splitting*, with one part of her conscious mind teaching Sano and Rita and the other continuing to teach me about more advanced ways to use telepathy and communion. And let me tell you, it was really strange to see it, to sit up on the deck and hear her talking to Sano and Rita while she was communing with me at the same time, holding two completely different conversations at once.

And Rita didn’t have to wait long. Around sunset, she too started to hear me and Rahne practicing telepathy, which meant that she expressed. By then, Sano had learned how to close her mind—it really wasn’t that hard when someone was there to explain it to you—and that meant that the two of them would start learning about sending in the morning, as soon as Rita learned how to close her mind. And that wouldn’t take long, because Rahne wouldn’t leave until Rita could do it. It was simply too dangerous to leave a neophyte telepath with Rita’s personal history unable to close her mind. It was a recipe for disaster.

After Rahne finished teaching Rita to close her mind and went back to her ship for the night, so she could spend the evening with her husband and

son via her bionoid on Karis, the three of us sat in the living room and talked about this change in our lives. Much to my relief, Rita wasn't afraid of it, she was more curious than anything else thanks to the way Rahne explained things and taught her when she expressed, and Sano was quite enthusiastic about it because she'd grown up with a telepathic sister and father. "So, you've learned how to send, what's it like?" Rita asked me.

"It's kinda like talking over a jack, just with a different part of your mind. Kinda," I told her. "It's not hard at all. I think both of you are gonna pick it up quick."

"I noticed that she was sending to you the entire time she was teaching us, but I couldn't understand it. That was so bizarre."

"She was splitting," I told Sano. "That thing where you can do two things at once. I'd have never thought of using it like that. I guess Rahne, and the other people born like this, they really are very different from us."

"No argument there," Sano agreed. "It's an entirely different way of thinking, of approaching things for us, but for them, it's just Tuesday."

I had to chuckle at that. "I'm gonna see if she'll teach me how to do it tomorrow while you guys are learning how to send. If I can learn how to split, I could talk on like two or three different chat channels in CO at the same time and not get confused."

"I wonder how that works," Rita mused. "I mean, how do you *do* it? I can't fathom the idea that I'll be splitting my mind into two independent pieces and have each of them work by itself. I mean, do they fight? Will they not like each other and refuse to merge back into one when I'm done? Will I create an evil twin of myself inside my own head?"

"I have no idea, which is why I'm glad Rahne isn't leaving yet," I answered her. "I'm sure I'll find out in the morning."

And I did. Rahne agreed to my request, and before she started teaching the girls, she set me up with a little game that she said teaches splitting. She brought up a hologram on the vidlink that had a split screen, and each side had something different. It was a hard hologram, meaning I could touch it and interact with it, and she told me to do the math equations on the right

side as I navigated a little dot through a maze on the left side. She told me that to split, I didn't focus on either of the sides of the hologram, I kinda let my mind take in both and then let my mind arrange itself to handle both tasks simultaneously.

It took me nearly two hours to figure it out, but I eventually did. Once I got the hang of it, of concentrating on nothing, which let me see both sides of it and start working on them at the same time, I started to really get the hang of it.

As we ate lunch, she explained how it works in more detail with Sano and Rita listening, using an analogy where our attention was a handful of coins, and we could spend those coins on doing tasks. But tasks that required us to use our bodies cost more than tasks that were purely mental, so there was a limit on how we could use splitting to do physical tasks. And if we did something intensive that involved moving around a lot, like driving a bionoid or being merged to some other external asset, only one of our splits could do it. I couldn't drive a bionoid with one split and move my body around with the other, though I could remain aware of my body with one of my splits so I could watch vidy or talk to someone. I just wouldn't be able to move around, and may not even be able to move my arms. She said that some people could, but most couldn't. She called the part of you that controlled an active body the *dominant split*, like the head honcho of all the different parts of me when I was splitting.

It was absolutely fascinating, and I was enthralled by the idea of it. I practiced it all morning and most of the afternoon while Rahne taught Sano and Rita the basics of telepathy, a lesson I learned just a couple of days ago. By the time the helper units served dinner to us, I had gotten splitting down to where I could easily handle the math/maze game, and had even tried branching out past that by listening to a netcast, trying to split my attention three ways so I was concentrating on all three at the same time, without really concentrating on any of them. And I was able to manage it just before dinner.

When Rahne left for the evening, she left behind an entirely different dynamic in the house. both Rita and Sano could send now, and the house was silent as we practiced, doing what Rahne told us to do and practicing, practicing, practicing. And I didn't realize how much work it was to send

until I was doing it for hours at a time. It left my mind tired by sunset, like I'd been working out my brain in an entirely new way, and all of us were tired of it by nine.

When Rita went to bed, exhausted from the day's activity, I sat with Sano out on the deck, the two of us sitting on the steps leading down to the beach. And it was so much different to send to her rather than speak to her, making it feel like we were much more connected.

So, is it everything you hoped? I asked her, looking over at her.

So far, she replied, her sending fuzzy, a regression from earlier. But that was because she was tired, and that made her sending lose clarity and focus. *Rahne said that both of us are considerably stronger than average for a telepath, so at least there's that. Not as strong as you, though,* she added with a self-deprecating smile. *She said that Rita's respectably strong, but not a powerhouse like you, and that I'm just a tiny bit stronger than her. And with some training, we'll both be on the high side of the power curve.*

That's alright, I won't let the bullies push you around on the playground, I assured her.

She laughed aloud. *My hero,* she grinned, squeezing my hand. *I'm just so happy that Rita seems to be okay. She doesn't seem to be anxious or afraid at all. I think she's honestly liking being a Generation so far.*

I think Rahne had a lot to do with that, I told her. *The way she explains it, the way she uses it, it doesn't seem scary or intimidating at all. I think whoever decided to send her to teach me and Rita was really smart. She's so kind and caring, it really shows.*

Her husband is a lucky man, Sano noted lightly. *But I just can't get over that accent. It's almost hypnotic. Where is it from?*

Scotland. She's Scottish, I answered. *It even shows up a little when she speaks Faey.*

And I thought I had an accent when I learned to speak Faey, she noted lightly, looking away from me for a moment.

I guess in that way, we're kinda the same. We were both pulled from our homes and thrown into an entirely different world.

Don't ever compare what happened to me to what happened to you, she sent strongly, her thought brimming with emotion that I couldn't identify. She took my hand and held it tightly.

Sometimes I think I won the lottery, I told her, giving her a smile. *That someone as wonderful as you would have anything to do with someone like me.*

She didn't say anything. She didn't send anything. She just gave me a gentle smile, put her head on my shoulder, and kept hold of my hand as we looked out over the ocean, which was illuminated by a nearly full moon sitting in the sky overhead..

And I almost wished that we could stay like that forever.

Rahne stayed with us for two more days, because Sano had to go back to work and I was going to go back to Jacksonville when she did, and she'd be coming to Jacksonville to continue teaching me every day until she felt I was good enough to be on my own.

In those two days, all three of us learned a hell of a lot. Rita and Sano learned more about telepathy, did the same game I did that taught them how to split, and learned how to commune and how to apply the lessons they learned in telepathy to commune. All three of us learned how to send privately, as well as how to send to multiple people at once who weren't close together, and how to send over long distances without "shouting in the ears" of people close to us. That was a bit tricky, and it took us a bit to learn how to do it. While they did that, Rahne taught me more about how to control my telepathy, since I was so much stronger than the girls, teaching me some advanced tricks to control my power as well as teaching me a few tricks she didn't teach the girls. She felt they weren't quite ready to learn them, but when they had a little more experience, I was welcome to teach them those tricks myself.

We also found out that Rita had a very, very rare ability. Rita kept complaining about hearing something strange despite her mind being closed, like urges and impulses on a telepathic level, and after Rahne investigated, she told us that Rita was able to use telepathy with animals. She'd been sensing the mental states of animals around the house, whose

minds were dominated by their instincts. That was a very rare skill, she'd told us, and it caused her to call back to Karis and have the Karinnes talk to the U.N. and arrange special training for her, so she could master the skill. It took a telepath that could communicate with animals to teach her, so they were going to track one down to train her. It would have to be a telepath that wasn't Faey, so it may take them a while to find one. Until then, Rahne taught Rita some very basic exercises to allow her to ignore hearing the instinctive impulses of the animals around the house, to close herself off to them until she could get some specialized training.

In the meantime, Rahne heavily suggested that Rita get a pet, so she could practice with an animal with which she was familiar, and was familiar with her. Rita agreed, and Rahne promised to find something for her.

And that led to a bit of a surprise on her last day at the villa. When the destroyer settled into the water offshore, a dropship launched rather than Rahne coming over on a flying platform. We came down to the beach where it landed, and we were a bit surprised when the hatch opened and this giant red-eyed dog bounded out of the hatch and down to the beach. I looked at it, and realized that it wasn't a dog, it was a giruzi! Giruzi were dog-like animals from the planet Moridon, and they were famous because they were like electric eels. They could generate a serious shock, could even project a lightning bolt over half a football field, which they used as a hunting tool in the wild. They had been domesticated, and the Faey, U.N., Urumi, Karinnes, Shio Federation, and Moridon used them as service animals, as guard dogs, trackers, and law enforcement animals. Nothing could scatter a crowd faster than the police bringing in a few giruzi. They were well known to be highly intelligent animals, very easy to train, but they weren't well known as pets because they were energetic animals that liked a lot of activity. They were high maintenance animals, but if you were willing to put in the time, they rewarded you with love, loyalty, and protection.

I thought it was a good idea. Rita lived alone down here, and having a giruzi in the house would make about any robber think twice about trying to break in.

But it wasn't the only animal in the dropship. Rahne came out carrying a small kitten, or at least what I thought was a kitten, and a larger cat bounded down the stairs and onto the sand. They were only cat-like at first

glance, however. They had eerie eyes that were almost a solid lavender, no iris and the pupil barely visible, which was just a darker spot of violet in the lavender. The one Rahne was holding had a calico-like coat of browns, blacks, reds, and orange, and the one on the ground was a dark violet color with light violet socks on its paws. I'd never seen animals like them before. "I found ye a nice pet, Rita," Rahne said by way of greeting. "Meet Tuki. Tuki, heel," she called in Faey, and the giruzi came over and sat down by her leg. "Since ye live alone here, I thought ye having a giruzi about the house might be a good idea," she smiled. "And this cute little devil is called a tabi," she added, hefting the tiny kitten in her arms. "I brought her ta' see if one o' ye wanted to keep her. Mimo there is my tabi," she said, wagging her foot towards the tabi on the beach, "and this little rascal is her kitten, weaned and ready for a new home. I think yui'll find them ta' be quite lovely pets. They're very popular on Karis."

"You're giving me a giruzi?" Rita asked in surprise.

"Aye, and Tuki has received some trainin', so she's ready ta' live in a house. She's been trained ta' be a pet, not a guard animal, but she knows commands ta' protect her owner that I'll teach ye, Rita," she explained. "Now, *these* are the guard animals," she said, hefting the cat again. "Tabis are very special animals, guys. They're empathic."

"They're what?" Sano asked.

"They're empaths," she repeated. "They can sense the emotional states o' others, and they use it ta' avoid predators. They can sense hostile intent, like a predator that wants ta' eat them. These little furballs are the ultimate guard animals, guys, because they can sense it if someone wants ta' do ye harm."

"Wow, really?" I asked in surprise.

"Mmm-hmm," she nodded, setting the tiny kitten—tabi down with the adult. "So, do any of ye want her?"

I looked at the calico, and I considered how nice it would be to not be alone in the apartment. Not that I didn't have someone to talk to in Stanley, but Stanley's not exactly good company. "I'll take it," I blurted.

"Okay then. Now, ye don't pick a tabi, guys. The tabi picks ye. And Mimo here won't just give up her kitten without makin' sure yui'll take

good care o' her. So we'll let Mimo decide if yuir allowed ta' take her kitten, and we'll see if the kitten likes ye enough ta' go with ye," she grinned. "Alright, Mimo, he wants ta give yuir kitten a home. Check him out," she told the tabi on the ground in Faey.

I knelt down almost reflexively as the adult cat-like animal padded through the sand to us. The adult tabi sniffed at my fingers, gave me a penetrating look with its eerie eyes, then gave a single sound that wasn't a meow, it was like a melodious chirp. That sound attracted the kitten, and I was not disappointed at all when the calico came straight to me and demanded that I pick it up. "Congratulations, Kevin, Mimo approves, so ye are now owned by a tabi," Rahne winked. "Tabis use a litter box just like a cat does, and they're omnivores, so they'll eat just about anythin'. They eat mostly meat, but they need some vegetables and a little bread in their diet ta' stay healthy, so feed her some table scraps now and again ta' supplement a diet of cat food, and she'll be just fine," she told me.

"I haven't had a pet since I was a kid," I said honestly, petting the little calico. "And I think it'll be nice to have someone else in the house. It gets a little lonely in there sometimes."

"Just ta' warn ye, ye don't spay or neuter tabis," Rahne said lightly. "They take that as hostile intent and they run away. So if any male tabis move into yuir building, ye may be giving away yuir own kittens later on."

"If a male can get into my apartment, more power to it," I said easily. "Besides, given I've never even heard of these, these may be the only tabis on Earth."

So, I ended up with an entirely unplanned but not unwelcome addition to my house and to my life. The calico was adorable, playful, affectionate, and I learned very quickly that it being an empath meant it was very easy to get along with. It could sense when I was not happy with something that it did, so it would hopefully stop doing it. I decided to name my new calico tabi Kishu, which meant *adorable* in Shio, because she was definitely adorable and *Kishu* sounded like a nice exotic name for a non-Terran pet.

Tuki hit it off with Rita almost immediately, acting like a little puppy despite the fact that she outweighed Rita by a good twenty kilograms. Rita liked dogs, and had been considering getting one, so having the giruzi

dropped on her was more of a windfall than an unwelcome surprise. And good grief was it big. Its head was only a couple of inches lower than Rita's, and they stood nearly eye to eye with each other. But if it was standing on its hind legs, it would be over two meters tall, much taller than Rita who probably barely reached 150 centimeters. The giruzi was sleek, lithe, looked more like a greyhound than a heavy dog like a Saint Bernard, but its sheer size made it formidable.

But it was the eyes that were what was most intimidating. Those glowing red eyes, the result of a bioluminescent reaction where the animal's vision was based on that light emanating from the eyes, reflecting off things, then bouncing back to the eyes, made the giant dog-like animal look downright *evil*, and I could fully understand why they had a reputation for being intimidating animals. The black coat and glowing eyes almost made it look like a hellhound from human myth, just one that could project lightning bolts.

The little kitten certainly made her presence known by staying very close to me as we learned the last thing Rahne wanted to teach us, and those were the exercises we could use to try to awaken our telekinetic ability. And they were a little unusual, not at all what I expected. I expected like meditation or something, but none of them were anything like that.

The first exercise was the oddest one. Rahne gave each of us a softball-sized ball made of a rubber-like material, but the surface was black and smooth and cool to the touch, and it didn't easily yield to pressure even though it did bounce if you threw it on the deck. And it was surprisingly heavy despite being filled with air. The first exercise was to study our black softball to the point where we were intimately familiar with every aspect of it. Its size, its shape, its weight, the way it felt, even the way it smelled. We were supposed to study it, concentrate on it, and learn everything there was to know about it.

The second exercise was similarly unusual, but I was starting to understand the method to the madness. In that exercise, we stood up and did nothing more than move our arms, pushing our hands away and then bringing them back, away and back, away and back, like we were hula dancing or something. While we did that, we were supposed to *feel* the

motion as we concentrated on our hands the way we'd concentrated on the ball in the first exercise.

The third exercise brought the first two together. In that exercise, it was the ball we were pushing away from us and then pulling back, and we had to concentrate both on the ball and on the motion at the same time, feeling the object we knew intimately move through the air as we concentrated on how it felt for it to move. Then we had to envision the ball moving in our minds, investing into it the motion we were feeling.

They were weird exercises, but just about everything about this is weird, so that made it normal. Rahne told us that it would take a while for us to manage to use TK, and that we'd know we were close when we started feeling a pressure behind our eyes when doing the third exercise.

After lunch, we got another pleasant surprise, in the form of a hovercar that slowed along the coast, turned to the house, and came down to land on the beach just at the edge of the deck. We got up from the table where Rahne was explaining how it felt to use TK and saw the car hatch open, and Mrirma hopped out! Her cubs hopped out just behind her as the trunk opened, and Mrijin went to the back and pulled out three suitcases using his telekinetic ability, floating them out. "Mrima!" I said in surprise, coming down the stairs quickly, I dropped to my knees and gave the tiny Pai a hug as she came up to us. "When did you get back from Paian?"

"Now," she said in halting Faey; I wasn't wearing my interface, so I couldn't get a translation. She could understand me, but I couldn't understand her. "Interface."

I put a hand to my face, then laughed. "Sorry," I said. "How long are you staying?"

"Today. Home tonight."

I fetched my interface so I could talk to her as she and her cubs were brought up to the deck, and they were all sitting around or on the table when I got back, carrying my and Sano's interfaces. Mrijin and Mralla were adults, the same size as Mrima, but they had different fur coloration. Mrijin was what I'd call a gray leopard, a dusky gray coat with black spots, and was closest to Mrima's gray tabby-like fur. Mralla was almost solid tan, like a cougar, but had black tips on her ears and the tip of her tail. Both of them

were wearing only that Pai kilt-like garment that they favored, split in the back for their tails. All three were sitting on the table instead of in chairs. “They cleared us to come through the quarantine just this morning,” Mrima said after we put on our interfaces. “I have to be back at work in the morning, but I thought I’d stop by and see you guys before we return to Norfolk.”

“You know this means you’ve been exposed to the virus,” Sano told her.

“That’s a moot point,” she said. “I guess you guys haven’t heard yet.”

“Heard what?”

“They’ve partially opened the borders of quarantined planets to each other,” she told us. “They’re allowing people like us who got stuck behind quarantine to come home, because they’re saying that the virus can no longer be stopped. Right now, they’re saying that the strategy is to just let it infect everyone behind a quarantine to get it over with, then keep them quarantined until the virus dies out.”

“Holy smokes,” I blurted. “Then things must be really bad.”

“This is news ta’ me. Think I’ll call back home and see what Jason has ta’ say,” Rahne said, then she turned slightly away from us and put a finger to her interface.

“I think it’s only right that it’s my best friend on Terra that gives us the virus,” Mrima said, smiling at me.

“Well, you’re infected now,” I grinned at her. “All of you are.”

“Which I’m glad about,” Mralla declared. “I think it’s gonna be awesome being a telepath.”

“So far it’s been pretty interesting,” I told her. “I thought I’d hate it, or I’d be afraid of it, but I’m honestly more intrigued by it than anything else. It’s kinda fun.”

“I am so ready to find out for myself,” she grinned in reply.

“Have all three of you expressed?” Mrima asked.

“Yeah,” Rita replied. “Me and Sano have just finished learning the basics, and Kevin’s right. It’s not as scary as I thought it was going to be.

I'm really interested to learn more now."

"That's a healthy attitude," Mrima told her with a nod.

"It's a lot easier than I expected it to be," Sano added. "I thought it would be super-hard to use, but it's not. In fact, it's almost too easy to use. I think that's why people have trouble with it when it first expresses."

"Yeah. So, we have some catching up to do, you can tell us all about what you've learned so we know what to expect," Mrima said. "And while I'm here, I'll teach you a little about telekinesis."

"Rahne's already taught us a little, including some exercises we can do to try to awaken it."

"The three exercises?" Mrima asked, and I nodded. "Shoulda figured," she chuckled, looking at the distracted red-headed woman. "I was going to teach you those before we went home."

"Well, that just means you won't have that eating up your visit time," Sano told her with a smile. "I'd much rather spend the rest of the day hearing all about what happened while you were on Paian."

"Jason says that's what they're doin'," Rahne announced, looking at us. "He said the doctors are afraid that the virus will mutate into somethin' deadly, somethin' that kills us rather than changes us, so now the game plan is ta' simply let the virus run its course on the planets it's infectin', then keep everyone quarantined until the virus dies. He said ta' expect them ta' open up travel between quarantined planets soon, allowin' us ta' move freely within the quarantine. I'm a bit surprised," she mused. "Jason was against anythin' like that. He musta gotten new information that changed his mind. He did say somethin' that's quite disturbin', though," she said soberly. "He said they think the virus isn't natural."

"Isn't—you mean it was created in a lab?" Sano asked.

"Aye," she replied. "The entire reason we weren't allowed off o' Karis was because people have tried to get our DNA before, ta' create their own Generations. If this virus was made, then someone managed ta' finally pull it off...somehow. I'll bet Jason's rippin' Karis apart lookin' for whoever did it. Makes me almost glad I'm here instead."

“Whoa, that’s some serious news,” I said. “And way above our pay grade.”

“Welcome ta’ the big table, Kevin,” she said without much humor. “It’s above my pay grade too. I’m just a glorified banker, I usually ignore the politics. But sometimes, Jason tells me more than I want ta’ know.”

I had to think about that for a minute. If it was artificial, then...*holy crap*. Maybe that was why it spread so fast, and was infecting like *everyone* instead of just one species. I could only try to imagine what may have caused some government to do something like that. Were they that afraid of the Generations that they decided to make their own? Or was it jealousy, wanting what they had? Or was it both? No matter the reason, the result was the entire Confederation in chaos, economies crashing, and people stuck in their houses because of a seemingly unstoppable virus rampaging across planets spread over half the galaxy. And the pain wasn’t just to governments or businesses, it was to *people*. Bullox was very worried that he might lose his pub if he couldn’t reopen it soon, and Braggan was flat broke now and had no idea how he was going to pay his rent when he would finally be allowed to go back to work. He had to pay the back rent too, and he said if he missed one more payment, he might be evicted because it would be too much to pay.

“It is above our pay grade, so nothing we need to worry about,” Mrima declared. “So, tell me all about what you guys learned! I’m so excited to know!”

And just like that, Mrima changed the entire mood around the table. We spent most of the early afternoon describing what telepathy was like to Mrima and her cubs, and told her about what we’d been up to while Rahne was teaching us. They met Rita’s new giruzi Tuki, which made them a little nervous given it was so huge, and they also met Kishu, which they all but fell in love with as soon as they saw her.

It was almost funny...the tabi wasn’t much smaller than they were.

We then heard about them getting stuck on Paian, how they’d had to all but camp out in Mrima’s parents’ living room, and how the mood changed on the planet as more information came in, then the virus showed up there. “It was the strangest thing. People were *celebrating* when they announced

the virus was on Paian,” she said with an amused look on her furry face. “The Karinnes are way more involved with us than they are with most other empires, so most of us know what Generations are and have seen what they can do from up close. Ever since we met the Karinnes, they’ve been really involved in the Cooperative.”

“That’s because Pai telepaths can hear commune without being Generations. Yuir the only telepaths we’d ever met that could, at least up until now,” Rahne explained. “Ye silly kitties really threw us all for a loop. Ye even incited a wholesale change in security inside the house.”

“Sorry, not sorry,” Mrima grinned. “Anyway, right now, Paian is a madhouse as Pai telepaths run around and teach new telepaths the basics. Kind of what Rahne did for you,” she said, nodding towards the Scotswoman. “My parents live in a fairly remote area, so the virus hadn’t reached us yet. That reminds me, Kevin, you’ll have to take us home,” she said, looking over at me. “Nobody who’s not infected is allowed to drive anything because of the risk we pass out at the controls.”

“I’d be happy to,” I assured her. “And I can understand why they put in that rule. I ended up in the annex with a broken nose when it happened to me. They said I passed out literally while walking across the living room, and landed flat on my face.”

“Ouch,” Mrijin sounded.

“Did you guys miss many classes?” Sano asked.

“None that weren’t cancelled in advance,” Mralla answered. “We were on summer break when all this started, and classes started back up again just last takir. We were attending class using rented bionoids, which was really annoying.”

“Mrima told us. No tails,” Sano laughed.

“Mrrshan’s whiskers, I had no idea how much not having a tail would mess with me,” Mrijin said. “I fell down like ten times in the first hour in that human bionoid.”

“Why?” Rita asked.

“The weight of the tail,” Sano told her. “I have some issues after logging out, we call it Phantom Tail Syndrome. I have to wait a minute or

two before I stand up, or I'll fall flat on my face thinking that I have to shift my weight forward to take the tail into account. I'd bet it's even worse for them, since them having a tail is the norm."

"Truth," Mralla laughed. "I still find myself nearly falling over like every time I walk."

"Classes are a little chaotic at the moment," Mrijin continued. "Even the teachers are a little scattered after all this. And many of them are out, so you never know every time you attend if your teacher will be there, or if it'll be a substitute."

"I'm surprised they didn't just cancel or postpone the term," Sano said.

"I'm glad they didn't. School gives us something to do, and keeps Mom out of our fur," Mralla said, giving Mrima a sly look.

"It's how I make sure you're actually learning something," Mrima said shamelessly.

"Been much going on in the game while we were gone?" Mrijin asked.

"Not really," I answered. "I haven't really logged in since I transitioned. I've been too busy learning how to control it to play."

"Everyone's just in a holding pattern right now," Sano added. "Lots of people offline due to the pandemic. We haven't raided since we finished the overworld raids, so we've just been farming Citadel trash for drops and skill crystals, waiting for everything to get back to normal."

"With the changes, maybe this means they're opening the planet back up," I mused. "People can go back to work, and Bullox won't be afraid he'll have to close his pub. That'll get us a big step back towards normal"

"Most likely," Rahne said. "If they're relaxin' the quarantine, then they'll reopen the businesses. I doubt yui'll be restricted ta' yuir buildin' when ye get home, Kevin."

"Eh, it wasn't all that bad, since we the stores were being restocked," I shrugged. "I don't go out much anyway."

"I wonder what it's going to be like out on the streets after all this is over," Mrima said. "I wonder if people are even going to talk anymore."

“Aye, they will, at least after they get used ta’ things,” Rahne said. “The Faey are a great example of how things will work. They still talk ta’ each other despite them all being telepaths. An’ I get the feeling that most of the new cousins will talk because it’s their habit.”

“Cousins?” Mrijin asked.

“It’s what we Generations call each other. Cousin. Because we can sense each other, it’s like we’re all one big family.”

“You’ll understand when you transition,” I told him. “I can sense who’s a Generation and who’s not just by looking at them.”

“We all can,” Rahne nodded.

“And it does make it feel like we’re all related. Connected,” Rita told them. “I look at Sano and Kevin and Rahne, and I feel, well, closer to them, because I can sense that they’re like me. Kindred spirits.”

“Aye, it’s the strangest thing on Karis,” Rahne said. “Morale on the planet has never been higher than right now. An’ it’s definitely a good thing.”

“I can understand why. It’s like other Generations aren’t strangers, even if I’ve never met them before,” I told her.

“I can’t wait to find out for myself,” Mralla said eagerly.

“So, we’re just dastardly outsiders now, eh?” Mrima grinned at me.

“Yup,” I replied with a grin of my own. “We should kick you out of the house, you strange, alien thing you.”

She laughed. “Not until after dinner, you’re not,” she challenged. “Please, please tell me you have some fish in the fridge.”

“Yes we do. Rahne pulled some strings and got us some fresh food delivered a couple of days ago. We have salmon steaks.”

“Awesome! I love salmon!” Mralla perked up.

Dinner didn’t happen immediately, however. We sat out on the deck for hours and chatted, Rahne getting to know Mrima and the cubs as we all caught up on what had been going on. We moved inside to eat once it was dinnertime, and caught up on the news. They did what Rahne said they’d

do, Secretary Kim was on the vidlink announcing that the planetary quarantine was being partially lifted, which would allow us to move around freely on the planet, we just couldn't leave it. He also said what Rahne predicted, admitting that the virus could not be stopped, and that as of now, the strategy of the U.N. and TERA was to manage the transition of the population to make it as orderly and easy as possible, including setting up remote learning classes for people to learn more about telepathy, telekinesis, and splitting. Effectively, he was telling us that the entire planet was going to become Generations, and now the plan was to make that transition, both for people and for society in general, as painless and smooth as possible.

After dinner, it was time to take Mrima and the cubs home. We piled into my skimmer after they said goodbye to the girls, and I lifted off and headed for Norfolk. Mrima sat up front with me as the cubs sat in the back, doing some studying, and it gave us a chance to talk. "So, now that we're alone, how has it really been?" she asked seriously.

"Pretty much what I said in front of the girls," I told her. "It's been good since Rahne started teaching me. I thought I'd be afraid of it, especially after those first days when I couldn't block out the thoughts of others, but Rahne showed me what telepathy can be, and I'm honestly interested in it now. Interested enough that I'm going to sign up for those advanced classes they're going to offer through the Academy. It's almost amazing what you can do with telepathy, Mrima. What Rahne has taught me in the last week makes me want to learn more. Much, much more. And I'm really looking forward to learning TK from you. Rahne showed us some tricks you can do with it, and it's like we've all been giving a new toy that we have to learn how to use."

"I'm glad to hear that you're doing okay," she said with an honest smile. "I've been very worried about you."

"And I appreciate that, small furry adopted Mom," I teased, which made her laugh. I reached over and took her tiny hand between two fingers. "Seriously. I don't think you know how much I truly appreciate how much you care about me, Mrima. It makes me feel like I have someone out there I can talk to when I need advice."

"I'm always here if you need to talk, Kevin," she said warmly, looking over at me with a kind look. "But I have to admit, I haven't worried as

much about you lately. You've come a long way from the boy I knew back at 2M. You're much more confident now, much better equipped for handling the real world, and you're even dating a girl I approve of."

I had to laugh. "Sano is something special," I agreed. "I hope I don't blow it."

"You'd better not. If you make me come down here and fix things between you two, I'll be very cross."

"I'd take the help if you do."

"Have you moved much further?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, have you gotten further than the goodnight kiss yet?"

"What a thing to ask," I accused, looking down at her.

"She's Shio, you silly boy, but she's not dead," she retorted seriously. "And you'd better show some initiative or she'll think you're afraid of commitment."

"She has me at her beck and call. Isn't that commitment enough?" I challenged.

"That just proves you're desperate, not committed," she grinned.

I had to laugh, then pushed her shoulder. "Shut up," I demanded.

It took us about two hours to get to Norfolk, time I spent catching up with Mrima outside of the earshot of the girls. Mrima really was almost like a mom to me, to all of us actually, and she spent as much time asking about Rita and Sano as she did about me. She liked to keep up with what was really going on in our lives, being a nosy mom to all of us. I delivered the cubs to their apartment building first, then landed outside Mrima's building, which was a good ten miles from the cubs' building, which Mrima had done on purpose so the cubs felt they had space from her while her still being close by in case they needed her. I knelt down and gave her another hug. "Be careful, okay?" I told her. "Stay sitting down or laying down as much as you can once you start feeling tired. That's a warning sign that you're in transition."

“I will,” she promised. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Kevin.”

“Me too,” I said, patting her back. “I’ll call you once I finish my lesson with Rahne, okay? We can work out when we’ll do our lessons with you.”

“Ah, so you are still doing lessons with her.”

I nodded. “She said it may be a month or so until she feels I’ve learned what I need to know,” I told her. “She’s only really done teaching the girls, and that I can teach the girls what she teaches me. And after she’s done teaching me, I’m going to sign up for those advanced classes they’re offering through the Academy. I’ve learned so much, and it only makes me want to learn more.”

“Good for you, Kevin,” she said, giving me a smile after I rose back up. “But don’t you forget, I’m going to be teaching you about TK.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I smiled. “So, talk to you tomorrow?”

“You bet. You be good now. And for Mrraka’s sake, kiss that girl like you mean it. That goodbye kiss you gave her was pathetic. Just pathetic!”

I swatted her, which made her laugh.

I watched her hop up the steps to the door of her building, which opened as she approached it, her suitcase floating beside her rather than her carrying it. and I found myself being eager for the day when I met her again face to face and knew that she was a Generation. That I could send to her, commune with her, share with her this new world that I found myself in, a world I very much enjoyed and wanted to explore more.

I wanted to look at Mrima and feel that connection to her that I did with Rahne and the girls. I wanted to feel like she really was my family...because, to be honest, she already was. And I felt so lucky to have friends like her, and Rita, and Sano, and even my in-game friends Alandra, Meldo, Braggan, Hinasa, and Bullox. I felt like I was rebuilding my life, and in a strange way, this virus, this pandemic, this change, had made me feel closer to my friends, helped fill the gaping hole torn out of my soul by the Trillanes when I was sent to that farm.

I could say it. I was healing. It was slow going, and I may never be whole again, but I was healing. After fourteen years, I was finally healing.

Each day left me feeling a little better than the day before, and I had my friends to thank for that.

It made me hopeful that tomorrow would be better than today. And I never thought I'd ever feel that way again.

Chapter 14

The pandemic had brought a tremendous amount of change to Earth, and it both had and had not changed my life.

It had been three weeks since I expressed, and for me, life was starting to return to normal, and pretty darn close to the normal that was normal before all this happened. Me becoming a telepath hadn't changed my life all that much, mainly because I had little to no reason to use that power outside of practicing with Rahne. None of my friends lived in Jacksonville, and I didn't feel comfortable using telepathy or commune with strangers. I did use it a little bit, to talk to Envarr, Straremai, and Sarko Ven every once in a while, but I didn't start chatting it up with the couple of thousand neighbors in my building.

My training had been moving right along at a clip that impressed Rahne. I'd learned everything she felt I needed to know to control my power, and now she was just teaching me cool stuff that she thought I might find useful, like sending to a specific place rather than a person and using my telepathy like a radar, a technique that powerful telepaths used to sense minds around them. I'd learned a bunch of cool tricks like that, and had also learned how to apply them to communion. Rahne said that I was pretty good at telepathy for a newbie, and she suspected that it was because I'd had a jack for so long. A lot of the concepts that you deal with in telepathy I learned when I got my jack, and she even went so far as to say that she was having that living computer look into the phenomenon to see if new Generations that had had jacks for a while learned telepathic skills more easily than unjacked Generations.

The one thing I'd learned about telepathy was that it went way, way faster than about anything I'd ever done except for CO. Rahne explained that the speed of what she called the mindscape was the speed of thought, unconstrained by the physical body, and that meant that time there worked much differently. Rahne said that newly expressed telepaths had to adjust to the change of time between the physical and the telepathic, but I didn't have

that much trouble with it. That was because to me, the speed of telepathy was just like playing CO. I guess the effect the third gen rig had on me translated well into telepathy, because my brain already worked at “mindscape speed.” Using telepathy was almost the same speed as playing CO, of reacting while in a fight, of thinking on my feet to come up with a strategy. CO taught me how to react fast and think fast, and that prepared me well for telepathic applications.

That explained one thing to me...why most Faey were such great fighters, both in games and in the real world. The fact that the entire race was telepathic meant that they thought fast as a species, and that allowed them to react rationally much faster to changing conditions on a battlefield. They were already conditioned to operate at the speed of the mindscape, and that translated into the real world as being able to think very fast and come up with new approaches to problems in a chaotic situation. By the time a human had identified a problem and started considering how to counter it, the Faey had already come up with at least one possible solution.

But the one thing I'd been focusing on, and was getting quite good at, was splitting. I saw some real use for it in CO by using it within the game, because the game didn't restrict your ability to perform multiple tasks so long as you stayed within the game engine's rules. You could split within the game, and it had some definite value. While you could only have two active skills operating at any one time, there was no real limit to the number of *passive* skills you could employ, skills that only required mental concentration, like Listening, Detect Secret Doors, and similar skills. The limit before was your ability to concentrate on them, but now that I could split, I could devote a split to a passive skill and keep it up almost constantly. It was like the game engine was originally made to take that unique ability of the Generations into account, and that core part of the game was now available to the rest of us.

I had managed to work myself up to being able to manage 17 splits simultaneously, and I didn't think I'd reached my limit. Granted, when I split that much I couldn't do much of anything but think or use it when merged to Civnet, but I could do it. And I felt I could split even more, I just needed more practice.

There was a way that splitting was restricted in CO, and that was moving your avatar body within the game counted as your dominant split, and you couldn't control another body at the same time unless you were really, really, *really* good at splitting.

Another way my life hadn't really changed was that I was still working my chosen profession, and that was playing CO. I went back to playing after Rahne said I could do so safely, and was back to making both streaming and making viddies. My in-game focus was now completely on Djinn Form. I was bound and determined to raise it to 2,000, and through a combination of skilling it up and blowing nearly a month's worth of profits from both my shops on 55 points worth of skill crystals, I now had it to 1,983, which was almost agonizingly close. I was now just one 20 point skill crystal away, which had turned me into a complete merchant baron. I spent hours every day scouring every stall and shop looking for someone selling skill crystals, much as Rita had done to get Flames of Methrian to 2,000. I'd stopped exploration and other activities to focus completely on my goal, something that all my in-game friends could completely understand.

But my life had been changed by the virus and its impact, and the biggest of those was Kishu. The little cat-like animal had moved into my apartment and effectively taken over my life, and I felt both bemused by it and bewildered over how I had lost control over my own apartment. My schedule now revolved around the little tabi's wants, needs, and whims, from having her breakfast in her bowl at precisely 8:00 every morning to only being allowed to log in and play when she didn't want my attention. She was a total lap cat, she wanted to be as close to me as she could as much as possible, always wanting to sit on my lap or lay beside me or even perch on my shoulder...which wasn't exactly pleasant because of her very sharp little claws. She didn't like to be left alone in the house, so I ended up taking her with me when I went to visit Sano, Rita, or Mrima, and she always got sulky when I left her in the apartment to go shopping in stores where she wasn't allowed, or went on dates with Sano when we went places she wasn't allowed to go. Me being in the merge pod didn't dissuade her, either, since she found it to be an excellent opportunity to get in some quality napping when I wasn't going to move her bed out from under her for a while. When I was done with CO, she was always sitting or laying on

my lap in the merge pod, either sleeping or waiting patiently for me. I can't complain too much, because Kishu gave me the one thing I wanted from her, and that was companionship. I didn't feel alone in the house anymore, and Kishu was playful, a tiny bit mischievous, youthfully rambunctious, and above all, she was very alert to my emotional states. That wasn't a surprise given she was an empathic animal, but I hadn't considered just how lovable it made her because she wasn't just reactive to my emotions, she was *proactive*. When she sensed I was lonely or sad or depressed, she was there to cheer me up. When I needed attention, she gave me attention, but when I needed to be alone, she gave me my space. But she was proactive in that she could sense when my mood began to change, which way it was going, and she headed off any slips into loneliness or sadness or depression by giving me something positive to focus on. It was almost amazing how she always seemed to know exactly what to do to make me feel better, and it made me so, so glad I'd agreed to bring her into my life.

Kishu may be a guard animal to most, but to me, she was incredible therapy.

I'd solved the problem of her not liking being left alone in the house. I figured that what she needed was a companion of her own. So, a week ago, we went out and looked at other animals, and we eventually came home with a rather exotic animal called a sandracer, which was native to the desert planet that was the home planet of the Kizziks in the Imperium. The closest animal to it on Earth I'd seen was a fennec fox. It was a very small dog-like animal with a narrow muzzle and black eyes, a lean build and long legs for its size, but didn't have a fennec fox's big ears. It had a tan coat that had a black stripe running from the base of its neck, down its spine, all the way to the tip of its tail, black tips on its ears, and a white tummy. The just-weaned pup we got was smaller than Kishu, and would grow to a little smaller than an average housecat, so he'd be about her size when both of them were fully grown. Sandracers were domesticated pets that were known to be affectionate, fiercely loyal, got along very well with other animals, and were easy to train. They were also very good "inside" pets, perfectly comfortable living their entire lives indoors. They used a litter box just like a cat or tabi did—though I had to have a separate one for Kishu because sandracers wouldn't use a litter box used by another animal—and they didn't have any destructive habits like chewing or clawing or digging, so

they were quite easy on the furniture or any carpet the owner might have. The only problem owners had with them was that they were lifetime pets. When a sandracer pup bonded to an owner, it was very hard for it to accept a new owner, not without a lot of work on the part of both the old owner and the new one to transition the sandracer over to its new home. So if someone got a sandracer, they had to be prepared to keep it for its entire life...and they lived to be 30 years old on the average

I didn't see that as a problem.

That's how much that damn tabi took over my life...I went out and got my pet a pet of her own just so she wouldn't be lonely when I wasn't in the house.

I named the sandracer Zuzu, which was a contraction of his full proper name, *Zoom Zoom*, since he was a hyper little thing that did what sandracers were born to do, run very fast as much as possible. Once he got used to the house, he'd run through it at full tilt quite a bit, and he was easily excited and got spazzy when he was keyed up. But that was normal behavior for sandracers, I'd learned. They were hyper, energetic, and a little high strung. He was a good companion for Kishu, giving her someone to play with, someone to cuddle with, and someone to keep her company in those rare times I wasn't in the house and she couldn't go with me.

So, not only did I have a new tabi in my life, I now also had a new sandracer, but I couldn't complain that much. I honestly didn't expect to enjoy having them in the house as much as I did, they really made me feel like my apartment was now a home.

I was enjoying the new normal, Kishu sitting in my lap as I watched the news for any new information about what was going on and Zuzu playing with a toy I'd bought for him as I rested after my daily workout, yipping excitedly as he chased a tiny ball around the living room. The ball wasn't cheap, it was a pet toy called a chaser ball, it was a sturdy synth-rubber ball with a small grav pod in it that made the ball roll randomly around the room at a pretty fair clip, which gave both Kishu and Zuzu a good workout. The toy even had a tiny processor in it that made it adjust its speed so different animals could play with it without it being too hard or too easy to catch, which kept them engaged. I was waiting for Rahne to arrive for our daily lesson, and I was ready for her because I'd already done my three hours in

the gym. Unfortunately, my *omi* lessons hadn't started back up yet, but they would next week. That represented both how my life was getting back to normal and how the world outside of my house hadn't fully adjusted to the new normal quite yet.

There was a new normal, and it wasn't nearly as telepathic as I expected it to be. The Medical Service had sent down a series of suggestions on how to use our new telepathy, and a couple of them had quickly taken hold. The first was for people to be quiet and reserved when it came to sending or commune, to prevent all of us new telepaths from getting overwhelmed by the sheer amount of chatter going on that we couldn't easily ignore. They wanted us to practice, certainly, but they didn't want the "telepathic airwaves" to be saturated with sending, because it might confuse us newbie telepaths. They wanted us to keep our telepathy restrained for now, both in how often and how "loudly" we used it. We were supposed to only use it for practice or for sending to people very close to us, like in the same room, where our conversation could be constrained in a local space and not be overheard by people four buildings away. The second was using a social convention that would help us adjust and would also allow kids to not have any problems. Simply put, we were supposed to talk to strangers, send to our neighbors, and commune with our friends and family. Because kids couldn't hear sending or commune, and they needed to hear speech to develop language skills, they wanted us to talk around kids, talk in open, public spaces, and talk to people we didn't know. We'd use sending to talk with neighbors and passing friends, where using sending was more convenient than calling someone's interface that was very close to us physically. And they wanted us to practice commune primarily with close friends and family members, at least for now, so we got practice with both standard telepathy and communion.

Things had certainly changed both on Earth and in the Confederation over the last three weeks. The entire galaxy had convened a summit about the pandemic, and they passed a bunch of new rules governing how the galaxy as a whole was going to deal with it. It affected me because, as a Generation, it now meant I wasn't allowed to visit some empires in the galaxy. I could visit them using a bionoid, but not in person, to minimize the risk that I spread the virus into empires that didn't want to be changed. On Earth, what Rahne was talking about had taken hold, that thing where

Generations saw each other as family. The entire planet seemed unified at the moment, humans and residents and visitors caught on the planet when the pandemic hit all being so nice to each other. And I could see why. When I looked at a Generation, I felt a connection to them, like they really were my cousin, and that made me, and the rest of us, want to treat them as more than a stranger. The virus had created comity on the planet, a feeling that we were all in this together, that we were a single people even if we weren't all the same species. Crime had dropped dramatically on the planet, particularly violent crimes, as the virus filled something of a hole in the human psyche that allowed us to be cruel to those we didn't see as "one of us." Now *everyone* was "one of us," and it had incited a feeling of true kinship across the entire planet. People on the street greeted complete strangers, everyone had time to stop and chat a moment, and there were so many smiles, so much laughter out in the shops and parks.

I'd worried about what the pandemic might do to the planet. I was honestly shocked and surprised at the effect that it had, because it was something I never expected. And I liked to see it.

The planet was changing a little politically, too. The big galactic summit had made them agree that the Academy here on Terra was the official school of higher learning for every empire in the galaxy, and the planet had started construction on massive expansions all over Earth and even on the moon to prepare for a huge influx of new students. Earth had been declared a neutral planet by the entire galaxy, which meant that Earth would never be attacked by anyone again—at least from in our galaxy—and was the host of the Academy and a neutral site that any empire could use for talks with other empires. But, since Earth was a Generation planet, it meant that empires and people that weren't Generations or didn't want to be had to take special precautions. From what I saw on the news, the new Academy campus up on the moon would be strictly for non-Generations, that no Generations would be allowed on the moon, and that would allow people from empires that didn't want to be Generations to still be able to come here to get an education. And that construction was *freakin' huge*. You could see it from Earth without a telescope, a massive construction project where they were raising a transparent titanium dome over a flat area that that was going to be the campus. The dome was the size of island of Ireland, and I could see the foundation of it from my balcony. They were building a campus up

there just as big as the one in Norfolk, maybe even bigger, with tons of room around it to expand as needed and keep it all inside the dome. And the speed they were doing it, it was almost mind-boggling. They'd just started the project like a week ago, and it was already visible from the Earth.

And they weren't done with it. Yesterday, the news said that they were going to terraform the moon to make it life-sustaining, and once that was done, they were going to build even more Academy campus facilities and turn the entire moon into one giant Academy institution.

The moon wasn't the first place that had been terraformed here in the solar system. They were terraforming both Venus and Mars, and if I remember right, you could go to Mars right now and survive on the surface. The air was very thin and it was damn cold, but you could do it. They only had a couple more years to go to make Mars more like Earth, where the air was oxygenated, thick, and the planet was warm. They were about halfway done with the terraforming effort on Venus, but it was still lethal there due to all the acid in the atmosphere and the fact that it was hot enough on the surface to boil water. But that was a big improvement over before they started, when it was hot enough to melt lead.

There was a lot more going on out there in the galaxy. From what the news said, they were going to allow anyone that wanted to be a Generation to get access to the virus, and it was all because they didn't want the virus to turn into a deadly plague. It turned out that Generations were immune to the virus, so the only real way to protect against it was to be infected by it, kinda like how you were immune to chicken pox once you had it. More than half of the empires in the galaxy were already making plans to transition their populations to become Generations, which meant that the number of planets I'd be allowed to visit would rise over the next few years.

I could see why they were doing it. Any empire that wasn't Generation would be a major disadvantage against the ones that were, because of telepathy. The Faey were a major force in the galaxy because their entire species was telepathic, and any empire that had dealt with the Faey over the last five thousand years was in on becoming Generations, to gain that power for themselves. Besides, as one of those people who were now telepaths because of the virus, I could say that I far preferred being a telepath over not being one, despite the fact that I don't really use it outside of training

with Rahne. Even if I didn't really use the skills that Rahne was teaching me, I really enjoyed the lessons, I really liked being able to do the things I could do now. Being a telepath, learning more about it, made me feel empowered, protected, safe, and I liked that feeling. And if Rahne wasn't lying about me being so strong, it meant that I never had to worry about being the plaything of a telepath ever again.

The virus had changed the galaxy, and I had the feeling that it had changed it for the better.

[I'm almost there, can you open the door for me?] Rahne called from her dropship. I picked up Kishu and walked over to the balcony as I ordered the garage door to open, and I saw her dropship slow as it descended. It came to a stop about twenty meters from the building, then the back hatch opened and Rahne appeared, on a flying platform. She flew into my garage as the dropship closed its hatch, then it turned its nose upwards and started back for the destroyer in orbit. "Hello there, Zuzu!" she said happily as she came into the living room, kneeling down and giving the sandracer a hearty pet and scrub on the back with her fingernails. He yipped excitedly, turned a few circles, then was again tempted by the chaser ball, dashing off to run after it. "An' hello ta' ye too, Kishu," she smiled, patting the tabi in my arms on the head. "Ye about ready?"

"Sure, you want some coffee before we get started?"

"When do I say nay ta' coffee, silly boy?" she grinned.

And that started the instruction part of my day. We sat in the living room as she taught me, teaching me advanced techniques of both attack and defense. I'd asked her to teach me how to protect myself from other telepaths, and she was honoring that request by teaching me how to fight using telepathy. My training was very basic to be sure, and I'd have to spend years refining my technique in organized instruction in the Academy—training I fully intended to pursue—but what it did was ensure that I was more than a match for any other neophyte telepath on the planet. I was both stronger and had more training, which meant that no newly expressed telepath was going to try to use his power on me for his own gain.

That was about the only type of crime that had increased on the planet since the pandemic hit. New telepaths were using their budding powers to

exploit those who hadn't yet expressed, and the Imperial Marines had sent reinforcements from Draconis to crack down on them. It also demonstrated that not *everyone* was as affected by the sense of family the virus created, the kinds of people that would have stolen from their own family before the virus were still capable of such acts afterwards. Rahne was teaching me how to smack down anyone that tried that crap on me, as well as allow me to stomp on anyone that tried it within my hearing range. I'd be able to protect both myself and whoever was being victimized by it.

I really enjoy the lessons with Rahne, both because she's a great teacher and because we'd become friends over the last month. And not just me, Rahne now had Sano, Rita, and Mrima's contact ID and was talking to them socially. She'd become our friend, and we had become hers.

We spent the rest of the morning and most of the early afternoon in training, as I learned the various basic techniques of attack and defense in telepathic combat, and then we changed venues. We piled into my skimmer and we went up to Norfolk, at least after I dealt with Kishu's sulking storm at being left home, and we met Mrima as she got off work. Mrima had transitioned, she was a Generation now, but she had yet to express her telepathy, and I had the feeling that Rahne was hanging around waiting for it to happen so she could be the one to give her the initial lessons. We then went over to Virginia Beach and sat on a blanket in the sand as Mrima taught me about TK. I still hadn't been able to use it yet, but I could feel something now when I tried, which Mrima told me meant I was close. The beach was fairly crowded, since Earth had more or less gone back to business as usual once the quarantine restrictions were lifted, and *everyone* on the beach was a Generation, no matter what species they were.

My initial success in telepathy was...impressive, to say the least. I still had my black ball, and I had it sitting in the sand just off the blanket as I attempted to pick it up with my TK. I was standing—she always had me stand when I practiced—and I was motioning at the ball as a means to help focus my concentration, something Mrima approved of. She said it helped, but it also wasn't something we should get into the habit of doing, since the motions we used may clue someone in as to what we were attempting to do and give them a chance to counter it.

It happened so suddenly. I felt that pressure behind my eyes that Rahne and Mrima had described, and I felt it build, and build and build and build, until it was like someone hit me in the back of the head with a sledgehammer. I was instantly disoriented, and before I knew what was going on, I was laying on my back on the sand, the blanket and our stuff scattered around me, my nose was bleeding profusely, to the point where I inhaled some and started coughing, and there was sand everywhere. I coughed out both sand and blood and sat up, a hand to my head, trying to figure out what the hell just happened...and saw that just about everyone on the beach was staring at me, and those closest to us were covered in sand. "What the hell?" I asked, then I saw Mrima gaping at me. She and Rahne were well back from me, both of them sitting or laying on the sand, and they too were covered in sand.

"Mrrshan's whiskers!" she breathed, then Rahne laughed.

"Couldn't just be satisfied wi' bein' a top tier telepath, could ye?" she asked lightly.

"What? What happened?" Rahne pointed, and I looked down. Where our blanket had been, there was a huge crater in the beach, well over a meter across and a meter deep. "What...what happened? Did I do that?"

"You didn't focus only on the ball," Mrima told me, standing up and scrubbing sand out of her fur. "You were trying to move the ball by scooping it and lifting it, and you scooped a little too hard. You moved the ball, and everything under it. That's nearly a cubic *arkir* of sand you just launched into the air, Kevin."

"Ye sent the ball nearly forty *shakra* into the air," Rahne said playfully, holding it out for me to see.

"I...I did?" I asked, trying to make my head stop spinning. Mrima stood up, and I got to see a master at work. She collected up a whole lot of sand from other people, from their blankets, gathering it into a loose ball over the hole, then put it back in the hole and smoothed it out until there was just a very slight depression left there. I'd seen her use TK before, but never quite like that, and it was something I'd never considered even possible. How could she collect up only the sand, and so much sand all around us, all at

once? I knew that TK could affect liquids, but to see it used like that, where she picked up only the sand, it immediately intrigued me.

“I think you’d better make some calls, Rahne,” Mrima said, to which she nodded.

“What? Why?”

“Because you can learn far more than what I can teach you,” Mrima said proudly. “Kevin, you’re the strongest TK I’ve ever seen. And I mean even stronger than any *Pai* I’ve ever seen. You just moved sand that has to weigh about fifty *kra*, applying enough force to throw it five *arkir* in the air, and you did it with very little training and no experience. And you didn’t pass out from the effort. You’re not even bleeding from your ears. Mraka’s breath, I bet you could pick up maybe a whole *rarkra* of mass once you know what you’re doing. You could be a Master, Kevin.”

“Wait. Are you serious?” I asked.

“Aye, she is,” Rahne told me. “Yuir way stronger in TK than I am,” she admitted. “I’d need a tactical gestalt ta’ do what ye just did. My God, I’d almost be afraid ta’ see what ye can do with a gestalt. Ye need specialized trainin’ ta’ develop yuir gift, Kevin. I’m gonna talk ta’ Jason and Ayuma about havin’ ye enrolled in the Academy course taught by the Pai Masters. Only they can teach ye properly.”

“Holy crap,” I breathed, trying to wrap my head around that. I was really that strong? It didn’t seem like it, and if the way my head was pounding was any indication, I sure as hell wouldn’t want to do that again. “But I don’t need another teacher. I’ll stay with Mrima.”

“Kevin—”

.”No, Mrima,” I said. “You promised to teach me, and I don’t want another teacher. So teach me everything you can, and once we reach the end of that road, I’ll think about another teacher.”

“Kevin, you need a Master.”

“No. I need *you*,” I told her simply. “If you didn’t notice, Mri, I don’t do well with strangers, even if they’re Pai. The only reason I did so well with Rahne was because treated me like a person instead of a student. She made

sure to try to be my friend before being my teacher, and that's about the only reason why I trusted her."

Rahne gave me a darling smile.

"If I want to learn more about TK once you finish teaching me, I'll enroll in the Academy. Until then, I'm not letting you weasel out of your promise," I told her with a smile. "So, tell me what I did wrong and let me try again."

Mrima gave me a strangely emotional look, then she collected up our things with her TK, folding the blanket swiftly with her power. "Not here. I think it's a little too dangerous for you to try again in a crowd. Let's go to the park."

"And we stay on pavement. He won't be able ta' uplift that," Rahne added.

So, we changed venues again, going to a park just a block or so from Mrima's apartment building. We settled on a bench along a walkway and they walked me through the process again, this time stressing to focus on the ball. She explained how to take the pressure I'd felt and narrow it down, like giving it a single small release point which would throttle it back, and keeping tight control over it. It took me quite a while to get to where I had that feeling of pressure again, and this time I did what Mrima said, I contained it, imagining that it was like water and I opened only a small drain to let it out, like the valve on a garden hose faucet. That caused the ball to shiver, then roll a little, then rise up into the air slowly. I was so surprised by it that I lost my concentration, which caused the ball to bounce back onto the pavement.

"Very good!" Mrima exclaimed.

"I don't feel anywhere near as wiped out this time," I told her, leaning over and putting my hands on my knees. "But I do feel a little tired."

"It's real work using TK, Kevin," Mrima reminded me. "The energy it takes to move something comes from *you*, and it puts more stress on your body than you think. That's why you don't see fat or our of shape Pai," she grinned. "To do what we do requires us to be in shape, so our bodies can handle the stress that using our gift puts on it. What you did put the same

stress on your body as if you'd just sprinted down to that wall and back, and probably burned just as many calories."

"Aye, that's why I said yui'd work yuir arse off, Kevin," Rahne agreed. "It takes a lot o' effort ta' use TK. It's usually easier ta' get up and get it yuirself," she smiled.

"Well, it's a good thing that I've been working out, then," I said, standing back up. "Okay, let's try it again."

By the time we finished, I was quite proud of the fact that I could move the ball at least once out of every five attempts. I was still having trouble finding the power, getting that pressure to well up, but when it did, I was able to use it successfully almost every time. Rahne had hung around until Mrima decided to stop, then she said goodnight to us and went back to her ship. I walked Mrima back to her apartment building, carrying her on my shoulder so she didn't have to run to keep up with me. "Mri."

"Yes?"

"You're a lot stronger than you let on, aren't you? That thing you did with the sand, I didn't think anything like that was even possible. That has to be way past what most Pai can do."

She was quiet a long moment. "That was something I learned when I was younger," she said, a bit wanly.

"It sounds like it wasn't very much fun."

"Well, it was, for a while," she said. "I guess I still feel a little ashamed about it."

"About what?"

"When I was young, a child, they called me a prodigy," she said in a distant tone. "I was strong, and I had a talent for the gift. I was given a lot of training, and in a way, a lot of attention, and I...liked it. I thought I was going to be a Master, the first Master in our family. But when the time came, after I graduated from school, I was called before the Masters, and they tested me. The Masters don't train just anyone, Kevin, they have tests they give all the hopefuls, that test more than just their strength and command of the gift."

“But you didn’t pass,” I guessed.

“I didn’t pass,” she confirmed. “I was strong enough, but I didn’t pass the screening. They don’t let just any Pai learn the advanced skills, they only teach Pai that they think have the mental toughness and discipline to handle it. I failed that test.”

“Well, that test was bogus,” I told her. “There’s no way you could fail it.”

She patted me on the neck. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but they didn’t agree with you. I was devastated when I was denied the chance to train with the Masters, I can’t deny it. My whole life, everyone told me I was going to be a Master, and I spent my entire childhood believing it, preparing for an honor, for a life, that was shattered so quickly that I was left in shock. I didn’t go home for three days after I was rejected, I was so humiliated that I couldn’t face my family, my friends, my village, who had all believed I was going to be a Master. But eventually, I did go home, if only because I was hungry and tired and had nowhere else to go,” she said in a nearly wooden voice. “They tried to cheer me up, but it was hard, Kevin. I felt like I failed my parents, failed my family, failed my village, and failed myself, and I withdrew from the world for a while. It took me almost a year to get over it, which I guess proved that I wouldn’t have made it as a Master. Since then, I haven’t used anything but the most basic applications of my gift, and only when I had to, because I always felt so humiliated and ashamed after being rejected by the Masters, like I was no longer worthy to use it. I only use it for the most basic things, and only when I need to. I haven’t practiced any of the advanced techniques for many years. I think the first time I used any advanced technique after the Masters rejected me was when I started teaching the cubs after their gift expressed. But I can’t really complain,” she said in a more cheerful voice. “If I’d have become a Master, I’d have never met my husband and I’d never have had my beautiful cubs. So I can’t really say that my life turned out badly because of it.”

“What was your husband like?” I asked. I knew that her husband had died nearly ten years ago, killed in an accident. One of the reasons I admire Mrima so much was that she raised her cubs mostly by herself. Her husband had worked in the Cooperative, the organization that handled all space

travel and science, as a technician, building the rockets they used to travel to the colony planet in their system, and had been killed in an accident on the job. But I'd never really asked her about him, because I figured she wouldn't want to talk about it. But we'd known each other long enough for me to feel like she wouldn't mind me asking her about it now.

"Mraki was wonderful," she said in a wistful voice. "I met him in Academy after I finally got over my depression and moved on with my life. He was a physics student and I was a math student. The physics students were all so cocky, thought they ran the school. He made me soooo mad back before we were dating," she said with a soft laugh. "But then he decided he was going to date me, and he started really pestering me. I think he asked me over a hundred times before I finally said yes, if only to make him stop asking. When we went out, when I got to see the real Pai behind his brash image and the grandstanding he did in front of his friends, I think I fell in love with him within an hour," she said, her voice distant. "He talked big and acted big, but it was all a show to impress his friends. He was gentle, and he was sweet, and he was kind. I miss him terribly, even after so long since he passed beyond the gray veil."

"I'm so sorry, Mri," I said in a supportive voice, patting her leg.

"Thank you," she said, sniffing a bit. "We Pai believe that those we lose are never truly lost, so long as we hold them in our hearts. And we have a tradition similar to Mexico's day of the dead, a day when the spirits of our loved ones return from the beyond the gray veil so they can see how we're doing. So, I believe that Mraki comes to visit us on *Ikraikiramarra*, the day of return, and he's been able to see how our cubs have grown and how well they've done for themselves. I'm sure that Mraki is proud of our cubs, that they're following in his footsteps," she told me.

"I'm sure that he is very proud, of both them and you," I told her. We reached her building, and I gently set her down by the front door, then knelt down so she didn't have to crane her neck to look up at me. I took her hands between my fingers and gave her a smile. "Thank you for teaching me, and for continuing to teach me."

"I'll teach you what I can, Kevin, but you really do need a Master to teach you," she said, looking up at me with gentle eyes. "You are *much* stronger than I am."

“If you weren’t good enough for them, then I won’t be either,” I said dismissively. “Besides, I don’t really want to learn all those super-fancy tricks. Teach me how to grab something out of the fridge without having to get out of my merge pod, and I’ll be happy.”

She laughed. “That would be a waste of all your talent, Kevin,” she chided. “And I’ll give you an example that might motivate you. You know how you can fly in CO?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, as strong as you are, you could pull that off here in the real world, just not able to go as fast,” she told me. “You can *easily* lift well over your own weight, which would let you propel yourself with enough control to keep from killing yourself. With training and practice, you could learn how to fly in the real world.”

“Is that even possible? I thought that you couldn’t pick yourself up with TK, that you had to use it on another object and ride on it.” I knew enough about TK to know that, that because of one of Newton’s Laws, the law of equal and opposite reaction, a telekinetic couldn’t pick himself up. It was because the force exerted to move yourself upwards was reflected by an equal force placed on you *downwards*, so all the energy you put into picking yourself up was countered because the force you exerted was reflected back at you.

Strangely enough, though, a TK could use his power on an external object and ride on that without that law getting in the way. I’ve seen tons of vid clips of Pai using that trick, mainly so they can get up to where they can look over a counter, which seemed a bit of a paradox to me. After all, if the force of the object you were moving was applied to your body, and you were sitting on the object you were moving, wouldn’t it just be applied to the object too? But that wasn’t how it worked. TK had its own rules, and one of them was that a TK couldn’t use his power to pick *himself* up off the ground.

“For most people. But as strong as you are, you could do it without using that trick. You could literally fly, Kevin, but you’d need to learn a lot about TK in order to pull it off.”

“Can *you* do it?” I asked impulsively.

She just gave me a slight smile, which made me laugh.

“Why haven’t I ever seen you do anything like that?”

“I told you, I gave up practicing the advanced skills after I was rejected by the Masters. I didn’t try to teach most of them to my cubs because, honestly, they aren’t capable of them, so I am very, very rusty with them. I’m sorry to say my cubs didn’t inherit my gift. So, I *can* do it, but it’s been so long, I’m not sure if I’d be able to do it without breaking my face.”

“Then how about this. We learn, or re-learn, together,” I told her, squeezing her tiny hands between my fingers. “I don’t give a damn what the Masters thought of you back then. I know they were wrong about you. I know that nobody could teach me better than you could. I want to learn everything you know, Mrima, everything that you can teach me, because I believe in you.”

She gave me a charged look, her eyes shimmering with emotion, then reached up and put her tiny hand on my face. “I would very much like that, Kevin,” she said.

“Then I’ll be back tomorrow after you finish work,” I told her. “And I’ll bet Rahne will be too. I think she’s waiting for you to express so she can teach you the basics. She really likes you.”

“That’s good, because I really like her,” Mrima smiled as I stood back up.

“Have the cubs expressed yet?”

“Not yet,” she replied. “I guess all three of us are being stubborn.”

:”You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t,” I told her lightly. “So, see you tomorrow?”

“Don’t be late,” she said with a smile.

After I was back in my skimmer and on the way home, I had to just lean back in the seat and consider Mrima. I wasn’t surprised at all that she was so gifted, so talented. She’s so incredibly smart, and wise, there’s no doubt that she’s a very special woman. But I had no idea that she was far more special than I had ever imagined. She was a child prodigy with TK, could have been a Master, if not for the Masters refusing to teach her because they

thought she didn't have what it took. And I found that...*insulting*. Mrima was amazing, a rare jewel of a person, and not just because she had strong TK. She was one of the foundations of my life, and I could say that I wouldn't be where I am now if not for her friendship and support. If the Masters thought that someone like *Mrima* wasn't good enough, then what the hell did they expect out of someone? If she wasn't good enough for them, they'd never so much as stand in the same room with someone like me.

I was just glad that Mrima had agreed to teach me. I knew it would be good for me, but a part of me told me that it would be good for her too. If I could help her get back in practice with her TK, to make her feel like she wasn't unworthy of using it, then I'd be helping her as much as she was helping me.

I knew what it felt like to feel worthless, and no way in hell was I going to tolerate *Mrima* feeling that way about herself. She was like a mother to me, the first real friend I'd made since being released from the farms fourteen years ago, and I love and respect her way too damn much to let her think that she's not special.

Because she *is* special. She's special to me, and forgive my arrogance if I say that that means she's special *period*.

I hadn't forgotten about CO. I was just so busy in the real world that it made it hard to log in for those marathon play sessions that had dominated my life since I started seriously playing the game.

But not all of that business involved being a Generation...at least not directly. And I certainly didn't feel quite so unique after we found out about it.

It turned out that I wasn't the only powerhouse TK on Earth. About three days after I unlocked my TK, Rita did as well, and she was just as strong with it as I was. That honestly shocked Rahne and Mrima, to the point where Rahne got in touch with someone in the U.N. and had them check on the other farm workers. And it turned out, there was a pattern. Those of us who suffered on the farms the longest were given something of a very, very, very late gift for our ordeal in the form of our TK.

Simply put, the long-timers, those who had been on the farms for two years or more, were demonstrating *considerably* stronger TK than most of the rest of the human population that were now Generations. Me and Rita weren't unique. We weren't even outliers. We were only above average when it came to the strength of the other long-timers, and that fact had brought the Medical Service, the Academy *and* the Pai Masters into it. But, given who we were, they didn't gather us all up and do tests on us, we were protected from stuff like that by law. They sent a Pai Master to talk to us, then someone from the psiology department in the Academy who was not a Faey gave us a series of tests. Then they had us answer like a huge questionnaires, trying to pinpoint just why us long-timers had far stronger TK than the rest of the human population by asking us a whole bunch of questions about our childhoods, our time on the farms, and what we'd done since them. Yesterday, the Medical Service asked for volunteers from the picker community to do some more involved tests at the medical school at the main Academy campus to find out the reason for it.

I declined to participate. So did Rita. And I suspect that most of the rest of us did as well. I'd bet that if they were lucky, they'd get maybe twenty pickers for it. All of us are very wary and suspicious of anything even remotely connected to the Faey, and the Medical Service here on Earth was dominated by Faey.

It was plain to anyone that it was the farms. Something about the farms had caused it, either what they did to us or something we were exposed to while we were there, and the longer we were exposed to whatever it was, the stronger it made our TK now. It didn't make all of us powerful telepaths, I was an outlier in that regard, but my TK was measured as only above average, in the 70% percentile on the ranking chart, when compared to the other long-timers. I was the longest-serving farm worker still alive, a record I very much do not like possessing, but despite that, my TK wasn't the strongest among us pickers. It wasn't even top 10%. The strongest, I'd learned, was some guy from Ethiopia that had been on a farm a full year less than me, and he was so powerful that the Masters had no real idea how to go about teaching him without him hurting himself...or them.

They thought he was the most powerful telekinetic in the galaxy... maybe even the entire known universe.

Outside of that, life had returned to normal for me. It was a different normal to be sure, but it was a normal I found quite...acceptable. The biggest way my normal had changed was that the virus had caused most of the residents on my floor to get much closer. It wasn't just Envarr, Straremai, and Sarko Ven, it was the resident of the other 21 apartments on our floor. Telepathy allowed us to talk to each other with ease, and the sense of community being Generations incited in all of us made us all not just neighborly, but friendly with each other. It was like the 24 families on our floor (from a family of one like me to the family of eight Rakarri around the corner) were part of an extended family unit. It wasn't complete harmony because six of those families on our floor were Faey, and them being Generations didn't completely override my aversion to Faey, but the virus *did* allow me to tolerate them much more than before. Now, instead of being deathly afraid of them, I was merely uncomfortable around them. And to their credit, they understood why I was averse and they gave me my space. Everyone on the floor, and most of the people in the building thanks to people not being able to control the power of their sending very well, know that I'm a farm survivor. And they don't push me, for which I am very grateful. We talk to each other via telepathy and communion, using communion with the neighbors I know very well, primarily Envarr, Straremai, and Sarko Ven. I've become much more social with my floor neighbors, to the point where I've had lunch with the Sha'i-ree man across the floor, Tigri, and helped my Rakarri neighbors five doors down set up and configure their new merge pod. I've had my jack longer than about anyone else in the building, so I'm very good at setting up vidlinks for merge operations and configuring merge pods.

In that respect, life was a bit noisier than usual. Virtually all of us are new telepaths, and not everyone got the kind of training that I did, so things are sometimes a little noisy as new telepaths learn the nuances of sending. The Faey in the building, who were already training new telepaths as part of the U.N. effort to educate the population, were spending their off time helping the people in the building...most likely so they can enjoy a little peace and quiet once they get everyone sufficiently trained so they aren't "screaming" when they're trying to send across the room, and telling everyone within a kilometer what they were trying to tell the person four meters away from them..

No judgment here. It took me a while to get the hang of that myself.

It really is almost surreal, how the basic demeanor of people have changed since we were transitioned. Rahne was right, it was like we were all one big family, an entire planetary population of people of different races and species that all shared something that made us all...the same. It didn't matter that my next door neighbors on both sides weren't human, that some of my neighbors had fur, or scales, or pointed ears, or venomous fangs, or natural dermal plating. It didn't matter that we worshipped different gods, that we had different world views and different concepts of the universe. We were all different, but the fact that we were all Generations made us related. It made us *cousins*, and that sense of family extended to all of them...even the Faey, God help me. And it was only proper to help family.

Hey, you don't necessarily have to *like* everyone in your family. They're still family.

The virus had done what no thing or person had been able to do in the 8,000 years of recorded history on our planet, and that was unify the human race.

My days the last week or so were still dominated by training and learning, learning the last of the things Rahne wanted to teach me in the morning and early afternoon, then going to Norfolk to learn from Mrima in person in the evening. Rita and Sano attended in person when they could, over Civnet when they couldn't, and I was getting used to the 90 minute round-trip commute from Jacksonville to Norfolk every day. But soon, I'd be off Rahne's apron strings, and I'd have my mornings to myself again. Rahne had taught me everything she felt I needed to know, and was lingering a little to teach me a few tricks I wanted to learn. I'd learned over the month or so Rahne had been teaching me that she was *ridiculously* good at telepathy, and could do many of the highly advanced techniques and applications I read about when I started investigating what telepathy could do beyond what the Medical Service put in the FAQs and articles they had us all read. Rahne told me she was trained by a graduate of the most prestigious school in the Faey Imperium when it came to telepathy, some place called Xerian, and that she was just an amateur compared to some woman named Ryn. So, over the last week, I'd been learning how to

implant simple, basic memories, because I wanted to be able to teach other people languages the way that nice Colonist telepath taught me Shio. Learning how to implant memories was the first step to being able to insert a language, as it was called, and that if I wanted to learn how to do that, I'd better be ready to study telepathy for a couple of years and master several advanced telepathic techniques.

And I was going to do it. I wanted to learn as much as I could about telepathy. I wanted to be so good at it that nobody would ever use me again, use me the way the Trillanes had.

So, I was definitely going to be enrolling in those telepathy courses that the Academy was offering, to continue my training in telepathy and achieve my goal of learning how to insert languages. To get into the ones that I wanted, however, I had to enroll in the Academy and become an official student. The things I want to learn aren't offered in the public courses they're offering new telepaths. But that was no problem for me, because what do you know, as a picker, I can enroll in the Academy without having to go through the selection process. I am guaranteed admission into the Academy because I am a farm survivor. It's one of the reparations we got from the benefits package. And what's ever better, I don't have to pay tuition, but I do have to pay for my own supplies that may be needed in the classes I take. I can go to the Academy for free, and the only thing I have to do is academically qualify for the classes I want to take. And the telepathy course doesn't have an academic requirement, so I don't have to worry about having like four completed classes in math in order to take telepathy courses. I wasn't planning on getting a degree, and I don't have to take the classes I want to take. I want to take the classes purely because I want to learn more about telepathy, and because I'm a picker, I can take all the classes I want and never pay a credit in tuition, even if I never get a certificate (what they call a diploma).

And the commute wouldn't even be that bad. I'd been going between Jacksonville and Norfolk for a couple of weeks now, and the 45 minute flight to Norfolk wasn't bad at all. There were parking spaces for skimmers on campus, to accommodate commuters like me, so I could even take my skimmer instead of my hovercar.

Hell, even if there weren't parking spaces, I could just send my skimmer home and recall it to have it come pick me up. I can utilize the skimmer's autonomous autopilot if I have it stay within the hovercar travel corridors. It's only not allowed to use it when the skimmer is flying in restricted airspace, and my skimmer is small enough to be allowed to use the Atlantic Coast Corridor, which runs from Miami all the way to Portland, Maine. It's a straight shot up the ACC from Jacksonville to Norfolk.

I was going to tender my application to the Academy on Monday, which I had to do through the DFM in order to get in automatically and not have to pay tuition. I was going to shoot for starting in the spring semester, since the winter semester was already in full swing. The only potential stumbling block for me would be getting a non-Faey teacher for my classes. There were more than Faey teachers in the telepathic course, but given that the entire Faey race was telepathic—or had been before the virus—they dominate the faculty in courses like that.

After getting Zuzu and Kishu fed, I warned them I'd be out for a bit and climbed into the merge pod. I'd gotten into a bit of a new routine, where my days were taken up with learning and my evenings were spent in CO, at least evenings I wasn't spending out with Sano, up at Mrima's, or down at Rita's. CO no longer dominated my time, but I did do my best to make time to play the game, because I still sincerely love the game and enjoy playing immensely.

I was enjoying living in the real world now, but I still very much enjoyed spending time in the fantasy world that was Arca. Besides, I made my living off playing the game, so it was my job on top of my favorite hobby. As had been my habit lately, I set up the streaming software for later, as I'd been streaming about an hour or so of my game sessions every night to let people see what Xen did when he wasn't exploring the most remote corners of Arca or hunting overworld boss monsters or trying to solo the weaker trash mobs around Citadel City. I had about 50,000 viewers a night on the average, which was pretty healthy but nowhere near as many as the most popular streamers, and I earned about C30 a night from my streaming, mainly because I don't actively solicit for donations while I stream. People can donate to my Arena page if they want, but I don't ask it of them, but every night enough people chip in C.5 or C1 or C2 to make it worth my while to do it. That was more than enough to pay my day's expenses, so I

was more than content with it. I don't start streaming as soon as I log in, though, because it gives me time to talk to some people "off camera" and see if anyone wants to do anything.

A pretty interesting little group had formed from the Champions on Methrian. Me, Emelda, and Savar were a unit that was often joined by other Champions, with Alandra, Meldo, Braggan, Bullox, Kane, Hinasa, and the Selkie Champion Mirri joining us the most often. Mirri was from the Dark Riders, and her starting to hang around with us was major because she was a dedicated healer, where Meldo was not. With Mirri and Meldo along, our small group could take on some pretty challenging content. And it wasn't just Champions, either. From time to time we had members of all the top guilds on the server along with us on our rather crazy adventures, where small groups took on raid content or extremely challenging dungeons or overworld content.

After logging in, I went about the daily chore of searching for any skill crystals that might be on sale in the marketplaces and shops in Citadel City. I was only 31 points away from getting Djinn Form to 2,000, and I was almost obsessed with getting it there now. I started with the big shops run by the merchant barons and then worked my way down to the four market squares that held player stalls, and my persistence was rewarded, *finally*, when I came across a stall selling only one item.

A 30 point skill crystal. And it was legit, it was the real thing, not just a cleverly cut piece of glass enchanted to glow with a soft magical light (the newest scam to hit Citadel City).

Those were super-rare, and the one *million* gold price tag for said crystal demonstrated its rarity quite well. But I didn't even hesitate. A million gold was a little over half of what I had saved up—my shops were *very* profitable and I was still hunting treasure chests from the Citadel overworld—and I didn't even blink when I ran to the bank, withdrew a million gold, then did the pickpocket waddle back to the marketplace, praying that nobody else with deep pockets beat me to it. It was still there when I got back, and I almost broke my finger on the checkout stand hitting the button to pay for it. When the sale finalized, it allowed me to pick up the crystal. And I used it immediately.

I looked at my skill window. Djinn Form: 1,999.

So close. Soooooo *cloooooose*!

I returned to my townhouse and went straight to the roof and started shifting back and forth between human and Djinn form, my eyes locked on my skill window as I prayed for Lone Wolf to do its job and push me over the edge. And let me tell you, time just seemed to stand still when I did that, and the suspense was almost killing me, as if I'd gotten five numbers in the lottery and I was waiting for the last ball to come out of the machine. Minutes of tormented eager expectation went by, and minutes, and more minutes, which had become an hour. By then I decided to start streaming so people could see me hit 2,000, and bantered with some people on stream chat as I did nothing but shift back and forth for an hour. Then for another hour.

And then, finally, just into the third hour, I *finally* hit the jackpot. I saw my skill roll over, hit 2,000, and I had the skill window open so fast that it was a blur. I scrolled down to Djinn form, and to my wild, elated glee, a new child skill had appeared under it. It had no skill rating, meaning it was a passive skill. It read:

Elemental Attunement: Your mastery of the magic of the Djinn grants you the ability to pass through the Vortex and enter the Elemental Plane of Air.

Holy *shit*, I was right! I could enter the Plane of Air! And I could do it *right now*!

"Look at that, people," I said to stream chat. "I can get into the Plane of Air, and if I'm not wrong, I can do it right now. So, lemme stock up on some supplies and put away my Champion's Raiment so I don't lose it. I have no idea if I can get back to Freeport once I pass through the Vortex, so I'm gonna assume that I can't and only take my backup gear and enough supplies to survive on the other side for a week. There's every chance that if I die over there, I lose everything I have on me. So I take no chances with my gear, because I can't replace it."

It took me about half an hour to get everything organized, and in that time, the number of people watching the stream *exploded*. I have no idea how people found out what I was doing, but I had *1.4 million* viewers by the time I was geared up and ready to go. I'd never had that many viewers

before! I felt sincerely nervous when I saw that number, as if the entire world was watching me. I triple checked my inventory, made sure that my most precious items were off and in my house's item storage, which included the swords I'd made for my Djinn form and Savar's bow, making sure that I was taking nothing that I couldn't afford to lose. I had no idea if Teleport or Succor worked there, and if the Vortex was a one-way trip, then I might be stuck there until I found another way back.

Once I was sure of things, I used Teleport to get to the scion in the Freeport sewers, then I shifted to Djinn form and rose up from the street. I felt incredibly anxious, excited, I knew I was about to see something that no other player in all of CO had ever seen, because I know for a fact that no other human that had Touched by the Djinn on other servers had gotten Djinn Form to 2,000 yet. I was the first, and I was first because I'd spent the last couple of months—not counting the pandemic—focusing on raising Djinn Form, grinding it day after day along with Emelda as she raised Phoenix Form. Those endless hours of monotony were about to pay off, and pay off *big time*.

I reached the glowing sphere of howling wind that hovered high over Freeport, which was the entryway into the Elemental Plane of Air. I paused there a moment to look at it, maybe get a little dramatic, then I took a deep breath, cracked my knuckles, then held out my hands as if to push open a pair of doors and surged forward. I entered the chaotic sphere of air, clouds being whipped by winds trapped within it, and felt the winds grab hold of me, then yank me forward and what felt like down. I tumbled, rolled, then I got control of myself and found myself in a tunnel of rotating clouds and wind, like being inside a tornado, being drawn down its long length. I had to fight to stay in the center, the turbulence along the edges was violent, but the center was like being in the eye of a hurricane...relatively speaking. There was still high wind, wind pulling me down the vortex, and I kept my eyes locked on the center of it.

After some time, I'm not sure how long, I saw the terminus. It was a light, a golden light illuminating the center of the vortex in front of me, and it got bigger and bigger as I neared it. And then, almost so suddenly I was honestly disoriented for a second, I was out of the vortex.

And I could do nothing but gape in awe.

Before me were dozens of small miniature like micro-planets hovering in empty space, and each of them had buildings built on their surfaces. There were also buildings just hovering in the void, buildings that had no foundation, were built like space ships in that they seemed to radiate out from a central point...perhaps an even smaller piece of land that was completely covered over by the building? All of the buildings were Djinn in architecture, meaning they had a definite Arabian feel to them, tower and minarets with domes, courtyards, arches and elegant spires, all of it built of a white-tan stone that looked like pale sandstone. The domes were covered in metal leaf, gold, silver, copper, bronze, and others were painted red or blue or green. And before me, flitting and floating and zipping and soaring about, were thousands of Djinn.

This was Madra Ban, the Djinn city on the other side of the Vortex that the Djinn NPCs had told me about. And it was absolutely *stunning*. I'd never seen anything like it before, not even in a movie or a vidy, a city made up of earthen pearls upon which their city was built, orb by orb, spread across the sky like bubbles floating in champagne.

There was no sun here, but there was light. The light didn't come from any direction, it was like...it was just *there*, as if the air itself was infused with a very gentle light, like a bank of fog lit by the sun that created an infusion of light all around you...just without the fog. Because of that, there were no shadows. But, I could see darkness within the buildings, which told me that this curious lighting effect only happened outside. Inside a room, surrounded by walls, the light didn't infuse the very air itself, so that meant that the interior of the buildings had to be artificially lit. Visibility here was line of sight, but I could see things in the vast distance, tiny specks, clouds, and in one direction I saw a smudge of darkness that looked like a storm.

There was also no gravity. I noticed that I was weightless, and it had nothing to do with me flying. Gravity did not exist, and yet, I saw, things weren't floating away from the earthen orbs that made up the city. Things sitting on tables stayed on the tables, and those tables weren't floating off the floors or the ground upon which they stood. Perhaps gravity was a local thing? Maybe it only existed close to the large earth spheres?

"My God," I breathed, looking around. "This is...this is incredible. Unbelievable. I am completely blown away," I told the viewers. "I never

even dreamed anything like this could exist. Hats off to whoever designed this place, they have way more imagination than me.”

“Ah, our mortal anchor has finally arrived!” I heard a powerful, jovial voice call. I looked up to see Sultan Sadran descending towards me, and I had the wherewithal to bow to him when he reached me, hovering before me with two of his royal guards.

“My Sultan,” I said respectfully. “I have mastered the form you have bestowed upon me with your magic, as you have commanded. This is my first passage through the Vortex.”

“I know,” he smiled. “Well done!”

“Your praise humbles me, my Sultan,” I told him.

“Well now, I think I shouldn’t interfere with your exploration of our fair city!” he said with a smile. “My palace is there, mortal anchor.” He pointed at the largest and most grand of all the building complexes, this one occupying the largest of the earthen spheres in this city of floating orbs, definitely a palace befitting a king. “Please, explore the city of Madra Ban, and when your curiosity is satisfied, I would find great pleasure in speaking with you. But not now, I have duties to attend,” he smiled. “So please, look around. Explore. Enjoy the local cuisine and our finest sunfruit wines. Speak with my subjects. Experience all that Madra Ban has to offer!” he smiled broadly, spreading his arms in a grand gesture. “When the obelisk reaches full illumination, then seek me out in my palace so I might welcome you formally.” He pointed behind me, and I saw a massive stone obelisk hovering in the void, which had visible light covering about two thirds of it. And as I watched, that light slowly, slowly crept up the stone. It was a means of telling time. I would guess that it being fully lit would be like noon.

“I will be there, my Sultan. Thank you for the invitation,” I told him.

I did as Sultan Sadran commanded, at least after I made sure I could get back home safely. I returned through the vortex and found myself safely back in Freeport, and once that was confirmed, I retrieved my usual gear and returned to the city of Madra Ban, this time coming through in human form to make sure I could do it. And I could. I was glad the Sultan gave me time to look around first, because I was absolutely enthralled by this alien,

exotic, nearly unbelievable city. I learned quickly that gravity was indeed a local thing, because it existed close to the earth spheres upon which the Djinn built their buildings, and not more than a meter beyond the sphere and the buildings that were built upon it. It seemed to exist anywhere there was something sufficiently large enough, anything big enough to be a building, which explained why there was gravity in the free-floating buildings that weren't built on earthen spheres. The city was even more stunning and incredible once I was able to get into it, move from sphere to sphere, see that the Djinn had homes and shops and inns, had everything I'd find in Freeport, just built in this amazing place, a city that was truly three dimensional. There were hundreds of earth spheres that made up the city, and each one held its own unique mix of dwellings, shops, parks, and courtyards.

But there were no farms, and that made sense to me. The Djinn could conjure food, they had no need for farms or ranches.

And there weren't only Djinn here! I screeched to a halt when I saw a tall, greenish-skinned humanoid that looked similar to the Djinn go by, sitting cross-legged on a flying carpet that was moving from one earth sphere to another. He was riding on the carpet because he wasn't Djinn, he couldn't fly. That was a Marid! It was one of the genies from the plane of Water! I had no idea the genie races interacted with each other!

That just made things even more interesting!

Genies weren't the only living things in Madra Ban. I saw tons of birds and winged creatures, as well as those coherent blobs of cloudy air that were the Air Elementals that you could summon with a spell. There were shimmering distortions in the air that moved coherently, beings that were all but invisible, and I saw quite a few winged humanoids, almost like the Agents of the Powers, moving from sphere to sphere. They were a bit taller than humans but looked completely human, outside of their feathered wings. I even saw a dragon, A forty meter long behemoth with brass colored scales, a *much* bigger dragon than Selvaron, but it was sitting in courtyard having a discussion with several Djinn who were hovering near its head. And in addition to the people and creatures moving around in the air, there were any number of non-flying animals on the spheres, some of which looked familiar to me. The Djinn kept canines and cat-like animals as

pets, just ones sized for them, so they were pretty big. Those couldn't fly, so they were stuck on the sphere where they were.

I was so excited to look around, and got so engrossed in this exotic city, that I was very nearly late for my appointment with the Sultan. I landed outside the massive golden doors that were built into a high wall surrounding the Sultan's palace, a wall that was an anchor for a very faint shimmering that had to be some kind of magical barrier to prevent Djinn from flying into the palace's airspace. The guards at the gate allowed me in, and one escorted me into the open, spacious throne room of the Sultan. His throne hall had no door, it was an open archway leading into the building up a long flight of pristine marble steps—only there for non-flying visitors no doubt—and into a vast hall with fluted columns along the sides and no furniture other than a massive block of black veined stone, carved into a chair, that had lushly vibrant pillows piled on it and with the furry pelt of some gigantic white creature draped over the back, so the Sultan never touched the bare stone. The hall was populated by nearly a hundred Djinn wearing very expensive Arabian-themed clothing, fine linens and silks and satins accented with golden threads, dangling jewels, and elegant lace. The Sultan was sitting in the throne when I arrived, and he rose up over his throne and clapped his hands after I was announced by the guard. “Bid welcome to our honored guest, my subjects, our mortal anchor from the material world, the human Xen!” he proclaimed. “He has mastered the magic of the Djinn and has come to the plane of Air. Salute his accomplishment!” I was a bit surprised when all the Djinn clapped three times, in perfect synchronization. “Now then, if you would follow me, Xen, there is a matter that we must discuss. Carry on, my subjects, I shall return anon!”

The Sultan led me into an antechamber above the throne room, accessed by a door in the ceiling that was opened for us by the guards, and I was directed to sit on a large cushion in front of a desk. The Sultan settled himself onto a cushion behind it, then put his elbows on the desk. “It is good that you have come, my human subject,” he told me. “Because the other Sultans were getting a bit impatient.”

“Other Sultans? Other Djinn, your Majesty?”

He shook his head. “There are four Sultans among genie-kind, Xen. Each tribe of genie is ruled by a Sultan. The other Sultans to which I refer are the leaders of the Efreeti, Marid, and Dao.”

“Ah. I understand, my Sultan. Why would they be impatient for my arrival?”

He smiled. “Because you represent something that genie kind has been eagerly awaiting for many years, Xen,” he replied. “The mortal races have finally gained the education and strength to master elemental magic, and that means that the other tribes of genie might soon enjoy the boon we Djinn have had the fortune to possess, a permanent passage into the material world. It will allow the other tribes to bring far more back into our home planes than what we can carry.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, my Sultan, but they want to open a passage similar to the Vortex above Freeport?”

“Precisely so,” he said with a nod. “Understand, my human subject, that only we Djinn may easily pass between the elemental planes and the material world. We trade with our three cousin tribes for the goods and materials we can bring from the mortal world. Opening the material world to them would make life much easier for them, as well as reduce the burden on them. I know that I am giving up the Djinn’s lucrative market trading with our cousins, but family is more important than mere money,” he said with honest conviction. “I have pledged my support to my cousins to assist them in their goal to open their planes to the material world. And for that, I will need your help. Not because you are the mortal anchor into your world, my subject, but because you are marked by the Powers as one the mightiest of mortal kind.”

To my sheer and utter delight, a new quest popped up on my quest log, on the side of my vision, and it was a *Champion’s Quest*! There were even more Champion quests for us to do! It was named *The Great Hunt*, and it listed a reward of a sizable chunk of XP and gold.

The quest had an unusual flag. It was marked as a *shared quest*, and those were very rare. What that meant was that everyone that was on that quest could contribute to its completion. It was one quest that had multiple people doing it, and only one person had to complete a quest objective in

order to advance the quest. The quest was really long, but its length was that it was a very long list of items and materials...so, it looked like I had to gather a bunch of stuff, that other people would be doing the quest as well, and that only one of said item had to be collected by anyone that was on the shared quest in order for the objective to be considered complete. If there were a lot of us doing the quest, we could split up the items among us and each of us work to gather our part of the list. So, while the list was almost intimidatingly long, the fact that there would be more than one person gathering them meant it wouldn't be quite so hard.

This was a very different kind of quest than the Grand Crusade had been. This quest was going to be very long, given the intimidating list of things we had to gather, but we were being given the opportunity to do this at our own pace. It wasn't a quest chain, it wasn't a scripted series of events, it was more of a sandbox quest. This quest was more like "this is what you need, do it at your own pace and in your own order." And I kind of liked that.

"I have need of the assistance of you and the other mortals so similarly marked, Xen. The genies need your assistance to open the other three elemental planes to the mortal world, so that all genie kind might prosper from a connection to the material plane."

"I would be honored to help you, my Sultan," I said excitedly. "What must I do?"

"The other three tribes can't quite so easily enter the material world as we Djinn can," he repeated, which made sense. Efreeti, Dao, and Marid were almost never seen in Arca, but Djinn were much more common. Still very rare, but far more common than the other three. "They lack the magic that we Djinn possess, which allow us to pass into the material world for short periods of time...at least before the Vortex was opened," he smiled. "The few genies of the other tribes in your world got there by accident, and they have no easy way back to their homes. In order to form a permanent connection between their planes and the material world, a powerful ritual needs be performed for each tribe at the home of their mortal anchor, with the mortal anchor assisting, so they might form a connection to the material world. What we will need from you, Xen, is help collecting the mystical items and materials we will need for the rituals, as well as assistance

preparing the location of the new gateway to sustain the magic that will be placed within it,” he explained. “The other tribes can contact their mortal anchor and arrange things with them on their own, but they need our help to get there, and your help gathering what they need, in order to form the gateways between the planes.”

“I understand, my Sultan,” I told him. “Where do we begin?”

“For now, I fear what we need most from you is to be a common servant, though such menial tasks are below you,” he smiled apologetically. “We need you to find the materials and items we’ll need for the ritual. Once we have everything we need, I will assist our cousins through the Vortex so they may enter the material world, and then they will travel to the home of their mortal anchor and conduct the ritual. There are many items and materials we need for this ritual, Xen, and some will be very difficult to obtain. That is why we need the help of the most powerful mortals of the material world. You must be our messenger, Xen, beseech your fellow Champions for their aid, and then venture forth to the far corners of your world and hunt down the things we need.”

“I’m fairly confident I can convince the other mortals to assist, my Sultan,” I told him strongly. “They would jump at the chance to experience the thrill of being able to enter the elemental planes.”

“That will come in time,” he said. “Once all four gateways are formed, they will become stable enough for mortals using the proper spells to pass through them safely. The fact that only one has been formed has put the elements out of balance, and that balance will be restored once all four are created. But until then, for now, only the four mortal anchors who have sufficient mastery of the magic that binds us to you can pass into the elemental planes.”

I understood what he was saying. In game terms, the elemental planes would open to all players once the Champions completed the quests that would allow the other three gateways to be created. It was like a new Grand Crusade, but this time, what we were doing was unlocking the new expansion for everyone else.

Talk about awesome!

“Do you have a list of what we need to gather available, my Sultan?”

“Of course,” he smiled, picking up a scroll tied with a red silk ribbon and offering it to me. “This list contains the items that all three of my genie cousins will require to conduct their rituals, arranged so that the items needed are grouped by which Sultan requires them, so you may focus on gathering the materials needed for one race of genie at a time yet also allow you to gather the others needed when convenient for you. Some of these items will be used by all three, so three of them will need to be acquired. Those materials are listed separately on each grouping, so don’t fear that you might overlook them. The rest, you only need one of them. Be warned, Xen, that some of these items will be extremely difficult or dangerous to acquire, and I would heavily suggest that you gather a sizable force of mortals to assist in getting them,” he said seriously. That meant that they dropped from raids. “When you have acquired an object or material, you must bring them to a special place that the four Sultans have arranged with the Powers for you.”

“What place, my Sultan?”

“Each of the mortal Champions was awarded a special prize, Xen. A ring, a magical ring. That ring is a key that will allow you to gain entry into the Champion’s Hall,” he explained. “It is a place formed by the will of the Powers, a place that those who bear the ring may enter from anywhere in both the mortal world and the elemental planes. And from within the Champion’s Hall, you can access one of the mortal scions in order to travel back to the Citadel,” he explained, which made me quite elated. It really was a key! “The Powers have granted us permission to place something within the Hall that will allow you to deliver the items we need to us without need of traveling to the elemental planes. When a Champion attains an item on the list, bring it to the Champion’s Hall and place it in the golden chest you will find there. That will allow the Sultans to bring the item to them, in their home plane, so they might prepare the item for its use in the ritual. Once you have acquired all the items a Sultan needs to open a gateway, then I will bring the Sultan into the material world and they will open a gateway into their plane.”

“I understand, my Sultan,” I told him.

“I’m glad that you do, and I’m quite pleased at your willingness to assist the genies, Xen,” he said with a smile, rising up from his cushion. I

did the same, and moved back when he rose up over the desk and approached me. “And be assured, we don’t expect the Champions of the Powers to do this for us without suitable reward,” he added with a smile. “Each Sultan has agreed to award the mortals that assist them with a boon, and once all four gateways are formed, we four Sultans will join together and reward your faithful service with something truly special,” he smiled. And with that, four new quests appeared on my log. Three read *The Ritual of Fire*, *The Ritual of Water*, and *The Ritual of Earth*. Each one listed a quest reward of a piece of Champion’s Raiment! The fourth quest read *The Opening of the Planes*, and it too awarded a piece of Champion’s Raiment, as well as a magical ring named *The Key of the Planes*!

They were giving us the opportunity to complete the set, plus give us another ring to match the one we got for completing the Grand Crusade!

“I would help you even without the reward, my Sultan, but I certainly won’t say no to them,” I told him, which made him laugh.

“You are a loyal subject and honor the Djinn with your devotion, Xen,” he smiled. “Now, I have other duties to attend, and you have a mission before you, so I will let you begin your task. But before I do, might I explain how to use the ring you were given?”

“Please, my Sultan.”

“Simply remove your glove and chant the words ‘unlock the door’ in the language of the First Ones,” he explained. “The ring cannot be covered to be used to gain entry to the Champion’s Hall. Do you know those words, Xen?”

“I do, Sultan Sadran,” I nodded.

“Then I will leave it to you,” he said, floating past me and towards the door in the floor.

I nodded and turned, then removed my glove. I held my hand up, though I’m sure it wasn’t required, and called out in a clear voice, speaking the words of the First Language: “*Isveth ek obru’an*.” I ghosted back a bit when a line of pure magic formed in front of me, then it expanded on both sides to form a glowing rectangle of magical energy, a shimmering bluish-white. The Sultan nodded and made a shooing motion with his hand, and I bowed to him and then ghosted forward, into the magical gateway.

There was a sensation of being pulled, and I found myself hovering with my boots off the ground in an elaborate courtyard surrounded by marble walls, standing inside the four arching tines of a scion, and I was momentarily awestruck. What was before me was a small but towering castle, or hall, with vaulting gates that had to be ten meters high made of nearly glowing golden wood banded with silver metal, and those massive doors began to open of their own accord as I put my feet on the walkway, paved with small white stones. The courtyard was filled with flowers and small trees laid out to each side of the pathway, with two small fountains on each side that formed the centerpiece of small courtyards, and beyond the gardens was an ornate fence that had nothing but a vast void beyond it. I walked over to the fence and looked over the edge, and I realized that this place didn't exist in the material world, or the elemental planes. It was its own place, like its own tiny little universe, and the only way to get in was the ring on my finger.

The interior was just as awe-inspiring as the courtyard. The doors opened to a vast vaulted hall that had three meter or so statues of each of the forty Champions lining the sides, with doors beside each statue. I could only open one door, the one to the left of my statue (mine was almost exactly in the middle on the left side), and it opened to a large, richly appointed suite of a living room and a bedroom, already furnished in lavish fabrics and exotic woods and stones. I realized that there were forty of them, one for each of us, and they were our own private spaces within the Hall of Champions. The hall ended in a large chamber that had a massive round table with forty chairs, with a massive crystal chandelier hanging over the table. There were three doors that led out of the meeting room, an impressive set of dual staircases that went up each side wall of the room. Each of the doors led to a recreational area, I discovered. One led to a parlor of sorts with a viewing crystal with enough couches and chairs for all of us, one led to a gym of sorts where I suppose we could practice fighting skills, or have duels, and the last opened to an indoor pool of all things.

Upstairs, I found that the devs had really set us up, because the entire second floor was devoted to tradeskills. For every tradeskill in the game, there was a room in the complex that had all the tools and equipment we needed to practice it, from blacksmithing to research.

There was another staircase on the second floor, and that led to a single huge room on the third and final floor, which was completely empty except for one thing...the chest. The golden chest Sultan Sadran told me about was here. It was impressively large, two meters wide, a meter long, and a meter and a half tall not counting the lid, and when I opened it, I found nothing inside...which was no surprise. They'd put the chest in a place where we couldn't possibly miss it so we knew where to put the things we gathered for the quest.

I came back down to the meeting hall, a little overwhelmed...and I bet some of the viewers were too. I now had a mind-blowing *nine million* people watching the stream, as no doubt word got out that one of the Champions was streaming just-unlocked content and people were flocking to my page to see what was going on. I felt extremely self-conscious as I sat down in one of the chairs at the round table, putting my elbows on it and leaning on my hands. "Holy crap," was all I could say.

I took a moment to gather myself, then took out the scroll that Sultan Sadran gave me. I started reading through it, and I voiced my thoughts for the viewers. "This is a serious ton of stuff, and I don't even recognize half of it," I said. "I'm gonna have to hit the database sites and look some of this stuff up. Some I recognize, though, and some of them are made by tradeskills, which explains the tradeskill complex on the second floor. They're furnishing us with the facilities we need to make the tradeskill items on the list, but they're not supplying the materials. So some of us are gonna have to pony up some gold to get this done," I remarked. "Now if you guys will excuse me for about five minutes, I'm gonna log out long enough to hit the bathroom, then send a message to the Champions I can contact in real life and tell them about this. With any luck, we'll see a few of them arrive very shortly."

I took care of that simultaneously, relieving myself as I used my interface to send a text message to Rita, Sano, Satoru, who was Hinasa, Meghan, who was Alandra, Mark, who was Meldo, and Oliver, who was Bullox, and explained to them how to gain entry to the Champion's Hall. I knew that most of them were busy, either at work or in class, but Bullox came in through the open doors when I logged back in—though my avatar was still sitting in the chair—nearly running down the grand entry hall

towards me. “Mate, this is ridiculous!” he said brightly when he reached me, looking around. “And I got four new Champion’s Quests in my log!”

“Yeah, I think I unlocked them,” I told him, then warned him over friend chat that I was streaming, so not to say anything potentially embarrassing. “We need to get all the Champions together, Bullox. Between you, Mirri, Hinasa, and Emelda, that’s all the guilds that have Champions in them. So we need to spread the word through the guilds that the Champions need to meet.”

“Gonna be a bit tricky, given we’re scattered all over the world. There won’t be a single time that’ll be convenient for everyone,” he grunted. “You’re like exactly twelve hours opposite Hinasa. The middle of the day for you is the middle of the night for him.”

“We’ll have to iron it out,” I said. “I guess in the meantime, we can create a chat forum on *CO Today* so we can organize things, or we can leave written messages here on the table or something. Cause we’re gonna need some cooperation to finish the gathering quest. There’s like three hundred items we have to gather to finish all three of the other quests. Some of them drop from raids, some are from dungeons, some of them are gathered from both of the Twin Worlds, some are on the Citadel, and some are made by tradeskills. We’re going to have to organize who’s going to be responsible for gathering what.”

Emelda came into the hall, and was literally running towards us, her hands holding her dress so she didn’t trip over her skirts. “Oh my god, Xen, this is amazing! How did you find it?”

“I didn’t, I was told how to get here,” I answered, standing up. “Do you have four new quests in your log?”

“Sec. Yes. And they’re Champion’s Quests!” she said, nearly squealing in delight. “They’re going to let us finish the Raiment sets!”

“Heya Em,” Bullox smiled, taking her hands when she reached us. “Quite a sight, isn’t it?”

“It’s gorgeous,” she said, looking around the meeting room. “Okay, tell me what you found out, Xen!” she said eagerly, sitting in the closest available chair.

I took the opportunity to tell them about my trip through the Vortex and my time in Madra Ban, then went over what the Sultan told me. “So, we’re going to be working on unlocking the elemental planes for everyone,” I surmised. “We gather the items on the list, and when we have them all for one genie race, Sultan Sadran will bring the Sultan of that race to the overworld and they’ll do the ritual to establish a gateway to their plane. We get the other three up, and that unlocks the planes for everyone. *We* are the ones that unlock the expansion for the rest of the server,” I said, a bit humbly. “So there’s a lot riding on our shoulders. What we need to do is gather all the Champions, either in game or on a forum or something, so we can work out who’s going to be gathering what off the list. And we have to go like *everywhere* to get it all. Raids, dungeons, remote corners of Arca and Netherim, even locations on Citadel. We need to identify the items, find out where we get them, then organize into teams to gather it.”

“It won’t need to be just us, either,” Bullox said. “The guilds can help with the raids and dungeons. Only one of us needs to be in the raid to get the drop.”

“Yeah, so we can spread out the burden,” Emelda agreed. “And we can have the fast travelers like Sebirk, Xen, Savar, Graz, and Uri gather the overworld stuff.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said with a nod. “I’ve explored a lot of Arca, so most likely I know how to get there to get it. And I know that Graz has been doing the same on Netherim.” Graz was the Silakkin Champion, and like the Savasa, his racial abilities allowed him to travel very fast overland. Savar and Graz could cover tremendous amounts of ground quickly, nearly as much as the three fliers among the Champions could; me, Sebirk, and the Sylph champion Uri. “We’ll need to split it up so Savar and Graz are gathering the stuff easiest for them to reach on the ground, and leave the stuff in the mountains and swamps and whatnot to the rest of us.”

“We’ll work all that out when we meet. For now, we need to identify what all this stuff is, and where we can get it,” Bullox said, pointing at the scroll I’d unrolled and put on the table. “I’ll bet we’ll have to look most of it up on the resource sites.”

“I hate having to go outside the game to do a quest,” Emelda grunted. “But we may have to.”

“I wonder,” Bullox mused. “Who are the other three races? Did the Sultan say where we were going to open the gateways?”

“No, he didn’t, but I know one of them. The Saberak have Touched by the Efreet. The guy that has it contacted me on my page so we could compare the skills, but excuse me if I don’t name him, so I don’t out him against his will. Who’s the Saberak Champion?”

“He’s in the Dark Riders. Rakri,” Emelda supplied.

“Then I can ask Mirri to talk to him, so he’ll know that the guy with Touched by the Efreet is going to contact him,” I said. “I can message him and tell him about this. As to the other two, I have no idea. Whoever has the other Legendary skills are being quiet about it, which is only smart in my opinion.”

“You are so paranoid, dude,” Bullox teased.

“When you play solo, you learn quickly to trust no one,” I replied shamelessly. “Not even *you*,” I added before Emelda could object, grinning as I pointed at her.

“I’m gonna get you for that, Xen, you just wait,” she retorted playfully.

“Bring it, snowflake,” I retorted, which made her laugh.

“The Saberak,” Bullox mused. “You know, I don’t see very many of them around. And humans were like never played before the Grand Crusade. How much you wanna bet they gave the four skills to the four least played races in the game?” he ventured. “You know, try to attract people to play them? Cause I’ll bet that they’ll get new racials, like humans got Gift of the Djinn.”

“That sounds about right,” Emelda agreed. “So, who are the other two unplayed races?”

I pondered that a moment. “I’ll bet my left boot that the Utaku are one of them. You almost never see Utaku, not even in their own faction territory on Netherim.”

“Don’t see all that many Ogres either,” Bullox ventured. “Or Spriggen.”

“Ogres are too ugly to be much fun to play, and Spriggen don’t have all that great racials,” Emelda mused.

“Dove, some players play Ogres *because* they’re big and ugly,” Bullox told her with a grin. “And I’ll bet that to make things even, two are on Arca and two on Netherim, so I’ll bet on the Spriggen. You know how the Netherim players always whine about how world events never happen on Netherim,” he said lightly. “Both the orc invasion and the final battles of the Grand Crusade were on Arca. If they gave the Arca races three of the four skills on top of that, it would be a category five whinestorm on the forums.”

“Dude, you better be glad Sebirk isn’t here. He’d skewer you for saying that,” I told him.

Bullox laughed. “He’s one of the loudest whiners about Netherim factions getting ignored by the devs,” he said with a slightly malicious edge to his voice.

We were joined by Alandra, who walked up to the table slowly, her head swiveling to and fro as she looked around. “This place is nuts!” she said. “And it’s just for us? That’s like crazy!”

“You got here faster than I expected. I thought you had class today,” I said.

“I just got out,” she replied. “Alright, someone explain the four new quests in my log to me. They got added as soon as I logged in.”

We were there for nearly four hours, because more Champions trickled in as they finished their real life stuff and logged on to find their guildmates all but screaming at them and multiple mail messages telling them about the Champion’s Hall and how to get to it. Each time another new Champion arrived, we had to rehash what led up to us being there, but we did get some work done. We drew up a new list of items that had every item we could identify on it, some of us surfing the resource sites as others kept track, until we managed to identify what every item on the list was and where we could get it. Some of our stream watchers helped with that. I had an absolutely insane average of ten million people watching over those four hours, and the stream chat was inundated with info as players told me what items were and where to find them. Of course I didn’t believe everything I was told, but more often than not, the info was legit. We managed to draw up three different lists sorted by which genie race needed them for their ritual showing all the items, where to get them, and were already penciling

in who was going to get them. I volunteered to gather quite a bit of the overworld Arca items, which more or less fit in with my exploration playstyle. I was well suited for venturing out to the remote corners of Arca hunting for rare flowers and manticore spikes and drake scales and whatnot. Emelda was talking to Baron and Bullox to Felik, and their guilds had volunteered to run seven of the raids to get the items needed from them, which were raids on the Twin Worlds and thus obsolete content for their guilds. The Dark Riders agreed to run two others, and Seva's Band agreed to run the final three.

But the roadblock was going to be six items that dropped from four dungeons on Citadel, and four items that could only be attained by running the entry-level raid on Citadel, the Shadow Halls. None of the guilds on Methrian were ready for raiding on Citadel. Hell, we weren't really ready for the *dungeons* on Citadel, let alone the raids. So, the four top raiding guilds on the server agreed to run it together, to form a massive army of the top-gearred players on the server to gather the four items we needed...and I was going to go in with them. It would be my first ever real raid, a raid of current content, and I was equal levels excited and terrified of the idea of it.

There would be nearly five hundred of us going into that raid. It would be like an army assaulting the Shadow Halls, and I bet it was going to be freakin' *epic*.

The dungeons, however, were going to be even more problematic, and that was because there was a hard cap on how many players could enter a dungeon at once. Only ten players could enter a dungeon, so that meant that we were much more limited on who we could send and what we could accomplish due to that player cap. And that meant that we'd have to build parties of only Champions for those, relying on our Champion's Raiment to get us through them.

And I'd be going on one of those dungeon runs with Emelda and Savar, so I was looking forward to that too.

It was well after dark when I finally ended the stream and logged out, and I had to deal with a near insurrection from Kishu and Zuzu. Neither of them had been very happy at all that I'd been logged on for so long without taking a break and playing with them, so I had to soothe the impending wrath of two animals that I could literally step on. And now that I was out

of the game, I was worried enough about Sano to call her. She hadn't logged on, and it was well after her quitting time. She didn't answer her vidlink, but she did answer when I queried her interface. *Make it quick, I'm like super- busy, Kev*, she told me, speaking to me over her interface.

That explains that. I was worried, you didn't log on.

Work's a bit nuts at the moment, she answered.

What happened?

Got pegged for doing the viddy for a series of reports on how the virus affected Terra.

We already know what happened.

This is for the Federation. I work for the Federation News Network, Kev, she replied, a bit impishly. *Our office is doing just one of the stories, showing how life has changed here in Brazil. Every office on Terra is doing a story on what it's like there.*

Oh. Cool. When will you be done?

In a little bit, she answered. *Why are you being so nosy?*

I'll explain when you finish and get home, I told her. I didn't want to get her hyped up while she was at work, it may make her mad.

Must be in-game.

Yeah. I'll explain it when you have time.

Good, cause unlike you, I still need a paycheck, she teased lightly.

I settled on the couch after Sano ended the chat, stroking Kishu's sinfully soft calico fur as Zuzu chased his ball all over the living room, yipping excitedly as the powered toy tried to escape from him. He eventually got tired of the game and hopped up onto the couch and jostled with Kishu a little bit, at least until I made room for both of them on my lap. "Are you two happy now?" I asked archly as I petted a demanding little furball with each hand. I was really looking forward to this new quest line, mainly because I hadn't really had much to do in game since I came back to it after becoming a Generation. The list of items I had to gather would send me all over Arca, and it would challenge my knowledge of the scion system

and my ability to hunt down very rare items and creatures. Finding a manticore was going to be a major challenge in itself, because they were very rare even in the places where they were known to live. It would be a major test of my knowledge of the game and my skills in tracking one down and then getting the spike, because I had to get one from a *living* manticore. I couldn't kill the manticore to get the spike, so I had to find a way to harvest a spike off its tail without killing it and before it could throw them. The spike had to be taken off the tail, the list specified that the spike had to be harvested from the tail of a living manticore. That meant I had to find a manticore, stalk it, then ambush it in a way that I could get one of its spikes before it could throw them, then escape without killing it.

And I *love* those kinds of challenges.

On top of the challenge of gathering the items on my list would be the raid and the dungeon runs. They would be my first ever foray into current group-oriented content, and I was already nervous as hell that I was going to mess things up and cause us to fail somehow. But I wouldn't be alone in there. My friends would be there to explain things to me, and if I made mistakes, help me overcome them so I didn't let the group or the raid down. Emelda and Savar were raiding veterans, and they'd be there to hold my hands if I needed it.

And I had the feeling I was going to need it.

I turned on the news and wound down a little bit, catching up on the newest developments as Earth settled into its new normal, which included opening back up to the rest of the galaxy. There was a big meeting of all the spacefaring races in the entire galaxy, and they'd hammered out a series of agreements over the virus and Generations. One of the parts of it was that the quarantines had been partially lifted for empires that had decided to become Generations. What they were going to do was send people to the Academy to become Generations and get trained in telepathy, then those people would go back to their home empires and teach the rest of their population once enough trainers were ready to do the job. Those trainers had to stay on Earth until the virus died out—it had a life span, the news said, so the key was for infected planets to stay isolated until the virus died—but they'd be here that long to do their training anyway.

For those who didn't want to be Generations, well, that was what the moon was for. They were building a city on the moon to go along with the new Academy campus up there, and the moon would be the non-Generation place in the Earth system. Generations would be on Earth, non-Generations on the moon. And since they were going to terraform the moon to make it life-sustaining, they were obviously very serious about making the moon as accommodating as possible for non-Generation visitors.

The news put up a list of empires that had decided to become Generations, and it was seriously long...and that wasn't a surprise to me. Now that I was a Generation, now that I'd experienced telepathy from the inside, I was very happy to be a Generation. I enjoyed telepathy, and I was very excited to learn more about TK from Mrima, for times just like this, when my two little furry monsters were in my lap and I might need to get something and not want to disturb them or bother Stanley. Like right now, since Stanley was busy cooking a late dinner for me, and I was thirsty.

Getting the drink myself would have to wait. Mrima told me not to practice without her or Rahne with me, because I was so strong that I might break something. And I was going to obey her. I asked Stanley to fetch me a glass of *oye* juice, then I settled in a little more and just enjoyed the company of my two little terrors.

Life was good. And I was very happy to be involved in it once again. And in a year or two, depending on how fast I felt I could go, Sano would be here with me, in my condo, and we would enjoy this new life of ours together.

I'd already decided. I was going to marry that woman. I belonged to her, and I wanted it to be official. But, she was Shio, and I knew that no Shio woman would even entertain the idea of marriage for at least three years after she started dating. That meant that I had to bide my time, prove to her that I was committed to our relationship, that I would be with her for the rest of my life, which was what Shio women did...and Sano was Shio to the roots of her hair despite living on Terra.

It was just like CO. I had to grind out the "marriage rep" with Sano by proving myself to her, until I finally maxed it out. Then, and only then, would I be rewarded with a ring I could wear in the real world.

I was going to have them made when we finished this new series of Champion's quests. When we opened the planes and got that second ring, I'd have two rings made that resembled them, which would be our marriage rings. For an engagement ring, I was going to have a copy of her first Champion's ring made, but would add an emerald and diamond setting. Sano loved emeralds, they were her favorite gemstone.

So, I had plans for the future, and now I just had to have the patience and determination to make those plans reality. And I would, because it would be worth it.

It would be soooooooooo worth it.

Chapter 15

[Hands down,] Mrima ordered.

That wasn't easy. I put my hands down and stuffed them into my jacket pockets deliberately, then went back to my task of causing three metal ball that weighed nearly fifty kilograms each in a pattern where one remained stationary in the air, but spinning, and the other two balls orbited the central ball at set distances, each also spinning on an imaginary axis. That required me to invest six different telekinetic forces into the balls, and it was a seriously hard exercise. I used moving my hands to help me focus my power, and for the last week, she'd been trying to break me of the habit that I'd developed. She was sitting on the back of a park bench in the park beside her apartment building, the place we'd been practicing since I became her student in telekinesis.

Why she trained me outside was obvious...so I didn't accidentally destroy the furniture in her apartment.

It was raining at the moment, a cold rain on a chilly December afternoon in Norfolk, but that was of no moment to a TK like Mrima. The rain overhead was hitting an invisible shield she'd created out of pure telekinetic force, and she'd had it up and over us for over two hours, keeping us perfectly dry as the park around us got thoroughly soaked, a thin mist forming over the ground as the air got colder and colder. That was an application of TK I'd never seen anywhere but in viddies, and it showed just how skilled and how powerful Mrima really was.

We weren't alone. Sitting on the other end of the park bench, hunkered down in her heavy coat because she didn't like the cold, Rita was resting after her own exercise, where she had to manipulate six metal rings that each weighed twenty kilograms, holding them at a determined altitude and spinning them on an axis. That was something I'd already mastered, and once I mastered the orbiting sphere exercise, it would be Rita's turn. She

was very nearly caught up to me in Mrima's training, and once she did, we'd be doing these exercises together.

It had been nearly three weeks since Mrima started teaching us, and I could say that I'd progressed quite briskly in her instruction. I could now use my power every time I wanted, and I'd gained enough mastery of the basic application of TK, moving stuff, to be allowed to use it without Mrima there to keep me from breaking anything. For the last week, she'd been teaching me how to use it different ways on multiple objects at a time, and she did *not* allow me to split to do it. She told me I had to be able to do this without splitting, the way the Pai had done it for thousands of years, and I was bound and determined to do it the Pai way. But holy crap, was it *hard*. I had to concentrate on controlling three axes of movement for three different objects simultaneously without using splits.

What wasn't hard was holding 150 kilograms of metal aloft for extended periods of time, which weighed a whole lot more than I did. I still hadn't fully absorbed the fact that my and Rita's TK was so powerful. I was slightly stronger than Rita, and so far, I'd managed to lift 400 kilograms of weight. And Mrima said that I hadn't come anywhere near reaching my maximum potential yet, that I'd be able to lift much more as I gained more mastery over TK. She estimated that I might be able to pick up about a metric ton once I was fully trained. That was more than the weight of my hovercar.

That was just nuts.

Mrima and her cubs had expressed about two weeks ago, and Rahne had been teaching them the basics since. And like me, Mrima had expressed as an exceptionally powerful telepath. In fact, most new Pai Generations were expressing much stronger than average, and that too was being studied by the Medical Service and the Academy. They felt that the Pai being telekinetic as a species had something to do with it, that even the non-telepathic Pai were already strongly inclined towards telepathy and that influenced how the virus affected them when it made them Generations, and they were trying to find out why.

Mrima had picked up telepathy very quickly, to the point where her communion was clear and strong. [*Reverse the orbit of the inner ball,*] she ordered, meaning she wanted them to orbit the central ball in opposite

directions. I had to work myself up to that, slowing the inner ball to a stop, then sending it in the other direction, which *was not easy*. Moving something in a straight line was cake, but moving something in a circle was tough, like majorly tough. And having it orbit another object at a set distance was even harder. There was a trick to it based on applying my TK to the ball in a way that it was affected by the power holding up the central ball, simulating the effect of gravity on the balls I was holding using my TK to create a stable orbit.

When I started this, I had absolutely no idea that to be a good TK, you had to have a very firm grasp on physics...as in, I was studying practical physics to understand how the application of force would affect the object I was moving, in both ways that directly involved my TK and also ways that it did not. I had to take any movement the object already had into account when I tried to affect it, as well as take gravity into account, because the pull of gravity altered the way my TK affected the object. And I had to know what that effect was, because I had to be able to manipulate objects in a zero-G environment to pass Mrima's scrutiny. It became clear to me that the advanced application of TK was as much a science as physics was, and those that practiced it, like the Pai Masters, studied for *years* to be able to do what they do. People like Mrima had studied for years and years and years to be able to use advanced TK tricks, and the fact that they were strong had absolutely nothing to do with it. Strength was not skill, and to do the things I've seen Mrima do in the last three weeks, that takes *skill*.

And the more I've seen of what Mrima can do, the more I want to learn about it. I was going to learn everything about TK that I could, and if the Masters would teach me more than Mrima knew, I was going to teach Mrima everything that I learned from them. I knew she could do anything I could, and I knew the Masters were wrong about her. Nobody as wonderful as Mrima could possibly not be good enough, for *anything*.

So, yeah, I'd say that I'm absolutely *in love* with being a Generation. I was rearranging my life to master these new skills, far beyond what was considered mainstream. I wanted to know more, I wanted to know everything that anyone would teach me about what I could do, and I would even go so far as to enroll in the Academy to do it. I was rearranging my life in order to explore my new abilities, and I was super stoked for it.

It was almost like real life had become a game, and I wanted to level up these amazing new skills I'd gotten when I started playing it.

She had me work on my orbits for another ten minutes, then I took a break as Rita worked on raw strength, and that was picking up a 500 kilogram weight that was sitting on a hovering platform just off the walking path, picking it up and putting it back on the platform over and over. Mrima said that TK was like muscles, you had to work it out to get stronger, and that it was best to practice with the heaviest weight you could fully manipulate, because it allowed you to manipulate even heavier weight the next time. That was why the balls I was orbiting weighed 50 kilograms each, and the next time I did this exercise, they would weigh 55 kilograms each. Light weights were for initially learning a skill, but when it came to practicing that skill, you used the heaviest weights you could manage and still do what you were trying to do. I'd just started this orbit exercise, so I was using relatively light weight compared to my strength. But when I was almost done with this exercise, no doubt the balls would weigh 200 kilograms each, which would push my maximum lift limit.

Getting the weights was easy, Rahne was supplying them. There was an industrial replicator on the destroyer she used to get back and forth to Earth, and she had the ship replicate the weights and brought them with her when she came to train Mrima and her cubs.

Believe me, I was tired after that. Mrima wasn't joking that the energy to move things came from the person moving them, and I felt exhausted after these training sessions, on top of feeling anemic. I was suffering at least a nosebleed a day, and Mrima wasn't satisfied in my progress unless I did. She said a nosebleed was a strong indicator that I was pushing myself, and you had to push yourself to get stronger. The orbit exercise didn't result in a nosebleed because I was getting the hang of it, which was why the balls would be heavier tomorrow. If I didn't feel weak in the knees when it was over, then the weights weren't heavy enough.

It wasn't just the exhaustion. I ended these sessions feeling almost battered and bruised, as if I'd been beaten up by the weights I work with, because of the other little aspect of TK that most people don't have to worry about. That was that our bodies are partially affected by the weight we're moving, as is the force we apply using TK to move those objects. When I

lift 600 kilograms straight up the way Rita is lifting that 500 kilogram mass, the weight of that object is *on me*, and I can feel it all but driving my feet down into the walkway. When I move something laterally, the force I apply against the object to give it velocity is also applied against me, a perfect example of Newton's law of equal and opposite reaction. Half of what Mrima had been teaching us was how to deal with the force that we apply to heavy objects to move them, tricks to deflect the force it put on us by using our power to anchor against it, or push back against it. If I tried to move that 500 kilogram weight Rita was lifting without bracing myself using my power, I'd be flung backwards or driven to my knees when I tried to move it instead of moving the weight. That's because the force is applied equally to both of us, and I don't weigh nearly enough to hold my ground when I apply sufficient force to move 300 kilograms.

So, these training sessions weren't just exhausting, they were almost brutal, leaving me with real, physical bruises when it was over, bruises inflicted by the force we're using that's applied to our own bodies. Since Mrima started training us in earnest, I swear I feel like I've been a punching bag in a boxing gym. That's something that most other TKs don't have to deal with because they can't move weight as heavy as we can, so they don't have to worry about having the force required to pick up hundreds of kilograms applied to their bodies when they try to pick up a big hunk of metal.

In that respect, Mrima was a freakin' slave driver, and she didn't have much sympathy for us. If we whined that the weights were too heavy, she made them even heavier, and that was nearly a shock given Mrima's sweet and caring personality. We both learned quickly to just shut up and do it, that complaining about it just heaped more misery upon us. But that was how the Pai taught TK, and she wasn't teaching us in any way different from how she was taught herself. TK was hard, TK was demanding, and thus those who taught it had learned to be just as hard as the power they were teaching us how to use.

And maybe, just maybe, that was why the Masters wouldn't teach Mrima. Maybe she was *too* nice, maybe she wasn't hard enough to learn the most powerful techniques the Masters knew. But I doubt it, because when it came to TK, Mrima had a split personality. She was all smiles and sunshine right up until she started teaching us, then she became Teacherzilla. I have

no doubt she approached using her own TK with the same hard-nosed attitude she used when she taught us.

A stark example of how things were different, however, was that the weight Rita was lifting was one that Mrima could not lift herself, at least by main strength. Mrima could lift about 400 kilograms, that was the limit of her power, at least the way she was having Rita do it. And that was exceptionally strong as TK went, fully proving that Mrima was every bit the TK prodigy that her people thought she was when she was a child. Most of the new Generations on Earth that weren't farm workers like me and Rita could lift, on average, about 40 kilograms, which was enough to lift about anything in their daily lives except maybe a piece of furniture. That was enough to allow most new Generations to use their TK to assist them in their daily lives, at least once they were trained. Then there were more capable TKs, like Mralla, Mrijin, and Rahne. Mralla could lift around 60 kilograms with her power, and Mrijin could lift nearly 70 kilograms, which was far, far more than what they weighed in our gravity. On Earth, they could do the self-levitation trick, but they *could not* do it on their home planet of Paian, because of the intense gravity there. Because of that, they hadn't learned how to do it, because Mrima didn't want them to get comfortable using tricks that they could do on Earth but couldn't do back home, else they might hurt themselves when they went back to Paian. Rahne was considered a very strong TK by the Pai, and could lift about 90 kilograms with her power, which was more than her own weight. She said that Jason Karinne was considered an elite-level TK, strong enough to receive training from the Masters, and could lift about 150 kilograms, which was also more than he weighed. But neither of them could use their power to levitate the way Mrima said I could, they weren't strong enough to pull off that trick...at least without a gestalt. They could use the trick where they rode on an object they were moving with their TK because they could lift more than they weighed, but they couldn't lift themselves. The strongest TK that Rahne knew that wasn't a Pai was the Grand Duke's son Zachary, who was considered a prodigy among both the original Generations and the Pai Masters. Rahne said he could lift nearly 350 kilograms by main strength, which made him the most powerful non-Pai telekinetic on Karis, and he received special one on one training with the Pai Masters because he was so strong. He was strong enough to levitate, Mrima said that a TK had to be able to pick up at least double their own weight in order to pull off the

levitation trick, and Zachary was still just a kid, so no way in hell he weighed more than 175 kilograms. He probably didn't even weigh 70 kilograms, not if he was only 15 years old.

Now compare that to Mrima, who could lift 400 kilograms and was considered one of the strongest Pai telekinetics alive (though one that had not been trained by the Masters, and thus couldn't do all the crazy stuff the Masters could), Rita, who could lift 550 kilograms with no training, or me, who could lift 600 kilograms with no training. And we weren't even the strongest farm survivor TKs, that guy from Ethiopia could pick up like *two metric tons* with no training. His TK was like mind-shatteringly powerful, like an order of magnitude over even people like me.

There were advanced tricks that allowed a TK to manipulate even heavier weight than their raw strength would allow, by manipulating space and gravity rather than the weight itself. The absolute maximum weight that Mrima could pick up and move was 1,300 kilograms by affecting the space the weight occupied and the gravity affecting it rather than the weight itself...and that was just awe-inspiring. Mrima demonstrated it yesterday, by *picking up Rita's hovercar* after Rita whined a little about why she had to learn about stuff like that. It was like the Yoda scene in *The Empire Strikes Back*, this tiny little Pai picking up a hovercar with nothing but her TK

Talk about driving your point home.

And compare us to Sano, who is considered above average among new Generations. She can pick up about 75 kilograms with her power, which is just slightly more than she weighs. So, she can't do the levitation trick, but she can use the trick where she can ride on an object she's affecting with her TK. It just can't be a heavy one, or she won't be able to pick up the combined weight of herself and the object.

Don't say she's fat. Sano is actually very tall for a girl (Terran, not Shio, she's only slightly above average for a Shio), so that's where the weight comes from.

Unfortunately, Sano couldn't easily join us for these lessons. She still had her job, and it was a three hour trip up here from Sao Paulo, which meant six hours round trip. She'd barely have time to do anything but the lessons if she came up every day. We make up for it on the weekends,

however, because all of us, even Mrijin and Mralla, go to Rita's villa and we both train all weekend and enjoy each other's company. It was quite the combination of party and hardcore workout on Saturday and Sunday. Rahne drops in on the weekends as well, at least when she can given she has her own job and they use a different calendar on Karis, so our days off aren't always her days off. She's been bringing her husband Adam and son Sean so they could get to know us. Adam is a really nice guy, modest and friendly, but he was like obsessed with his work, which was in finance. He works in the House of Karinne's financial department like Rahne does—that was how they met—and he likes to sit around and talk about intergalactic stock markets and the prices of commodities, which just goes way over our heads. He'd already been a telepath before becoming a Generation, so he was pretty skilled, but he was nowhere near as strong or as well trained as Rahne was.

As far as TK went, Adam was the perfectly average Generation TK, he could pick up about 40 kilograms with his power. Rahne had been training him herself, but he did like sitting in on our training sessions when he was at the villa, so he could pick up a few tricks from a Pai.

And in the evenings on the weekends, we all played CO, at least sorta together. We'd gotten Rahne and Adam into the game, and they were loving it. They couldn't really do much with me, Rita, and Sano, but that was where Mrima and her cubs saved the day. Both Rahne and Adam had rolled human so they were on the same faction as Mrima and the cubs, and they were going out and adventuring with them while we worked on the new Champion's quests.

Adam had become absolutely fascinated with the economy in the game, and he'd taken out a 5,000 gold loan from me with the promise that he could turn it into a million gold inside six months. And given he was a banker in his day job, he just might be able to do it. I had the feeling that Adam was going to go the merchant baron route, spending most of his time in game buying and selling in Citadel City to build up his gold. And hey, that's a viable play style in the game. If that was what he enjoyed, then he should have at it, I say. The game's about having fun, after all.

Over the last three weeks, we had gotten a lot of the list knocked out in game. I'd spent that time flying all over Arca hunting down the overworld

items on the list, and it was no cakewalk. Nine of them dropped from overworld boss monsters, and well, that's kinda my specialty, so I'd been the one to go after those. Sebirk, Uri, Savar, and Graz were doing the same thing, Savar and Uri on Arca and Graz and Sebirk on Netherim. As we were doing the long distance legwork, the other Champions and their guilds were going after the other stuff, the drops from dungeons and raids. Just about every dungeon and raid on both the Twin Worlds had a drop, numbering 110 items on a list of 336, forcing us to go back and do every raid and dungeon in the overworld, all 27 raids and 83 dungeons.

We hadn't done the Citadel stuff yet, either overworld or group content. We'd decided to get everything done in the overworld first, and once that was all knocked out, we were going to gather and take on the Citadel stuff in an order that would allow us to focus on gathering all the items we needed to unlock one plane at a time, where we'd need to throw large numbers of players at the content in order to get what we needed from it. Even gathering the overworld stuff was going to be a pain in the butt, because it was in places where the monsters would cream just one or two players without breaking a sweat. Not even I could easily get that stuff, with my flying and all my stealthy tricks. And if I had to kill a monster for it, forget it.

I felt my strength come back as I watched Rita stop with the heavy weight and move on to practice with the three balls I was using, just not the same exercise. She was holding them aloft and spinning them, like she had with the rings, but it was harder because while there were fewer balls, they weighed more than the rings did as a whole, and that was the main factor when it came to how tough it was to do these exercises. It was getting pretty late, so I figured this would be about it for today. I'd been in Norfolk most of the day, spending the morning over at the Academy and the afternoon after Mrima got off work with her. What I was doing at the Academy was a special one on one course that Rahne and the Grand Duke arranged for me, taking over my telepathy lessons from Rahne with an Academy instructor. I'd get the special one on one lessons until the spring semester started. My instructor was a Grimja female named Ilki—I had no idea Grimja could be telepaths before the virus until the moment she walked in the door—and she was both riotously funny and seriously skilled. She was the first Grimja I'd ever talked to more than a fleeting greeting passing in the street, and she

was exactly what most people said the Grimja were. She was laid back, easy going, had a fantastic sense of humor, was decidedly mischievous, and we spent more time joking around and goofing off than we did doing real work. But she was *seriously* smart, and she had a way of teaching like Rahne did, he was able to easily explain very complex concepts, which let me learn very fast under her tutelage. And she was a master telepath, I had absolutely no doubt about that. Despite how much we screwed around, I was learning a ton from her.

She was also almost insufferably cute, in a chinchilla kind of way. That was what Grimja most closely resembled when it came to life on Earth, human-sized bipedal chinchillas. They were a rodent species with pronounced front teeth, a short muzzled face with high, pronounced cheeks, whiskers, and large, round ears. Grimja had hair in that the fur on their heads was longer than the rest of their body, so Ilki had a head of short, tousled gray hair the same color as her fur that took up the space between her ears. Like most furred mammal species, she didn't have breasts the way human women did, and what was a bit disturbing, she had *six* nipples on her chest and upper stomach. The first time I'd met her, the lowest two were visible below the hem of the crop top she was wearing.

That took a lot more getting used to than I'd care to admit. The very idea of it seems...*wrong*.

I could see why they chose her, though. Because of my past, my background, I needed a teacher that would put me at ease, and Ilki most certainly did that. Rahne had done it by being my friend before my teacher, and Ilki did it with her relaxed personality and sense of humor. And *wow*, was she...well, worldly would be a polite way to say it. Grimja females weren't exactly demure the way human women were, because there was no division of the sexes when it came to how they acted in Grimja society. Males and females acted almost exactly the same, so that meant that Grimja females were just as hard-partying as the males were.

Which explained why the Grimja Union had an overpopulation problem.

But one thing was for sure, and that was when it came time to put down the beer and roll up her sleeves, Ilki was as good as they came. Before coming to teach at the Academy, she'd worked for the Union government as

an embassy worker in their version of the State Department, working in the Grimja embassy to the Imperium. Anyone that was around the Faey had to be a telepath, so she served the Union by being one of those telepaths that dealt with the Faey Imperium. And since the Faey were all so skilled and powerful in telepathy, only Grimja that could match them were sent to the Imperium to represent the Union.

That was also something the Grimja were known for, and that was that they were seriously good at what they did despite how much they partied, and when they put their minds to it, they could be scary formidable. It was like their partying and their slacking off only made them that much better at their chosen professions. A class with her was like a paradox, when I left I wasn't sure we did anything at all, but then I'd think about it and realize I learned a heck of a lot in a short time. Ilki was a seriously skilled telepath, and I was learning a ton from her, so much that I was almost afraid I'd be bored in the formal classes that would start next month, in January.

But that wasn't really something to worry about. The telepathy program didn't have a linear curriculum. They would test my skills when I started, then I'd be placed in the appropriate class once they knew what I already knew and what I could already do. So, my training with Rahne and Ilki would let me "test out" of the basics and start immediately in the more advanced classes.

Christmas was starting to rear its ugly head. I had a lot of presents to buy, and the biggest of which would be for Sano. I hadn't decided what to get her yet, but I knew that I was taking this opportunity to get her something big. She couldn't complain too much if I got her something nice for Christmas, she'd lived here long enough to know what Christmas was and what it meant to humans, so this was my chance to buy her something she'd usually glare at me for buying with complete impunity. She really didn't like me spending my money on her, not anything big, but she was going to have to live with it this time. I'd be doing a little Civnet surfing tonight when I got home, surfing the commercial sites looking for ideas on what to buy Sano.

What I'd *really* like would be to try to buy her out of her job and give her the same freedom that me and Rita had, the freedom to do what she wanted instead of having to work for a living. But there was no way in hell

she'd go for that, the one time I floated the idea she nearly bit my head off. Sano doesn't like either me or Rita to spend our money on her, but that's not too much of a surprise given she's Shio. Shio have a big cultural streak of personal responsibility and self-reliance. It's not that they're so proud they won't ask for help, it's that they don't believe in accepting charity they neither need nor deserve.

My prediction came true. After Rita wore herself out with the three balls, Mrima called it for the day. She loaded the rings and balls onto the platform with the big weight and sent the platform back to the dropship that was sitting on the edge of the park, then it closed its hatch and took off, heading for the destroyer in orbit. I carried Mrima as we walked back to our vehicles, Rita's hovercar and my skimmer, as she told us about the day's lessons, what we did well, what we did wrong, and what we should work on trying to improve before tomorrow's lesson. We were allowed to practice at home now, as long as we didn't do anything stupid or crazy.

[You know, you've been training us nonstop for nearly a month, Mri. You sure you don't wanna take a day or two off? You've barely had any free time for yourself lately,] I suggested.

[Are you trying to get out of your lessons, Kevin?] she challenged lightly.

[Of course not. I'm just a little worried that you haven't had much of a break, that's all.]

[You're under the impression that I don't enjoy beating you two up,] Mrima communed with a wicked tilt to her thought, which made both of us laugh.

[Oh, we know how much you enjoy torturing us,] Rita retorted. *[But I should warn you that I'll most likely be late tomorrow. I have Christmas shopping to do, and I'm not sure I can get it all done and still get up here on time.]*

[Then how about this, since both of you are whining over how mean I've been to you,] Mrima teased. *[We'll take tomorrow off, and we'll go a little easy on Saturday and Sunday, maybe make a half day of it so we can go to Mexico City and so some shopping. Come to think of it, I haven't done much Christmas shopping either.]*

[Sounds good to me, I need to find something good for Sano,] I supplied. [And Mexico City has a lot of stores to check out.]

[Nah, if we're going shopping, let's do it for real. How about we take Saturday off and all of us go to Los Angeles. They have that massive shopping district there where you can get almost anything.]

[I'll go or that, I've never really been to Los Angeles,] I agreed.

[That sounds fun. Maybe we can get Rahne to come over and go with us,] Mrima communed eagerly. [She said she'd be over this weekend.]

[I can call her interface and ask,] I offered.

[Go for it.]

[Sec.] I accessed Civnet from my interface and placed a call to Rahne's interface, and she picked it up almost immediately. [What's up, Kevin?]

[We were planning on going on a shopping excursion on Saturday to do some Christmas shopping, and Mrima wanted to know if you're up for that. She said you plan on coming over this weekend.]

[I am, and I'd love to do some shopping,] she replied. [But if we're gonna shop, we should do it in the best place to shop in the galaxy. How about you guys come here?]

[To Karis? Seriously?]

[Sure am. Karis isn't closed anymore, Kevin, and since all of you are Generations who live on Terra, you're allowed to visit here. There would usually be a bunch of paperwork and screening you'd have to go through, but I happen to know the Kimdori that handles all that, so I can get you approved for a tourist day pass in about five minutes. I'll make the arrangements, and we'll do some shopping in the Merchant District here in Karsa, which is a place you can find and buy just about anything you can imagine. I just need to know who's coming.]

[All of us,] I answered.

[Including the cubs?]

[Yeah, they were coming to the villa this weekend, so no doubt they'll wanna come too.]

[Alright, I'll talk to Miaari and set things up,] she answered. [This'll be my chance to show you guys my home town.]

[I think all of us would love that, Rahne,] I told her. [Call me back when you hear something.]

[Will do.] She broke the connection, and I gave Rita a big smile.

[Rahne said she's up for shopping, but she wants to bring all of us to Karis to do it,] I told her. [I accepted for us, I don't think any of us would say no to the chance to go to Karis.]

[Oh hell yes I'd love to go!] Rita agreed emphatically.

[So would I. I've always wanted to visit Karis,] Mrima agreed.

[Rahne said she'd arrange it so we don't have to go through the application process or anything,] I told them. [So, we can all meet at the villa early on Saturday morning and then I can take us in my skimmer.]

[Actually, why don't you guys come Friday night, sleep over, and we'll go first thing in the morning? That way we have all day to explore Karis.]

[Sure, that sounds fun,] Mrima communed with growing excitement creeping into her thought. *[Kevin can fly me and the cubs down after I get off work, we can have a nice dinner at the villa, then head for Karis first thing in the morning.]*

[That sounds lovely,] Rita agreed. *[I'll have Tomberito's delivered.]* That was an absolutely awesome traditional Mexican restaurant that was in the village of Rio Indio, which was about twenty kilometers from Rita's house. They had incredible food, and they'd deliver to the villa.

[That just sealed the deal. I absolutely love love love Tomberito's,] Mrima bubbled.

I flew home after delivering Mrima back to her apartment very much looking forward to a little weekend day trip to a place like Karis. Like just about everyone, I always saw Karis as this mysterious, nearly magical place, a forbidden planet with technology so advanced that it was almost like magic, and a place that was one of the most diverse planets in the galaxy, more diverse than just about anywhere but Norfolk. I was very much looking forward to the chance to go there, to shop in the Merchant

District, which was famous all over the galaxy for having virtually anything you may ever want. The Karinnes traded with like *everyone*, so the goods of every single empire in the galaxy could be found in the shops on Karis, and particularly in the famous Merchant District of Karsa.

If I couldn't find something to get Sano for Christmas there, then I had no business ever buying a present ever again.

I told Sano about it after I got home, after spending enough time with Kishu and Zuzu to remind them that I was happy to see them, getting Sano on a hologram rather than talk to her over our interfaces. She'd just gotten home from going out with a couple of friends from work, who were all Shio. "What's up, Kev?" she asked as she sat on her couch.

"Rahne invited us to spend Saturday on Karis," I told her.

"Really? I'd love to go!" she blurted.

"I already accepted for you," I said, which made her laugh and grin at me. "What we want to do is meet at Rita's villa on Friday, after you and Mrima get off work, stay there overnight, then leave first thing in the morning so we have as much time as possible. That work for you?"

"Yes it does," she replied. "I'll see if I can get off work a little early so I can catch the three o'clock ferry to Miami, so I don't have to catch the seven o'clock ferry and get there at ten o'clock."

"Then you need to call Rita as soon as you know when you'll be leaving. She's going to order us some Tomberito's, so she needs to know when to call in our order. And they close at nine."

"I'm definitely getting there early now," she laughed. "I refuse to believe that there aren't Shio chefs working in a restaurant with food that good."

"Racist," I teased, which made her laugh again.

"Let me call my boss to arrange it," she prompted.

"Sure. I'll call Rita and let her know."

I did so, then sat on the couch and played with Kishu a little bit. I had a stream scheduled for tonight, which would be me picking up the last few items on my list. While that wasn't really all that exciting, I usually had a

good hundred thousand people watching. The streaming had been good for me, to be honest. I'd gotten used to talking to strangers because of the streams and the viddies that I make, it had helped me be more social and sociable. It also didn't hurt that I made a decent amount of money streaming, and that had increased since the new quests had come down. I'd gained nearly 70,000 new subscribers to my Arena page and nearly 100,000 on my streaming channel on Gametopia (I simulcast my streams on both, which are the two major gaming streamer platforms on Terra's Civnet)

The Arena is mostly CO and Vanguard only, but Gametopia is a place where streamers of just about every game streams their gameplay content.

The income I was getting from streaming was now getting pretty substantial, to the point where not only did I never have to touch my stipend income, I was putting some significant money in the bank on a monthly basis. My expansion to Gametopia had more than doubled my streaming income, and my viddies on Arena were getting a lot more hits since I'd done so, Gametopia viewers coming to the Arena to check out my viddies. Gametopia doesn't host recorded viddies, they only do live streaming, but they allow content people like me to link our viddy platform of choice on our stream channel so viewers can check out pre-recorded content.

It was almost insane, how much money I was making off playing games. I was solidly in the upper middle class income bracket *just* off my pro gaming income. Adding in my stipend and annuity income, I was bordering on actually being rich.

But that income depended on me playing CO, and being so good at it that people wanted to watch me play. And in that respect, I had a leg up on most other players because I had a unique skillset and playstyle that made me stand out from most other players. And oddly enough, my playstyle had created some followers of a sort. My Solo Challenge rules had inspired other game streamers to try it, and they'd started new accounts on CO using those rules to see how far they could go.

Now that I could split, I'd also gone the route of playing multiple accounts. I'd upgraded my vidlink to turn it into an absolute monster, and used that heavy duty power to start four new CO accounts (I have money, I can afford it). I'd found that I could play all five of my accounts at once without stressing myself, at least so long as the four accounts I wasn't

controlling with my dominant split had their simsense set very low to minimize the VR aspect of the game. That means that I'm, in effect, only experiencing the full simsense on just one character while the others are more like playing a non-simsense game. But even with the simsense filters turned way down on the extra accounts, I can only really handle four extra accounts without losing my splits due to the sheer complexity of playing a character in CO. Even just one more account overtaxes me and causes my performance to drop way too far for me to keep my accounts alive in a fight. So for me, five was the magic number when it came to "splitboxing" CO.

It was certainly an entertaining challenge. My five baby toons were still in faction territory using gear I made for them to start grinding their skills, and for maximum efficiency, all five were human so I had the ability to move all of them via flying as a group...just very, very slowly given their low skill levels. And it was a fun diversion from playing Xen, trying out something new in the game I love without having to do anything drastic and while also having access to all of Xen's resources. His gold and tradeskills had geared up my little baby group very well, which was allowing me to rip through the content that they could do as new toons.

I was considering streaming my splitboxing to show my subscribers something a little different, and that would be me starting five brand new characters made specifically for streaming, and playing them with no help or support from Xen or anyone else. I'd still be trying to do stuff that a regular player wouldn't be able to pull off, which is what would make it both fun for me and interesting to viewers. I think it would be a fun challenge, using my knowledge of the game to see how far I can push things without outside assistance, using only the resources available to a new player. And to make sure I never bowed to temptation, I could start those new toons on a different server. You can make new toons on different servers on the same account.

Splitboxing was a fairly new term that referred to people who controlled more than one account at a time while playing, and as people learned how to split, it was becoming more common. The objective of it for me using my new five accounts was to try out group content in a group of players that were all me, so if I made any mistakes, I didn't hurt anyone but myself. It wasn't something I did during my usual gameplay with Xen because it

violated the spirit of the Solo Challenge. Since I had the chance to build a group and still play solo, I had done it right. One of them was a main tank archetype, one a dedicated healer, and the other three were DPS archetypes, one a mage archetype, one a “magic archer” archetype, and the other a “magic swordsman” archetype. That was a full group with a good mix of skills and abilities that would let me tackle a lot of content by myself, and if I decided to stream splitboxing, I would mirror it over to the new toons on a different server.

I was really good at splitting, so I could handle five accounts at once... just not all of them at full simsense. Most other people, though, could only handle two accounts, because CO was a heavily immersive simsense game that tended to dominate whatever split you were using to control your actions, even with the simsense on the other account turned way down. I’ve spent a lot of time since I transitioned specifically practicing splitting, so I can control more accounts than most other people.

This was relatively new to CO, because it was so immersive that you really had to be able to split to play more than one account at the same time. “Multiboxing” was a common thing in a lot of other games, but not intensively immersive simsense games like CO and Vanguard. With most of the Terra server players now Generations, we were starting to take advantage of being Generations in the game. And I was seriously considering streaming this new aspect of who we are.

I was interested enough to jump in the merge pod after dinner and create five new characters on the Semrika server, the second least populated server on the Terra cluster, each one following the same skill builds as the five I created on Methrian, and all five of them human. I didn’t send them into the game world, however, leaving them stuck in the limbo of having them created but not yet in the game. That did reserve their names, so no other player could take those names so long as I had the characters created.

Once I finished that, I recorded a short viddy on Xen about my idea, asking if people would be curious to see me try splitboxing on a new server, while also assuring them that Xen was certainly still my main focus and I had no intention of abandoning him for a new server. My splitboxing would purely be a side challenge, something to do for fun whenever I had some

spare time. Once that was done, I released it on my Arena page and got down to the business of streaming.

The night's stream was a success. I finished the last items on my list and then spent the rest of my scheduled stream time in Madra Ban, showing the viewers the Djinn city that they couldn't access yet because the planes weren't open on any server. I picked up a few interesting bargains in the shops that I would resell in my shop in Citadel City. However, things got turned sideways on me when I returned to Freeport, and found a Royal messenger hovering beside the vortex, waiting for me. "Champion, King Gerin needs to speak to you immediately, and it seems that your communication crystal won't work when you're on the other side of the vortex," he said without preamble almost the instant I was free of the vortex.

"Lead on," I replied, then I slowed way down to allow the messenger to take the lead. The NPCs in the game had their own skill levels, and none of them thus far had raised Gift of the Djinn high enough to go very fast. Unlike us players, they had jobs and lives within the game and couldn't devote a lot of time to raising their skill.

Gerin was waiting for me in his study behind the throne room, and the Prince and Admiral Rogers were there with him, sitting in one of the two chairs in front of Gerin's desk, with the Prince standing behind his father. I bowed after I entered and was offered the open chair in front of the desk, sitting to the left of the Admiral. "That was fast, Willik," the King said to his aide.

"He came through just as I got there, your Majesty," he said, then he bowed and left the room.

"I wish this meeting was about the wonders you're exploring on the other side of the vortex, Champion, but I fear this is serious business," Gerin said immediately. "I'm afraid I need to call on your aid once again."

"What do you need, your Majesty?"

"The Kanlon are back, Champion," Rogers said in a grim tone.

That made me frown. "You mean even after we wiped out their armada?"

“They must have an absolutely ridiculous number of ships,” the Prince growled.

“Yesterday, a fleet of Kanlon supply ships was spotted by one of our griffon patrols, they were just off Skull Rock,” the King told me, looking at me. “We think they were part of a reinforcement fleet that was supposed to resupply and reinforce the armada after it conquered Freeport. They moored just off the island, then they picked up the Kanlon soldiers that were still there and turned back the way they came.”

“They picked up those soldiers just days before I was ready to take the island,” Rogers injected. “We’ve just taken delivery of six new frigates and ten corsair class naval vessels, so we at least have the beginnings of a new Navy. Their first mission was going to be taking Skull Rock from the Kanlon.”

The King nodded. “A new report just sent from our spymaster, Merria, has incited me to put our hand in despite the fact that our Navy is still in shambles and we’re still rebuilding from the Kanlon attack on the city. What’s changed is that Merria just returned from Kanlavia with news on the situation there.”

That was the name of the continent to the west of us, which currently wasn’t open to players. “Simply put, Champion, Merria has spent nearly a month on Kanlavia, ascertaining the political state of the continent. And her report has incited me to move,” he told me. “It seems that the Kanlon aren’t just a threat to us. They’re at war with virtually every kingdom and faction on Kanlavia, using their naval superiority to attack the mainland more or less at will, and sinking any ships that their enemies dare build to try to push them back. Unlike what they did here, there they don’t try to invade and conquer. They simply destroy any city or town or holding that they can overrun. The reason for this is simple. They see all other races as inferior,” he grunted. “They tried to conquer us to turn us into slaves to expand their production, because they see us as *sub-human*. They see anyone not human to be little more than talking animals, not even worthy of enslaving because they don’t believe that they have any real intelligence.”

“So, they’re racists,” I surmised.

“Their entire society and religion is based on the superiority of the Kanlon over all other life,” the Prince said. “Non-Kanlon humans they see as just human enough to use as slaves and beasts of burden, but all other races are unworthy of even that much.”

“Why this matters is that, since the Kanlon have attacked Arca, now it is in the interests of Arca to make sure that they never try to sail across the Western Sea and attack us again,” the King said in a strong voice. “So, our new strategy is to ally with the peoples of Kanlavia and assist them in any way we can, to press the Kanlon on every side and choke them, remove them as a threat to Kanlavia *and* Arcavia. And the first step is to start trying to break the Kanlon’s stranglehold on naval power. We dealt them a major blow by destroying their armada here at Freeport, and we have to press that advantage before they have the opportunity to rebuild. Champion, I need you to go to Kanlavia,” he told me, giving me a serious look. “Merria says that you are the best spy she’s ever had, and we need those skills now.”

To my surprise, two new quests popped up on my log, and both were marked as a Champion’s Quest. The first was titled *Naval Reconnaissance*, and the second was titled *The Kanlon Campaign*, which was the type of quest that told me that I was starting a major quest chain, one that would have many quests and take a while to complete. The Grand Crusade quest was a great example of this kind of quest, which the game uses to warn you that you’re about to embark on a pretty epic questline.

“The best way we can help them is to find out where they’re building their ships, the ships they’ll need to replace the ones we destroyed,” Rogers told me. “You’re very good at sneaking around and finding things, Champion, so what we want you to do is find their main shipyard and ascertain its defenses. When you know where it is and how well it’s defended, report your findings so we can devise a plan to hamstring their operation.”

“You won’t be operating alone in this venture,” the King said. “Merria is already on Kanlavia along with a sizable number of her operatives and griffon riders. She’s made contact with one of the kingdoms there that has been hosting her, a relative of our high elven allies who call themselves sun elves. They’ve agreed to devote soldiers and resources to our efforts,

because we are working against a common enemy. She needs highly skilled people to assist her in her mission, and she has asked for you, Xen.”

“The objective here, Champion, is to weaken Kanlon naval power to the point where we can establish trade routes between Arcavia and Kanlavia, so we can send soldiers and supplies to help the Kanlavians fight the Kanlon,” the Prince added. “And the first step to breaking their hold on the seas between here and Kanlavia is to disrupt their shipbuilding operations.”

Establish trade routes? That sounded like they were going to open the continent of Kanlavia up to the players! And I wasn’t the only one. The chat on my stream blew up as people watching made the same connection I just did.

“I understand, your Majesties, Admiral,” I replied. “When do you want me to leave?”

“Right now,” he replied. “But you’re not going by ship. Spymaster Merria has reported that there are scions on Kanlavia, and that there is a scion in the sun elf capitol of Celestis that connects to a scion in a drowned city of the First Ones off the coast of Moonshard Island.” That was north, in Moonshadow faction territory, off the coast of the forest under which the dark elves had their underground cities and villages. That was pretty far south from where the Nazetar had their submarine settlements. “If you can reach that scion without drowning, Champion, you can use it to travel to Celestis in a matter of hours instead of enduring a month-long journey by ship.”

“I can reach it easily, your Majesty,” I assured him. “If you have a map that shows its location, I can be in Celestis by tomorrow.”

“I have just what you need, Xen,” King Gerin smiled, holding up a rolled map. He offered it to me, and I took it without hesitation. “If you can talk to Merria in real time, tell her I’ll be there tomorrow. I’ll start out for the scion right now, camp somewhere for the night, and continue on in the morning.”

“She has a communication crystal, so I’ll warn her you’re on the way,” Gerin answered.

“Then with your permission, your Majesty, I’ll start out right now.”

“Go quickly and safely, Champion,” he said, standing up. I did so as well, bowed to him, and turned and hurried out of the study, suddenly eager and excited. Well, logging off was off the table now, as was logging on my alt accounts and playing around with splitboxing. I had a new major quest chain, and if I wasn’t mistaken, it would end with the continent of Kanlavia being opened to the players. And it looked like the Kanlon weren’t just going away, they were the focus of this new aspect of the game, possibly part of the same new expansion that was giving us the Elemental planes... and that made sense to me as I thought about it.

The Elemental planes were a place almost purely for players who had beaten the Citadel, to give them something new to do that would challenge them now that they’d effectively “beaten the game” by conquering its most challenging content. That was like 1% of the playerbase, so what was the other 99% of the playerbase, including players like me, supposed to do? Just sit around and watch other players get to enjoy new content? That wasn’t very fun. So, the devs had been smart and given everyone new content, and that new content for the masses would be this new Kanlon campaign. The Kanlon would become the “big baddie” that everyone was going to fight, and were the impetus that would open a new continent to the players, as well as explaining why from a lore perspective we suddenly had access to that new content.

Players knew the other continents were there, and in the past, players had tried to reach them. One group of enterprising players had stolen a merchantman vessel from an NPC and tried to sail it west, to reach Kanlavia, to see what would happen. They expected to hit a barrier, an invisible wall that would stop them from going any further, but they hadn’t. They were on the ship for nearly twenty days in real time sailing west, and what ended their adventure was them being attacked by several ships of a design they said they’d never seen before. Their success getting that far spurred other attempts to sail to Kanlavia, and all of them ended the same way, the players spending nearly a month of their real lives only to get blown out of the water by mysterious ships that seemed to come out of nowhere and wrecked them before they could so much as load a catapult.

Everyone thought that they were the dev’s solution to keeping players off the forbidden continent without breaking game immersion by putting up some invisible wall, and I suppose that was exactly what it was. But now

we had the *lore* behind it, that those ships were Kanlon vessels attacking and destroying any ship that got too close to Kanlavia, or their home islands of Kanlon. Kanlon was like Japan in the real world, it was an archipelago of islands of various sizes sitting off the central east coast of Kanlavia, and that put Kanlon more or less between Arcavia and Kanlavia. So, before, it was the insanely huge navy of the Kanlon patrolling the waters off their island nation that intercepted and sank player-controlled ships trying to reach Kanlavia.

And now we were going to break their hold on the Western Sea, which would allow trade routes to be established between the two continents...and that meant that the continent of Kanlavia would be open to the players. And why we were going over there was to fight the Kanlon, to take the fight to them after they attacked Arcavia. That would also no doubt mean that new scions would be found that would connect Arcavia with Kanlavia, either new scions not yet discovered or scions that were “dead,” scions that had no sister scion, that we would somehow restore during our campaign against the Kanlon to open fast travel between the two continents.

And it turned out I wasn't the only one being sent to Kanlavia. “Xen, I just got a new quest, I'm supposed to meet you on an island north of faction territory,” Emelda told me over friend chat. “I'm supposed to make contact with a cousin race of elves on Kanlavia!”

“Whoa, seriously? I just got that quest myself,” I answered. “You're being sent to Kanlavia too?”

“Yeah, I'm supposed to establish formal ties with the ruler of the sun elves,” she answered. “And that they're a race of elves that live on Kanlavia. The Queen said you were dispatched there to assist them, and that the Queen wants me to go along to establish formal ties and help you with whatever you're doing.”

And she wasn't the only one. Braggan also contacted me over friend chat. “Xen, I just got a quest that says I need to meet you on some island in Moonshadow territory,” he said.

I just had to laugh. “They're sending all of us!” I said in both friend chats. “Is Hinasa on?”

“Not right now, it’s like eight in the morning in Tokyo, and he has to work today,” Braggan answered.

“Well, no doubt he’ll get a similar quest when he logs on after he gets home,” I predicted. I then merged the two friend chats so it was a conference, connecting Braggan and Emelda. I then told them about the quest I’d gotten, and what I thought it meant. “It looks like they’re opening up Kanlavia to the players, and we’ll be doing the first quests that do it,” I told them.

“Awesome!” Braggan said, his avatar representing him in friend chat grinning broadly through his beard. I cleared the palace gate and took off as soon as I was out of royal palace airspace—no flying allowed over the palace—and headed for my shop to gear up for the expedition.

“You have your flying mount from the Champion’s quest, right Brag?” I asked.

“Yup, got it with everyone else,” he replied. Last week, all the Champions met and win traded to get the mount, because it turned out that because we had more Champion’s quests that were sending us all over the place, we really needed them. If everyone had had the flying mounts, more of us could have gone out to farm the items from Arca and Netherim rather than forcing the five of us that can travel fast do it all. Even I had it, but I didn’t need it because of Djinn form, and I think I’ve used it all of once just to see what it looks like. I have to admit, though, that it’s pretty sweet. The flying mount you get is magical, it’s a magical force that manifests in the shape that you want it to be, and that lets the Champion customize his flying mount to be exactly what he wants. Because the griffon is the aerial mount used by the humans of Freeport, the one time I summoned mine, I made it a griffon, but it could be anything I wanted, even something stupid like a broomstick or a rock. And I can change it if I want, it takes the form I want it to take when I summon it. I summon it with a small whistle that I received after finishing the quest, so I don’t have to care for it and it can’t be stolen. The only thing we have to protect is the whistle, because it has a durability rating. That means that it can be destroyed, and I seriously doubt there’s any way for a Champion to get a new one if he breaks his whistle. So, the mount does have something of a drawback, and that’s that you don’t pull out the item that summons it if you’re in a position where the item can

get destroyed. And since the mount is a magical construct rather than a living thing, killing it doesn't really do much except make you summon it again...provided you survive the fall after your mount is killed out from under you.

The mount does have one other thing going for it, something that I think makes a lot of sense. You don't control the mount like a living flying mount. It responds to your will, not you pulling in the reins, so you have absolute control over the mount. That means that you don't need to have the flying mount skill to use the mount, but you do need to skill up a new skill that you get when you first summon the mount, a skill appropriately named Magical Mount. That's very similar to how I fly using Djinn form. My skill in that isn't connected to my Djinn Form, however, so that means that I have to skill it up. And I probably will, because like I told Mrima, having any skill just sitting at 1 jacks with your average skill rating, and that can affect the quality of the quest rewards you receive. To keep my average high, I'll raise the mount skill to at least 1,000...then probably never use it again. That shouldn't take me too long because of Lone Wolf.

"I think the only one that's never used it is you, Xen."

"Like I need it," I snorted, which made him laugh. "That means you won't have any problems reaching Moonshard Island. Know where it is?"

"I was given a map," he replied.

"Me too," Emelda affirmed.

"Then let's meet on the island on the beach closest to the ruins where the scion is supposed to be," I offered. "You have some way to breathe underwater, Brag?"

"Yup, I have Faerune on my helmet," he answered.

"Then we're all set," Emelda said. "We won't have any problem reaching the scion."

"I'll be heading out as soon as I gather up some supplies. I'm not going to assume that we'll be back anytime soon."

"Same," Emelda mirrored.

“That’s what I’m doing too,” I had to chuckle. “Lemme call Hinasa and tell him what’s up so he knows what to expect when he gets off work.”

I divided my attention enough to create a split outside the game, and since I was in the merge pod, I used it to call Hinasa’s interface. It was 9:01pm here, which meant that it was 9:01am in Tokyo, where he’d moved just before the pandemic hit when he got a new job, and Hinasa was at work. He had his interface on, so he picked up when I queried his interface. *[What’s up, Kevin?]*

[Just wanted to give you a head’s up,] I answered, then told him about the quest and the fact that the other three Champions in the Golden Lion were being sent to Kanlavia. *[We’re all certain you’ll get the same quest, it wouldn’t make sense to send only three of the four faction Champions. We’ll be on the other side, so we’ll meet you in Kanlavia when you get there. I’m going to mail you a charm of water breathing so you can get to the scion.]*

[I don’t need it, I have Faerune,] he answered.

[Cool, nevermind then,] I chuckled. *[Me, Em, and Brag are gonna travel to the island and probably log out once we get to Kanlavia and start the quests tomorrow, so we don’t leave you behind. So, see you in the morning.]*

[You mean the afternoon,] he replied lightly.

[Whatever,] I retorted playfully. “I told Hinasa that most likely we’ll go through the scion and log for the night, and we can start the quests in the morning when he’s off work. Sound good?”

“Yeah, it’ll take us a few hours to get there,” Braggan replied.

“About an hour after you to get to Citadel,” I corrected him. “You two come to Citadel. I know of a scion not far from the coast up in Darkshadow Forest. It’ll be about an hour to the island from the scion.”

“I’m half an hour from a scion,” Braggan called.

“Then we’ll wait for you at the scion on the Citadel, Braggan,” Emelda said.

“I’ll be on the way as soon as I gear up.”

I caught the stream up on what was going on—they couldn't hear my friend chat—and told them that I'd be streaming in the morning when Hinasa joined us and we could start on the quests as a group. I finished stocking up for an expedition into unknown territory by dipping a bit into the stock in my shop, then used Teleport to get to the scion up on Citadel. Emelda joined me just a moment after I arrived, and we formed a group with Braggan. I warned both her and Braggan that I was streaming, then enabled the stream viewers to hear party chat.

But there wasn't much for the streamers to see or hear. We spent the rest of my stream time discussing the quests and what we might be doing, then once Braggan joined us, I used Teleport to get to the scion not far from the coast in the Darkshadow forest, the home territory of the dark elves. We all had to very quickly get off the ground, because we were in another faction's territory and the NPCs would be hostile to us, but the game takes that into account by rarely if ever having any NPC guards near the scions in faction territory. That allows players from other factions to use them without getting blitzed by hostile guards as soon as they appear. But, it also wasn't a guarantee that we wouldn't be attacked, because a roving patrol of dark elf guards might pass by the scion close enough for them to notice us.

Us being Champions doesn't change the basic game rules, and one of them is that players from other factions are attacked by NPC guards in faction territory if they're not specifically allowed to be there. And we weren't invited into Moonshadow territory, so we would be considered hostile invaders by any NPC guards that might wander into our path.

But, I do have an out with that rule, and that's Djinn form. Since I'm no longer considered a player when I take Djinn form, I can cheese NPC guards that aren't inherently hostile to a Djinn. Some faction guards attack me on sight as a Djinn, but some don't. So, as was my habit when entering the territory of another faction, I immediately took Djinn form. Emelda and Braggan immediately took out their whistles and called their mounts, which was a flying carpet made of magic for Emelda and a burly armored ram for Braggan. We started out for Moonshard Island, me flying between them as Emelda sat demurely on her carpet and Braggan sat in the saddle of his magical flying ram.

It took us about an hour to get to the island, which was about 80 kilometers off the coast. Moonshard Island was uninhabited because it was infested with a hostile race of magical monsters called Wisps, and they were exceedingly nasty little buggers that ate the life force of anything but a plant, and could only be injured by cold-based magic spells. Not even magical weapons could hurt them. They only came out at night, and it was currently early afternoon in game (remember, the game uses a 30 hour day, so it's not connected to Terra's time), so we had the option to land on the beach and prepare for going underwater without incident.

"This place is creepy," Braggan said, looking towards the forest on the far side of the beach and a strip of tough brown grass.

"The wisps have killed all other life, even the insects. That's why it's so quiet," I told him as I stowed anything I didn't want to get wet in my item storage.

"They even kill bugs?"

"They kill *everything*," I nodded. "The only things that wisps won't kill are plants. They can't digest the life force of a plant."

"Well that's just lovely," Braggan grunted, walking up to the surf line. "I hope this water ain't too cold."

"It will be," Emelda warned. "And you should be thankful that the water of the western sea is cold, because that's what keeps the wisps trapped on this island."

"They don't like cold, eh?" he asked.

"It's the only thing that can hurt them," I affirmed, stepping past him, a wave breaking frothy water over my boots. And yes, the water was cold.

"Makes me wonder how the Nazetar deal with living underwater, they live even further north."

"They have a racial that makes them resistant to the cold," I told him. "They even take reduced damage from cold-based magic. Ready?"

"Let's do this," Emelda said, wading into the surf.

"Bah. Strath don't like the cold," Braggan complained as he waded in behind her.

“You’ll live, buttercup,” I told him, which made him turn and make a rude gesture at me. That made me laugh as I started after them.

It took us a while to swim down to the scion, which was in the middle of one of the ruined cities of the First Ones that was drowned when the Salamanders sent most of the water on Netherim to Arca, which raised the sea levels. The base of the scion was buried in nearly a meter of mud, requiring Emelda to use magic to excavate it to prevent us from appearing a meter in the air when we appeared on the other side. Once that was done, the three of us got in the center of it, and Emelda used Teleport to activate the scion to send us to its sister scion, one of the ways the spell could be used.

We were not prepared for what we found on the other side.

The scion sat on a raised platform on a spire in the middle of a shockingly large city whose architecture could only be described as absolutely *magical*. The buildings were made of stone sculpted by magic, much like Astralar, but they were much more fanciful, with nearly impossible towers and spires, and everything was very open. There were a multitude of smaller buildings on the ground around the high towers and spires, each of them built in a flat-roof design with colorful awnings and shades to protect people from the sun’s heat. The city was built in the middle of a desert, so it was very bright, very hot, and the stone was white or tan, with bands of color painted on the spires and domes and towers. It had a very subtle Arabian feel, but that was in the basic shape of the buildings. These buildings were built in a desert, built to take the heat into account, so they had many large windows, no doubt had very high ceilings, which was basic Arabian architecture as well.

To my surprise, there were two people standing on the platform holding the scion, and one of them I recognized as Merria, the spymaster. The other was an elf that was very exotic, at least to me, because he had rich brown skin and black hair. He wore white linen that gave me a slight Egyptian vibe, including a headdress of white linen covering most of his hair that had a beaten gold circlet holding it in place. His ears were pointed, but were much longer than a high elf’s ears, almost like a Rathii in real life. The tips of his ears very nearly reached the top of his headdress. “Champion,” Merria said.

“Merria,” I returned, stepping out of the scion. “I didn’t expect you to be here waiting for us.”

“It was just good luck that we were,” she replied. “May I present Salen Umdar, aide to her Majesty, Queen Celindria, ruler of the sun elves. I do hope that you speak elvish, Champion?”

“Of course I do,” I replied in elvish. “Master Salen,” I greeted. “I am Xen, emissary of his Majesty, King Gerin of Freeport.”

“It is a pleasure to have you here, Xen. And as promised, you have brought one of our cousins from Arcavia,” he said with a bright smile, stepping over and offering his hand to Emelda. “Welcome, my cousin, to Celestis! I am Salen Umdar.”

“I am Emelda Miliastris, and I’m very happy to be here,” she replied in elvish, allowing him to kiss her hand, which was an elvish custom that all but the dark elves followed. She then kissed his hand, and they bowed to each other. “I come with greetings from Queen Silara of Astralar, Master Salen.”

“I am bade to bring you to her Majesty immediately upon your arrival. And might I be introduced to your dwarven ally?”

“Braggan Stoneaxe, my Lord, Champion of King Harkun of the mountain dwarves,” he replied, striking his fist against his breastplate in the typical dwarven greeting.

“Her Majesty is most grateful for your arrival, master dwarf, and the assistance of your people,” he said with a smile. “We were told there would be a fourth?”

“Hinasa of the Jagaara, my Lord, who has much further to travel than we did, so he will join us later.”

“Ah, understandable,” he said. “Come, my friends, let me escort you to the Palace of the Sun so you might meet her Majesty!”

Celindria was every bit what I expected. She was tall, regal, beautiful, and like most elves, sharp as a tack. She sat on a throne with a giant sun of beaten gold forming the back of it in a huge audience chamber at the top of a near pyramid-like ziggurat in the center of the city, which further advanced my theory that the sun elves were based more on the ancient

Egyptians than Arabian culture. She had black hair like Salen, but hers was uncovered, and also so long it dragged the ground. When we arrived, it was flowing from the side of her throne to curl on a carpet beside her bare feet. She wore a delicate tiara rather than a crown, was dressed in a sheer white linen dress that clung to her curves enticingly, the top of which was secured to a beaten gold collar that held elven script and an image of the sun, its rays spreading down to where her linen dress straps secured to it. She stood after we were introduced, then led us to a study on the floor below the throne room, stairs behind the throne leading into the ziggurat.

There, she explained why we were there, which updated our first quest. “The humans of Freeport have offered their assistance in our struggles against the Kanlon,” she told us. “And the assistance of their allies, our cousins the high elves, the mountain dwarves, and the Jagaara. The master of spies Merria has devised a plan to break the Kanlon’s stranglehold on the seas of Kanlavia, to take advantage of their setback when they were repelled in their attack on the human city of Freeport. Lady Merria reported that the Kanlon lost a great many ships, and that it presents an opportunity to greatly weaken their naval power if we can prevent them from building new ones to replace them.”

“That’s what the King told me, your Majesty,” I confirmed. “He told us we were going to search for their main shipyard so we might be able to attack and destroy it.”

She nodded. “The Lady Merria assured us that all four of you will have a means to search for the shipyard without need of our ships.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Emelda answered. “We each possess magical means of flight. We can use that to search for the shipyard from the air.”

“That’s not a guarantee, my Lady Emelda,” she warned. “The Kanlon employ flying drakes as defense against aerial attack, and they are quite formidable.”

“I’ve fought them before, your Majesty. I’m fully aware of their capabilities, and am still very confident that we can complete the mission safely,” she answered confidently.

“Then I am quite relieved to find that my decision to accept your aid was a good one,” she said with a smile. “Salen, bring the map.”

“At once, your Majesty.”

A huge map the size of a carpet was laid on the floor, and the Queen herself pointed out Kanlon territory, which was a series of islands that ran from north to south along the east coast of the continent. There were six large ones surrounded by a multitude of small ones, and that meant that finding their main shipyard wasn't going to be easy. “The Kanlon kingdom is made up of a series of nearly uncountable islands, which makes it very easy for them to conceal large-scale shipbuilding operations,” the Queen said, mirroring my own thought on the matter. “But the work of my scouts has narrowed it down a great deal. We are fairly sure that their operation is somewhere here,” she said, taking a small gold-plated cane and sliding it along a series of islands due south of the southernmost of the large islands in the archipelago. “We think it's somewhere here, along the Skalivar Straight,” she said. “They have a great number of ships in this area, which means that they are defending something. And these islands are too small to hold one of their cities. That hints to us that it must be military.”

“I've had no luck getting my griffon riders close to those islands,” Merria continued. “There's a considerable number of Kanlon drake riders that patrol the skies far enough away from the islands to keep us from getting a look. What we need you to do, Champions, is get much closer than our own scouts have been able to in order to get a look at what's there.”

“We can split up the area and each of us search a quarter,” Emelda suggested. “We'll wait for Hinasa to get here, then head out and do the search.”

“Sounds good to me,” I nodded.

“And you can do so without being repelled the way Merria's riders have been?” the Queen asked.

“Yes, they can, your Majesty,” Merria answered. “These three are the Champions of their kingdoms, they are the best of each of their peoples,” she added calmly. “They have experience and skills far beyond my riders.”

“Plus we have magical flying mounts that go much faster than their griffons,” Braggan said with a slight smile. “We'll find that base, your Majesty. And when the time comes, we'll help you burn it to the ground.”

We discussed the operation with the Queen for nearly half an hour, then she showed us to quarters where we could wait until Hinasa arrived. I logged off not long afterward and spent a little time with Kishu and Zuzu before bed, pretty excited about the idea of doing another major questline.

I have to admit, I rather like being in the middle of everything. I like exploring and making my maps, but since the Grand Crusade and me suddenly outgearing most of the Twin Worlds, it's not as challenging as it used to be. But these kinds of quests, these are a challenge. Not just of my fighting skills, but of my wits, my ability to solve problems, which was what attracted me to my playstyle in the first place. Doing what I do takes a lot of critical thinking and problem solving.

And I was back to doing what I love best, being presented with a challenge, a puzzle to solve, and one that mattered. These quests were going to open the continent to the rest of the server, which meant new quests, new wonders to explore, and a campaign that everyone could undertake. The war against the Kanlon was going to involve everyone, not just the Champions, and it would have long-lasting ramifications on the server.

This world was dynamic, it changed, and our actions could change it. And I was very much looking forward to seeing what would happen.

It was almost like Christmas morning.

I woke up in my guest bedroom in Rita's villa nearly half an hour before the alarm went off, disturbing Kishu and Zuzu. The two of them didn't like to sleep anywhere but in my bed with me, usually with Kishu curled up beside me and Zuzu on top of me. The two of them always felt very at home at the villa, mainly because Rita had learned how to communicate with them through her training. Rita had a very rare skill among telepaths, the ability to communicate with animals, and thanks to that my little babies knew the rules when it came to visiting her villa, and both of them felt like it was just an extension of their home. They were good friends with Tuki, who saw them and us as part of her pack, and she was almost like a protective mother when it came to my two tiny little furballs. They were going to stay here today while we were on Karis, which would keep them happy and entertained while we were off shopping in one of the most

famous places in the Confederation for serious shoppers, the fabled Merchant District of Karsa.

It was going to be a real treat, for more than one reason. We were going to get there on a KMS military vessel, not my skimmer or a transport, and not just any warship. We were going to travel to Karis on the largest military warship in the KMS, one of their fleet flagships. The ship was sitting in Terran orbit right now, and was scheduled to return to Karis today, and we were being allowed to hitch a ride. The ship was named the *Saiva*, and we'd be flying up in my skimmer in about an hour, the ship would take us through the Stargate (without me having to pay passage fees), and then we'd fly down from the ship to Karsa. Sano's sister Mikano arranged it, and I was glad she did. I've always wanted to see a KMS ship since Sano described riding on the *Defiant*.

I had to nuzzle the furballs before getting up to get dressed. I often wondered what it was like to send to an animal, what Rita could hear, because every time I tried, all I got was an indecipherable ball of instincts and impulses. The only time I could make sense of Kishu's thoughts was when she was experiencing something intense and profound, where it dominated every aspect of her mind. Raw terror, complete contentment, utter fury, only the most intense of emotions or impulses made sense to me.

But the fact that she and Zuzu experience emotions tells me that animals aren't what we've always thought them to be...which really makes me conflicted any time I eat meat.

That was one way Rita's gift had changed her. She doesn't eat meat anymore, because she feels it's like eating a sentient being, a being she can talk to and understand. And from what I've read, most telepaths capable of communicating with animals are like that. And it was just good luck for her that in this modern world we live in, there's almost always some kind of plant out there that tastes just like the meat she used to enjoy. There's this bean that grows on Makan that, when they mash it and mix it with some kind of grain flour and a protein paste, cooks up and tastes almost exactly like beef, and it's what Rita uses in place of hamburger for the dishes she has her helper unit cook for her.

But, when it comes to us, Rita never complains when we eat meat...and that's a good thing, because Sano isn't about to become a vegetarian. No

Shio ever will, food is too deeply entwined into their cultural identity, and Shio cuisine includes meat.

I wasn't the only one up. Rita was sitting at the kitchen table in a robe eating breakfast, which was a simple bowl of cereal. *[Morning. It's fend for yourself,]* she greeted.

[Sano up?]

[Yes, I'm up, and I'll be down in a minute,] she answered.

[I think all of us are up,] Mrima injected. *[We'll be out for breakfast in a moment.]*

We gathered at the table and talked about our impending adventure, and then we got dressed and embarked upon it. I took off from the villa more or less right on schedule (the KMS ship had a departure time and we had to be on board before it left), and it took us nearly an hour just to get to it. Ships that big had to orbit the planet way, way out away from it so its mass didn't monkey with the planet's orbit or its rotation, and the ship just got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger as we approached. It was sitting not far off from the entry station the Karinnes used, and behind it and the ship was the Stargate that would take us to Karis.

"Civilian skimmer, you are entering restricted military space," a controller called to me over gravband.

I put on my headset really quick. "I have permission to land on the KMS *Saiva*," I answered. "I'm sorry, I wasn't given any information on how to hail the ship. I was told they would call me."

"We're calling you now," came the rather amused response. *"Your skimmer beacon ID checks out. You have permission to land. Come to heading 294 mark 12 and reduce to ten percent. A zip ship is coming out to guide you to your landing bay. Follow it. A deck officer will direct you where to land once you're in the landing bay."*

"294 mark 12, reducing to ten percent, understood. Thank you, control."

A moment later, a tiny little ship came out and flew around us, then settled into a matching course about a thousand shakra ahead. It then blinked its running lights and turned slightly and accelerated, very slowly, and I moved to match it. The tiny ship, which was like a bobsled with a

canopy, led us towards the ship, to a huge set of open doors near the bow, beyond which was a landing bay so massive that I'd bet another line vessel could land in it. There were other ships in there, dozens and dozens of them, as well as military battle robots, they called them mecha, of all kinds of different shapes and sizes. There were even ones based on animals, four-legged robots.

As we got closer, I started to hear it. Commune, commune like I'd never heard before, like thousands and thousands of computers all using telepathy at the same time. It was like a constant buzzing in my mind, and it got louder and louder as we approached the ship. It was going too fast for me to understand it, it was nearly confusing, and I had to block it out...and there was a lot of it to block. Was this what it was like to live around biogenic computers and machines? To hear them communing with each other all the time? Wow, talk about noisy. How did the Generations on Karinne stand it? Or were they just...used to it?

"So much commune," Sano said from the co-pilot's chair.

"Yeah, I know. I'm almost getting dizzy trying to listen to it all," I nodded. "I've gotta block it out."

The zip ship brought us through the airskin shield, and I was contacted on local by someone in the bay. *"Skimmer, land in the area where you see the blinking blue rectangle, that's your assigned parking space. Just to your left about two hundred shakra ahead."*

"I see it. I'll land in the center of the rectangle."

"Just so, but you must land with your nose facing the bow of the ship, just like every other ship you see around you. That's very important."

"Understood."

"You have permission to exit the skimmer and move about the landing bay, but do not cross any red line on the floor, those lines mark active flight and work areas. And don't wander too far. You'll need to return to your skimmer and use your jump restraints when we pass through the Stargate."

"Understood, uh, deck officer," I replied hesitantly. "Do I need to shut down, or can I just put the skimmer in gate passage mode?"

"Gate passage mode is fine," the deck officer replied.

We landed where they told me to, requiring me to swing the ship around and back it into the spot before I landed, and I put the skimmer in gate passage mode after opening the hatch. We then left the skimmer and looked around, while staying pretty close to it, gawking at the fighters and the exomechs, and even the bionoids. They had a lot of bionoids in the landing bay, many of them doing work, all of them with the same female Faey face and wearing the same duty uniform. I dared to walk as close to a parked fighter as I thought I was allowed to go, a long, sleek, nasty-looking war machine with downward sloped wings. I remembered enough about the war to identify it as a Wolf fighter, one of the most formidable fightercraft ever built.

He's a beauty, isn't he? a Faey man sent to me after walking up to me. He was wearing military armor, his helmet locked behind his neck. I swallowed my usual aversion to Faey to be polite, mainly because I didn't want to get Sano or her sister in trouble.

It's a lot bigger looking up close than it looks on holo. It's a Wolf, right?

That's right, he answered. *Backbone of the KMS fighter corps, and this one is my baby.*

You're the pilot?

Yup, he smiled over at me.

I thought Faey men didn't fight in the military.

In the Imperium, but the Karinnes are much more open-minded. It's one of the reasons why I joined the house, he answered with a smile. *We don't get many civilians around here. You have passage to Karis?*

Yeah, a friend of ours arranged to let us land here so we can hitch a ride with the ship.

Must be someone pretty important to get you on a military warship.

I dunno, I guess, I shrugged. *Sano's sister is a ship captain, she arranged it. I guess that's pretty important.*

What's her name?

Her sister? Mikano Strongblade.

The man gave me a sudden smile. *Oh yeah, that's important, all right,* he sent with an audible laugh. *Captain Strongblade has a lot of pull in the KMS.*

I guess so. I don't know much about that kind of stuff. I'm just a regular person.

Well regular person, would you like to see what it's like to sit in the secondary cockpit?

What, seriously? I'd be allowed to do that?

Sure. Wanna give it a go?

Sure!

We approached the fighter, and I had to step on this tiny little circular disc that came down from the cockpit, which lifted me up into it. I sat down eagerly in the seat and was quite surprised to find almost nothing in it. There was no flight stick, no controls, no buttons. There were backglass displays, but they were all off. *Wow, it's like empty. Does this thing fly by interface?*

Completely, it has no manual controls at all, in either cockpit, the pilot said, hovering up to join me, using the grav pods in his armor. The displays winked on—no doubt he was the one doing it—and he closed the canopy, hovering just outside of it I got to see the head's up display, which projected onto the canopy glass in front of me so it was in my field of vision when I was looking outside, and it actively followed my eyes so it was always in the same place no matter which direction I was looking. The status of the other systems was on the backglass displays in the console, where they were on my skimmer, which had the information about the fighter that wasn't important enough to be on the head's up display. He spent a good fifteen minutes showing me the systems, explaining what I was seeing and what it meant, and I was so into it that I forgot that he was a Faey. The biggest surprise I had was that this wasn't the actual cockpit of the fighter, it was the secondary cockpit that a second person used, a person he called a whiz...no, wizzo. That stood for Weapons Officer, and I learned that the wizzo operated the secondary weapon systems which allowed the fighter to have two people shooting guns at different targets at the same time, or was

a dedicated mindstriker, which was a telepath trained to use their talent as a weapon in battle.

He let me get a look at the real cockpit, and *holy crap*. I'm glad I wasn't claustrophobic, because it was nothing but a tiny little hole with gel backing that you entered from the belly of the fighter. The pilot told me that the pilot was sealed inside, and that you couldn't move at all, the backing compacted down and held you absolutely immobile. And that would have freaked me out, if not for the fact that he also said that the pilot merges up into the fighter, controls it by merge, which means that pilots weren't using their body anyway. They wouldn't even be aware of it while they were merged to the fighter.

Well, that explained why KMS fighter pilots were so nasty. They flew their fighters by merge, not just by interface, and they were doing it back when everyone else was still using manual controls. They had to be absolute terrors in combat.

Going through the Stargate was really interesting, because we had to strap into the skimmer in full jump restraints. Really big ships couldn't go through the gate fast, and the gate sucked them in when they did, making them speed up, so it was like some kind of carnival ride when we went through.

But, it was a good thing we were in the skimmer, because we were on our way from the ship not long after going through the gate. The ship couldn't get too close to the planet because of its mass—just like it had been sitting away from Earth when we boarded—and it was going somewhere else anyway. It was going to Karis' moon, which had a military base on it. We were going to the planet, so we were given permission to launch and made our way to Karis.

And boy was it different from Earth. For one, they had a lot more flight restrictions there, including me having to nearly go halfway around the planet to enter a civilian flight corridor. And that mattered, because I was specifically warned that any deviation from civilian flight lanes would get the skimmer fired upon by automated weapon platforms that orbited the planet.

No warning.

So, I was understandably nearly anal about making sure I stayed in the civilian lane, coming down into the atmosphere in a controlled descent as we came down over an ocean, and then the city of Karis appeared over the horizon as we came down into the thicker air of low altitude. The city was really big, sitting on the east coast of a continent in the southern hemisphere. The city sat in the sub-tropical zone of the planet's climate, and from what Rahne said, the weather pattern gave Karsa nearly the same kind of climate as Hawaii. It was almost the same temperature year round, with very little deviation between summer and winter. The seasons in Karsa were defined by the rainfall, not the temperature, with the late winter and spring being very rainy and the late summer and early autumn being very dry. The city sat along the coast, which curved gently inward so the edges of the city stuck out farther than the middle, and it sat along a section of coastline that made the city run primarily from east to west rather than from north to south, with the ocean to the north of the city. That was kind of like Los Angeles, which sat in a way that the Pacific was to the south. The city was dominated by mega-buildings, but those buildings were built in an odd way that caused them to all almost reach the same height, and that height wasn't much taller than the center of the city. In nearly the exact center of the city, there was a nearly unimaginably massive tree whose canopy spread out over *kilometers*, and it was one of three trees that I could see as we approached the city. There were trees to the east and to the west of that central tree, with the tree in the center and the tree to the east of it close enough that their canopies came very close to overlapping. The tree to the west sat mainly by itself, sitting over a part of the city that looked purely residential. It was dominated by conventional houses and smaller buildings, where the tree in the center and to the east competed with giant skyscrapers for space in the sky.

I've seen pictures of those trees before. They were called *oye* trees, and they only grew on two planets in the entire galaxy, Imbria and Karis. Those trees produced fruits of the same name, which were one of the favorite foods of both humans and Faey. And those two trees that were nearly touching were more or less famous. No picture of Karsa I've ever seen was taken without those trees being prominently in the shot. Those trees were part of the city's identity.

The tree that surprised me was the one by itself over to the west. That one, I had no idea was there.

We got a lot closer to those trees that I was expecting when we got landing instructions. The Merchant District of Karsa, we found out, was *under* the central tree. It sat at the base of very large, low hill, and the tree was planted at the very top of it. The base of the tree was a restricted area, my nav told me as we came in to land. That was the capitol complex of Karis, where the government had its offices.

We landed on a large platform beside a 40 story building that was a Moridon bank, right in the heart of the Merchant District. The district held both the shops for which it was famous and also the planetary headquarters for a lot of corporations, all mixed in together. There was a much smaller area within the district that was called the Shopping District, which was famous all over the Confederation for the large number of shops that it held that sold just about anything you could imagine. But there were tons and tons and tons of other shops and stores in the Merchant District outside of the Shopping District, and the district as a whole was considered to be the ultimate hardcore shopper's Nirvana.

Here, in this district that sat on about 17 square kilometers of land in the heart of Karsa, you could find almost *anything* for sale...if you had the patience to look for it. There were stories of those lucky few who were allowed to come here spending their entire vacations without ever leaving the Merchant District, exploring its thousands of shops to find some of the most interesting and exotic merchandise available in the Confederation.

We didn't have a week. We had a day. And that day was going to start as soon as we got off the skimmer.

At least we didn't lose time waiting for Rahne. She, Adam, and their son were standing on the edge of the pad waiting for us, and with them was a Shio woman that I recognized as Sano's sister, Captain Mikano Strongblade. Sano ran into her sister's embrace as soon as I opened the hatch. *[I had no idea you were going to be here, Mikki!]* Sano gushed.

[I wanted to surprise you. And by the veil, it's so good to hear you commune.]

[You certainly sound like you've been doing it your whole life.]

[She's had a lot of teachers around,] Rahne noted lightly as I shut down the skimmer. Rita, Mrima, and her cubs filed out as I finished shutdown, greeting Rahne and Adam and meeting Mikano. *[I'm glad you two were able to make it,]* Rahne told the cubs, leaning down and taking their hands.

[No way were we missing this,] Mrijin declared.

[Truth, brother,] Mralla agreed.

I came out to join them, and the first thing I noticed was...was how *clean* Karsa smelled. Jacksonville smelled like a city, but the air here in Karsa was clean, nearly sweet, with no smell of concrete and human detritus. The smell was like the city wasn't even here, like this was a sun-kissed grassy plain rather than a jungle of plascrete, metal, and glass. I could smell *oye*, I could smell the tree high above us, and its scent seemed to neutralize the smell of construction and technological advancement.

And there was more to it than that. I slowed to a stop and looked up, and I could feel...*something*. This place was like no planet I've been on, and I've been on a lot more of them than the average human because I own a skimmer. It was like a glow that you couldn't see emanating from the city, one that was comforting and pleasing. It was a feeling that I was welcome here, I was welcome here and I was *safe* here.

[Kevin?] Kevin? Kevin! "Kevin!" Sano's voice touched my ears, and I felt her hand on my shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I...yeah," I said, blinking. The feeling faded. "The air here smells...it smells like *oye*. And there's something else, something I can't quite put my finger on."

[I told you this city wasn't like anything you'd ever visited before,] Rahne communed with a smile.

[It's not that. There's a sense of, of...security here. I can't explain it. Usually everywhere I go, I feel vulnerable, but not here. This place, it makes me feel like the bed you slept in when you were a child, a place that's warm and comfy and you knew that your parents were just a call away, ready to come running if you needed them.]

Rahne gave me a curious look, and Adam gave a soft chuckle. *[It's felt that way since the pandemic started,]* he supplied. *[There's a feeling in the*

city like everyone isn't a stranger. We new Generations see each other, we see strangers in the streets who feel like family to us. Maybe that's what you're sensing. Rahne said you're a damn strong telepath, you may be way more sensitive than we are to things like that.]

[May be,] I communed musingly, then I smiled and looked at Sano when she took my hand. [So, ready to do some hardcore Christmas shopping?]

[You know it,] she replied with a smile.

We had a pretty awesome time. Rahne, Adam, and Mikano knew the district very well, so they took us to a large variety of shops, from the conventional to the bizarre to the outrageous. Most of the shops in the district weren't big department stores, they were smaller stores that offered a narrower, more focused array of goods. That meant that you had to go to multiple shops, but that was part of the fun when it came to a place like this. Every shop was a little world, decorated differently, offering different wares, and they were run by different species.

That was something that was so different from home. We had other species in Jacksonville, but they were very much a minority. The city was predominantly human, and you'd see a different face every once in a while. But here, almost every face was different. Karsa was more like the Academy than Jacksonville, a place where hundreds of different species shared the sidewalk. Every person I found myself beside in a shop was different, and many of them I had never seen before, not even in pictures or on viddy. There were pretty species, ugly species, people covered in fur, people with scales, even some with feathers. There were ones who didn't come up to my belt, and ones that were so big that they had trouble getting in through the shop's door.

And all of them, every single one of them, was a Generation. And that made them feel, feel like they were *family*. I didn't once feel uncertain or intimidated by any face I may see, even if that face was well over my own, or had a mouth filled with dagger-like teeth. No matter how anyone I met looked, no matter what race or species they might be, they were Generations, and that made us all related.

Maybe Adam was right. Maybe that sense of inclusion was so prevalent here on Karis that it was like a telepathic residue that I could pick up, because I admittedly am a very strong telepath.

And one of the benefits of being a telepath was that I could separate from the others to hunt for presents without them knowing what they were without being out of contact with them. We all more or less scattered across the Merchant District, but we kept in constant contact with each other. Rahne, Adam, and Mikano were still guiding us to the stores that might hold things we'd be interested in buying, but they were doing it by sending us directions and even images by telepathy, or they were uploading directions to our interfaces using their own.

I managed to find some pretty cool stuff in the three hours I was shopping, by myself so the others didn't know what I'd bought. I got Rita these awesome wind chimes made out of some unique kind of crystal. Wind chimes were a major part of Aridai culture, and there was an entire shop run by an Aridai that was devoted to the many kinds of wind chimes they had, which had different cultural and religious significance. What they all shared was that when they were played by the wind, they were almost mesmerizing. Rita adored stuff for her villa, so I knew she'd like them. I also got her a fishing rod designed to be used from the shore of a beach, because she'd really gotten into fishing after the pandemic, and they were fishing just for extra food. She was still fishing, now because she enjoyed doing it, not because she wanted more than emergency rations for dinner. And since I was spending some credits on Mrima and the others, I made sure to also buy Rita something a bit pricy and really nice, and that was something I'd already acquired. I'd bought one of Sarko Ven's works, something that I knew for a fact that Rita liked because she'd seen a picture of it I showed her when I told her about him. Since she liked the portrait, I bought it from him before he sent it to a gallery for display and sale.

And because I was a friend of his, Sarko Ven sold it to me on the cheap...compared to what he usually got for his paintings.

I got Mrima a somewhat pricy Pai-sized jeweled locket in the human style that had an image of her late husband inside it on one side and a picture of her cubs on the other, the image of her late husband something I could share with the jeweler with telepathy. She'd shown me a picture of

him, and I shared that memory with the jeweler so he could engrave it into the locket.

I have to admit, the training I'd done in telepathy had fundamentally changed how my memory worked. Since I wanted to learn how to insert languages, my teachers had been training me in how to use telepathy with memory, and the memories I worked with doing that were much more detailed than if I recalled them the normal way. What I did was effectively "store" that memory like data in a computer inside my own brain and share it with the jeweler, rather than remember it like a normal memory. That gave the jeweler a picture-quality image to use with the locket, rather than a memory that may have been altered by time or my personal bias.

The cubs were easy to buy for. What I got them were hoverscooters, which were small personal hoverbike-like vehicles that would let them get around on campus much faster. The scooters were normal size with the controls sized for a Pai, including having interface control ability so they didn't need to use the controls at all. That would give them some cargo space to carry stuff around campus, which was often an issue for a race as small as the Pai.

For Sano, I bought something available on Karis but not on Earth due to demand, and something that she'd both be overjoyed to have and probably hate me for buying for her, and that was a bionoid. I found a bionoid store in the district that could have a moleculartronic bionoid built and shipped to Sano before Christmas, and I used my detailed and extensive memories of her, as well as her biometric data I'd surreptitiously acquired for just such an opportunity, to make sure that the bionoid was as close to an exact duplicate as possible. Now, it wouldn't be absolutely exact, because they had to have pictures of you naked in order to do that, and asking for something like that would get me kicked in the face. But I'd done well in getting as much biometric info on her as I could without crossing the line, so that the bionoid she'd get would be 98% identical to her. And she could have the bionoid upgraded to fix that 2% on her own.

I bought Sano a bionoid before I bought one for myself. What a world.

Shopping for Rahne and Adam wasn't easy, because the honest truth was, they were rich. Like *seriously* rich. So they already had all kinds of stuff, as well as the money to buy what they wanted. But, I did find

something I thought they'd really like, and something that proved that you could really buy just about anything in Karsa. I found a shop that sold reproductions of historical objects and artifacts, and I had them create for me a unique coat of arms and a plaid pattern for a fictional new Scottish clan, the MacKarinnes. I had them make a tapestry with the coat of arms, put it on a shield, and had them make a traditional tartan worn by a dressing dummy that Rahne could display in her house. The colors on the crest of the House of Karinne were blue, white, black, and gold, so I had them use those colors in the tartan.

The Keelo that ran the shop was quite intrigued about the idea of creating something new but with roots in historical fact, and he really enjoyed creating a tartan pattern and a coat of arms in the same style used by the Scottish clans of that time period. He had to do a lot of looking up stuff on Civnet, but once he knew the background, he did a fantastic job with the crest and tartan pattern.

There was a reason for that. Since I was her friend, Rahne had told me that she had absolutely no memory of her life on Earth before coming to Karis. She had been one of the people that the Trillanes abducted to turn into slaves, one of the people that had been hidden in the Urumi empire for years after the Trillanes were kicked off Earth. The Trillanes had completely wiped her memory—this was before she was a telepath—so her only memories, and the only life she'd ever known, was of Karis. The Grand Duke had taken her in and made her like his own sister, given her a new family that would look out for her, and he was the only family she had ever known. That was why they were so close. But they did know that she was from Scotland, if they didn't know exactly who she was and where in Scotland she came from, and that was enough to have the history place create her own clan colors and crest, to let her establish her own history and traditions that honored where she came from but also recognized that she was where she wanted to be.

I respect and admire the Grand Duke Karinne for many reasons, but that may be the biggest one right there. He had taken in a woman he didn't know and made her part of his family purely because she needed him. It said everything that needed to be said about what kind of man Jason Karinne really was.

Because some of the stuff I bought was pretty big, I arranged to have it shipped, so I only brought a couple of already wrapped boxes back to the skimmer when we were all done. It was late afternoon when we met back at the skimmer. The others had done the same, they were only carrying a couple of small things, and had arranged to have the bigger stuff shipped to Earth. *[It's dining hour,]* Mikano declared, referring to the traditional time in Shio society when one ate dinner. *[How about we go to my favorite restaurant?]*

[Sure, I'm hungry,] Mrima declared.

Where she took us surprised me. It was a small café on the northwest edge of the city, just a few blocks from the beach and also only a few blocks from the trunk of the oye tree that loomed over the west side of the city, a place she said was owned and operated by one of her friends. It seemed that Rahne knew them too, because she greeted the Shio that came out to meet them when they entered with a laugh and a hug. *[You here alone, Merra?]* Rahne asked, holding her out at arm's length.

[Seido's at home, it's her turn to cook dinner,] she replied. *[Salyk and Deno are in the kitchen.]*

[Oh no, you're the one cooking for this group,] Rahne smiled at her. *[These are my friends from Terra, Merra. May I introduce Kevin, Mikano's sister Sano, Rita, Mrima, Mralla, and Mrijin?]*

[I'd be happy to cook for the friends of one of my best friends!] she announced with honest warmth threaded through her thought. *[Come in, come in! Sit and look over the menu, tell me what you want!]*

There were too many of us to fit at one table, so we pushed two tables together. Like the other Shio restaurants Sano had taken me to, their menu was very large and filled with pictures of the dishes they served, hand-written in Shio. Which I could read thanks to my language insertion. They cooked stuff from all over the Confederation in this small café, with a menu even larger than most big fancy restaurants.

“Oooh, she offers *simlai*!” Sano said aloud in a hushed tone after she went back to the kitchen for a minute. “We should try that, Kevin! It's really hard to make right!”

“She makes fantastic *simlai*, sis, you won’t be disappointed,” Mikano told her.

I’d learned long ago not to ask what a food was when it came to Shio. “Alright, I’ll give it a shot,” I said.

It turned out, *simlai* was a fish-based dish that was served drizzled with what almost looked like caramel, but was actually a rich, nutty flavored sauce that really popped with the texture of the fish. It was really, really good. She served it with traditional Shio vegetables on the side, but had included Makati *ruga* roots with the side dishes, which I rather like. But, I didn’t see what the big deal was about cooking a fish flank, and it made me curious enough to ask about it. *[Why is it so hard to make if it’s just a flank of fish meat?]* I dared ask Sano privately.

[Because simlai is like those stinkbug insects on Terra you complain about. The fish has a bunch of acidic glands in it that makes anything that eats the fish regret it. If you don’t prepare it just right, the glands get ruptured and it makes it taste like a rancid, moldy boot, on top of burning your mouth. But if you manage to prepare it without rupturing any glands, you get some of the most delicious fish you’ll ever eat. This simlai is prepared semu go, which means she removed the glands while she prepared it, which is really, really hard for a chef to do. If she prepared it semu roch, then the glands would still be in the fish and it would be our responsibility to not bite into them. It makes the meal much more of an adventure,] she communed impishly.

[You Shio really will eat just about anything,] I accused with a smile at her.

[We’re at the top of the food chain for a reason, baby,] she replied shamelessly.

After eating, we ended up somewhere I never believed I’d be. Rahne said that we’d been invited to the beach, and much to my shock and surprise, the beach in question was the *private beach of the Grand Duke*! I had no idea where we were going, we just followed along behind Rahne and Adam and their son as they walked us down a street, until we came to a fence that had an opening guarded by Faey women in black armor. They let us in without a word, and I found myself looking at the trunk of the *oye* tree

after we came around what looked like a small barracks-style building. Sitting on a bench beside the trunk was the Grand Duke Jason Karinne, with a strange heavily-built cat-like creature sitting beside him. The Grand Duke was only wearing a pair of black shorts and flip-flop style sandals, showing off a muscular torso. It took me a moment to realize that the cat wasn't a pet or an animal, it was a very rare race called the Parri, which I had only ever seen in pictures. The Parri had white lines and symbols drawn on its body, and the only thing it wore was a leather strap around its waist that held a small pouch. What I remembered about the Parri that makes them so unusual is that they're not fully bipedal. They can stand up on their back legs, and they do so to talk to people, but they can't walk that way. Their bodies aren't built for walking on two legs. They have to walk around on all fours.

It was a bit of a shock to meet Jason Karinne face to face. I'd only ever met him in the game. I was surprised that he was much taller than I expected—he has to be 190 centimeters easy—and he's freakin' *buff*. I didn't think a planetary ruler would have arms that big, or a washboard stomach. The man works out, and I mean he *majorly* works out. He's got the build of a football player, and I mean beyond the muscle. He has the body frame of an athlete, with wide shoulders and chest and lean hips, which make him look sleek and powerful. If I had no idea who he was, I'd look at him and immediately think *this guy plays sports, and might even be a pro athlete*.

"G-Grand Duke Karinne," Rita stammered as she shook his hand, after he introduced himself. "Thank you so much for all your help."

"It's no more than what you deserved, Rita," he replied aloud, with a gentle smile. He then shook my hand, but I was more focused on the Parri sitting beside his bench. It rose up on its hind legs, and I was quite surprised that it towered over us. It was well over two meters tall when standing upright! The Parri nearly pushed the Grand Duke out of the way and startled me by putting its thick-fingered hand under my chin, holding it with two fingers as it made me look up at it. "*Shaman?*"

"What are you called?" the Parri asked me.

"Uh, Kevin," I answered, a bit unsettled. "Kevin Ball."

“What’s wrong, *shaman*?” the Grand Duke asked.

“Nothing, Jason Karinne,” it replied in a soothing voice. “Kevin Ball, what did you smell when you first came here?”

I looked up at it, a bit confused. “*Oye* fruit,” I said uncertainly. “I’ve never been this close to an *oye* tree before, I had no idea they were so fragrant.”

“That’s odd, I didn’t smell anything,” Sano mused.

“That is understandable,” the Parri said. “I will attend the matter. Jason Karinne, might I ask for you to let me return to the village in one of your iron birds for a brief time, and then return? There is a task I must perform.”

“Of course, *shaman*. I’ll have Dera fly you home,” he answered.

“That would be delightful, I enjoy her company,” she said. “Please, do not let your guests leave until I return.”

“I’ll see to it.” I watched the Parri drop to all fours and amble towards the barracks building, and I had no idea what the hell just happened.

“Okay, that was...something,” Rita said, voicing my own confusion.

“Parri are Parri, Rita,” Rahne said lightly. “I’ve known the *shaman* for years, and I still dinna’ understand her one whit.”

“The Parri are mystics, Rita,” the Grand Duke said. “In a way, they live in an entirely different world than the rest of us. But I’ve come to learn that the world they see is no less real than the world we do,” he added, putting his hand over the tattoo on his shoulder. “There are things that they can see, things that they can do, that are very real. I’m still looking for some other way to describe it than magic, because it almost seems like it.”

“Who’s to say that magic isn’t real?” Sano said. “There are tons of old stories in Shio folklore about magic, and most old stories like that usually have some basis in truth.”

“That’s a pretty healthy way to look at the world,” the Grand Duke told her with a chuckle. “I’ve been studying with the Parri to understand their world, but it’s been very slow going. But I will say that it’s certainly been an eye-opening experience,” he added ruefully. “Anyway, I’m glad you

accepted my invitation. I wanted to see you and talk to you guys a bit before you go back to Terra.”

“I’m a little surprised you even remember who we are, your Grace,” I said honestly.

He smiled at me. “Of course I remember you, all of you,” he chided me gently. “And I’m very happy that you and Rita have found a much better place in life than where you were,” he added. “You guys are stuck here until the *shaman* returns, so why don’t you come down to the beach? You can meet some of my friends and family and relax a little while before you go home.”

The beach, well, that was a bit of a shock. It never occurred to me that a human Grand Duke would adopt Faey customs, because everyone was running around on the beach *naked*. There were almost two dozen kids and teenagers running around, most of them Faey but a handful with human skin tones but pointed ears, marking them as having both human and Faey parents. It was a bit of a shock to see naked little children playing in the surf, making sand castles, sitting on towels in the late afternoon, as the sun crept towards the horizon behind the tree. Both me and Sano were a little taken aback by it, since it was so different from human and Shio cultural norms. And it was hard to know where to look when I was being introduced to naked women. The fact that they were Faey wasn’t putting me off nearly as much as the fact that they were naked.

And even the kids didn’t see anything wrong with it. One of them, who looked like she was only like four, boldly asked why I was wearing clothes on the beach...and holy *God*, her commune was insanely powerful! I could feel it, it was almost like her thought was reverberating inside my own skull when she asked why I was wearing clothes. Was *this* what the original Generations were? No wonder they were so feared by the rest of the Confederation!

I ended up just sitting on a beach blanket down away from most of the others, leaning back on my hands and watching the waves crash onto the shoreline. I didn’t know any of these people, and most of them were Faey, so that made me feel uncomfortable. Not even them being Generations made me feel completely comfortable, and at least they had the consideration to leave me be. Rita, Sano, and Mrima and the cubs were

chatting with the people, and I was happy they were enjoying themselves. But talking to strangers isn't really my thing, and I don't think it ever will be. Not even being a Generation has really changed me in that regard all that much. But it seemed that not absolutely everyone was willing to just leave me alone. A Faey girl that looked to be about fifteen flopped down beside me. She had dark gray hair and rather pretty violet colored eyes, and was naked like everyone else, which made me a tiny bit uncomfortable. *[Uncle Jason said that you're the Xen!]* she communed excitedly. *[Is that for real?]*

[Well, I suppose, if you're talking about CO.]

[Of course I am! I love your viddies!] she gushed, looking over at me with an earnest smile. *[Everyone at school that plays thinks you're absolutely awesome!]*

[Wait, teenagers play? Only adults play on Earth, only adults can get jacks.]

[We have tech that lets us get around needing a jack,] she replied. *[At least before. Now it doesn't matter, everyone can play. You don't need a jack to merge to a biogenic vidlink.]*

[Oh. I didn't think about that, I suppose,] I replied evenly. *[We don't have biogenics on Earth.]*

[I can't believe you're actually here! Uncle Jason said he knew you, but you can never tell how serious he is about anything,] she nearly accused.

[Why would it matter?]

[You're famous here on Karis!] she told me with a beaming smile. *[Everyone I know that plays CO watches your viddies and your streams! They're gonna be so jealous when I tell them I met you in real life!]*

Well, that scattered me. I looked down at her, honestly taken aback. It never occurred to me that those numbers I see on my Arena page and in my stream display were...like...real *people*. Like with names and faces. To me, they were like Civnet people, people I knew were people, but didn't seem more than ephemeral entities that only existed online.

[I think you're being generous,] I countered modestly.

[Not even. I'm Sami, by the way.]

[Kevin. Nice to meet you,] I returned, offering my hand, if a bit awkwardly.

She took it, her smile unchanging. *[What's it like to be a Djinn in the game? We've all had tons of arguments about it. I think it makes you feel different, but my sister thinks you feel the same.]*

[Well, it's kinda both,] I answered. *[I don't feel any different from normal when I'm in Djinn form, but since I'm way taller like that and I don't put my feet on the ground, it feels a little different from that perspective.]*

[What secrets did you find in Madra Ban that you didn't put in the viddies? There's gotta be a couple,] she communed eagerly.

And that started nearly an hour of conversation about Citadel Online, of all things. This teenager Sami surprised me with how much she knew about the game, and really surprised me with how much she knew about Xen. She really must have watched just about every vidy and stream I've ever done. We sat there as the sun set and lights came on that lit up the beach, long enough for me to kinda get numb to the idea that I was sitting there talking to a naked teenage girl, and even long enough to get used to the idea that she's Faey. But then again, she's just a kid, so she's not as intimidating to me as adult Faey are. She probably wasn't even alive when I was on the farm, so it wasn't her fault, and it would be wrong of me to blame her for what happened to me. We stayed there so long that most of the other people went back to their houses, and for Sami's mother to come looking for her, a woman with nearly white hair and a gentle smile who was named Maya.

Once I said my goodbyes to Sami, after she all but browbeat me into giving her my interface ID so she could call me, I ended up sitting in the living room of the Grand Duke Jason Karinne and feeling like I had no business being there. He and his wife, a Faey woman named Jyslin, were sitting on a couch chatting with Rita and Mrima when I came in, and we were joined by Sano and her sister Mikano not long after I came in. I did my best to avoid conversation, and thankfully, nobody really pressed me to talk to them. Rita and Mrima knew how I felt about being around strangers,

and it seemed that the Grand Duke and his wife did as well, because they more or less left me alone.

I didn't have to sit there for very long, though, because the Parri returned. She padded into the room on all fours, and she wasn't alone. A smaller Parri was with her, one that didn't have all those white stripes and symbols on it, and that smaller Parri came right over to me and rose up on its hind legs, towering over me. Even though it was smaller than the other one, it was still bloody big when it was standing upright. I wasn't entirely sure what they were about, because the first thing it said was nonsensical. "There is much I can do," was all it said, in a voice that hinted to me that maybe it was also a female. In this modern world, assuming a species' gender was usually a bad idea.

"Do? About what?" I asked in confusion.

They completely ignored me. The smaller one made me stand up by pulling on my elbow, and to my shock, she took hold of my shirt tail and started pulling it up. That incited an immediate and nearly violent reaction as I grabbed my shirt and held it fast, because to show my bare torso would mean exposing the savage, disfiguring scars that are scattered over my chest, stomach, and back. "Gently, Kevin Ball," the bigger one said in a soothing voice. "Among the things she can do for you is remove the scars that dim the light that radiates from your heart. But she must be able to see them."

"How did—" I started, then I recoiled from the smaller one when she tried to lift my shirt again, tearing a piece of it away.

"*Shaman*, you know I would usually never gainsay you, but I have to here," the Grand Duke spoke up, standing. "If you want her to examine him, doing it in a public room is the wrong way to go about it. The scars on his chest and back are something he doesn't like letting anyone else see. Kevin, would you object to letting her examine you in private? That way it's just you and her. And she won't tell anyone what she sees. Ever," he said in a strong, reassuring voice.

"Why? Why do you want to look at them?" I challenged.

"To remove them," the smaller one answered calmly, putting one of those big hands on the pouch tied to her waist by a cord. "There is a remedy

known by the Parri that removes scars from the skin.”

That made me gape at her, and my mind raced. Remove the scars? The Medical Service offered to remove them, but I wouldn’t let them anywhere near me, not after what they did to me, how they treated me. They said it would require surgery, and there was no way in bloody blue hell I was going to go into the hospital, to be under their control like that. How was this Parri going to remove my scars?

And did I want them to? The scars were a part of me, even if they were a part of me that I wouldn’t allow anyone else to see. The scar on my face, that meant something to me because it was my memorial to the friend that I killed, but the ones on my chest, my stomach, my back, those are testaments to the cruelty that we faced on the farms, a visible symbol of the brutality that we endured. I was ashamed of those scars, I didn’t let anyone see them, because in a way, they reminded me of my own weakness.

Did I want them removed?

I looked at Sano, and I realized that I did. I would never let her see those scars, see what they did to me, but there would come a time when she would *have* to see them. If I wanted to deepen our relationship, there would come a time when I would have to bare my scars to her, both psychological and physical. If I ever wanted to marry her, I had to show her all of me, and I was terrified that she would see the scars that I kept hidden and be repulsed by them.

For Sano, for the chance to be with Sano, I would do it.

“I...alright,” I said, looking Sano in the eyes, and I saw her expression change slightly.

She stood up and approached me. “I’ll go with you,” she offered, taking my hand.

“No! No, Sano, you don’t under—”

“I do understand, Kevin,” she said in a gentle voice, putting a hand on my upper chest. “But I’m not afraid to see them. I want to see them, Kevin. I want to fully understand who you are, and the only way I’ll ever know is if I see them before the Parri heal them. They’re not going to change how I think about you, not one bit. If anything, they’ll make me respect you that

much more, that you managed to survive to be the wonderful man I know despite everything they did to you to try to break you.”

“Sano!” I said in shock, gaping at her.

“I’m not afraid, Kevin,” she said to me, putting her hand on my face, placing her palm over my interface and the scar that was hidden beneath it. “And I don’t want you to be afraid of me, in any way.”

What could I possibly say to that? I looked into her eyes, and I could see how serious she was about it. And I can say that there was only one person in this universe that could have talked me into that. But I wasn’t about to surrender to her quite that easily. “It *will* change what you think of me, Sano,” I told her as the others went absolutely silent. “What they did to me...you have no idea what they did to me. Once, Sano, they staked me to the ground and ran a plow over me. It nearly cut me in half,” I said in a charged voice. “Can you imagine what kind of scar that leaves? There’s no way you can see what they did to me and ever think that I could be normal again. If you saw what they did to me, you’d never talk to me again.”

“When you told me about how you got this scar, I didn’t run away,” she said, taking off my interface and putting her fingers over the scar on my face. “And what could have been worse for you than *this*?” she asked sliding a finger along the scar. “So, I’m asking you, Kevin. Let me be there. Let me see, so when they’re gone, you’ll know that I’m still here even after I’ve seen the worst of you.”

I stared at her, my mind a whirlwind of fear and apprehension, but in the end, there wasn’t really anything I could say to that. All I could do was hope and pray to God that she was being serious, and that she wouldn’t run screaming from the room after I took my shirt off. “Alright,” I said, in a bare whisper and with my heart in my eyes as I looked at her.

The Grand Duke took us to another room, an empty room that had mats on the floor that looked like a small dance studio room, and the Parri had me sit down in the center of the room. The only other person in the room was Sano, who was sitting beside me. The Parri then deliberately leaned down and took hold of my shirt, and I blew out my breath and let her take it off me. I couldn’t see her after that, because she went behind me and I think she sat down, and I felt her pad-covered hand touch my shoulder. Sano gave

me a long, reassuring look, then she leaned back and looked behind me. And to her credit, I didn't hear her scream, or even gasp. She was quiet, holding my hand as she looked at the scars on my back.

There were several there, with the tiller blade scar being the largest and most gruesome. But there were others, reminders of times when I was burned, sprayed with acid, cut with blades and farm tools. Some were accidents, some were deliberate. There were even more of them on my chest and stomach, and still more on my arms and legs, but the ones there are more accidents than they were deliberately inflicted, demonstrating just how dangerous it was to be a farm worker when your overseers don't give a damn about safety, or even if you live or die.

"These can be remedied," the Parri announced, her hand strong and warm and actually comforting as I felt it slide over my shoulder, then down my back. "But this one will take some time to remove," she added, touching the tiller blade scar.

"How will you remove them? If I may ask," Sano said, looking up at the Parri.

"A poultice holding special herbs and medicines that I will apply to the scars," she answered. "They will break down the scar tissue and return it to healthy skin and tissue, as well as cause his flesh to fill in the void left by the scars, removing all trace of them. I will apply it to the scars and wrap them so the poultice is protected and can do its work. After some time, the wrappings will dissolve to the point where they break, and when that happens, the poultice will have done its work and the scars will be gone."

"Just like that?"

"Of course," she said calmly. "The wrappings will need to remain for some several days to give the poultice time to do its work. So it will not be overnight. But with time, the poultice will remedy these scars."

"That doesn't sound so bad," I said.

"I'd like to help," Sano said. "May I?"

"Yes, you may," the Parri said. "My expertise is needed to mix the poultice, not to apply it."

I sat there and felt equal parts terrified and bolstered as Sano dropped all pretenses and looked at the scars. I felt her hands on my back, I felt her touch the scar across my shoulder blades, a touch that was both hot and gentle. I bowed my head and tried to get my emotions under control as I allowed the one person I care about most in the world look at a part of me I never wanted her to see, never wanted her to know was there. I kept expecting her to get up and walk out of the room, never to see her again, but her hands never left my back.

Eventually, she spoke, and what she said surprised me. “How in the six bells of Seklo did you survive this?” she asked, touching the scar over my shoulder blades.

“I technically didn’t,” I replied woodenly. “The doctors said I died three times before and during the surgery to save my life, but they managed to revive me. The blade severed my spine and lacerated both of my lungs. It came within a hair of cutting some major artery coming out of my heart that would have made me bleed to death in seconds if it had been cut. I spent nearly a month in the hospital, and most of that time was spent in a body cast to keep me from moving while I healed.”

“And the doctors didn’t stop it? They didn’t do anything?” she asked, nearly outraged.

“They didn’t care. I told them what they were doing to us, and they just shipped me back to the farm after they put me back together. That’s why I don’t like the Medical Service. They knew what was happening to us, and they didn’t stop it. They let it happen. And the way the Faey worship doctors, they would never believe it even if we spoke out. They’d probably try to kill us for daring to say something bad about doctors. That’s why we’ve never said anything.”

“I want to say that you’re wrong...but I don’t think I can,” she said in a quiet voice.

She didn’t ask any more questions, but I could tell that she wanted to. She touched every scar on my back, from the smallest to the largest, and she looked at the scars on my chest when the Parri moved her out of the way, just before she began applying her poultice. It smelled very nice, like flowers and honey and oye, and it was surprisingly warm when I felt her

apply it to my skin. It was a paste, a honey-colored paste that almost looked like oatmeal, which she smeared liberally onto my back, starting with the ghastly scar across my shoulder blades. She set another jar of it in front of Sano, and I got to enjoy, in a strange way, her applying it to the scars on my chest. At least after she asked how to do it, learning that it had to be applied in a thick layer. *[How does that feel?]* she asked, her thought gentle and kind and concerned.

[It feels warm, and it's getting warmer as it sits on my skin,] I answered, looking down as she covered over a long scar on my left chest, which had been made by a sharp piece of metal. That had been an accident. *[At least it smells nice. I won't mind smelling it until I can clean it off.]*

[It smells like flowers,] she agreed, bringing the jar close to her nose. *[I just wonder how it's supposed to work. How can something that looks like Terran cottage cheese heal a scar?]*

[I'm not sure, but I'm sure I wouldn't understand even if she told me,] I answered.

[I can't imagine how much some of these hurt,] she communed, her thought laced with compassion and...and...and something else. An emotion that I couldn't easily identify. She finished applying the stuff to one scar, then dipped her fingers into the jar and started smearing it over another.

[I don't like to think about it, even now,] I answered honestly. *[Not all of them were deliberately inflicted. Most of the ones on my chest, arms, and legs are from accidents, but that didn't make them hurt any less. That one was from a saw blade.]*

[I don't even want to ask how it cut your chest,] she mused, almost grimly.

[Just me being stupid. When your parents told you not to run with scissors, what happened to me was the kind of thing that they were warning you about.]

She looked at me, then despite it all, she giggled. *[At least you can put some of this into perspective,]* she communed as she gave me a gentle, dazzling smile.

[I could lie and say it was some fluke accident, but the honest truth was, I tripped and fell while carrying a saw blade. And it did what saw blades are supposed to do, cut things.]

[Then maybe we should leave this one, to remind you to be more careful,] she teased gently, her eyes telling me that she wasn't being serious.

[I really don't care one way or the other. I'm doing this for you,] I admitted, looking into her eyes. *[So you don't have to see them ever again. So you don't think I'm too damaged to be with.]*

Her eyes softened, and she leaned forward and gave me a very gentle, soft kiss on the lips. *[What I think doesn't matter, Kevin. You are perfect so long as you are what you want to be,]* she told me, and with us touching, with her kissing me, I knew she was being completely serious. Skin to skin contact made telepathy stronger, and with us touching, I could see more into her mind than normal. *[If you want to remove the scars, that's fine. If you don't, that's fine too. All that matters to me is that you feel comfortable being who you are.]*

[All I want to be is what makes you want to be with me,] I told her.

[Then just be you, Kevin. Be the kind, sweet, occasionally naïve, adorably dorky man that I've loved more and more every day since we met in Freeport,] she answered, which sent an electric thrill right all the way down to my soul. I could feel it in her commune, I finally identified that emotion in her thought, interlaced through it, that I hadn't been able to identify before...love.

Sano loved me. I could sense it in her thoughts, an undercurrent lurking beneath the rational thought, something that she could neither easily hide nor easily fake. It was something I hadn't experienced in so long that I didn't know what it was when I looked at it from the outside. And while it thrilled me beyond words to finally understand that, it also made me both incredibly humble and even a little frightened. *[I love you too, Sano,]* I confessed.

She kissed me again, then pulled back enough to look into my eyes, giving me a gentle look. "I think we can leave some of the scars," she said aloud. "Let's only remove the ones that would probably freak people out a

little, so you can take off your shirt at the pool and not attract undue attention. The rest of them should stay. They give you some character, and you can always spin wild stories about how you got them in your adventurous youth,” she said with a glorious smile. “And of course, this one has to stay. I know what it means to you, and would mean to Ethan,” she added gently, sliding her thumb along the scar on my cheek.

I could only gaze into her eyes.

“Now, I think I’m the one that gets to decide which ones go and which ones stay,” she said with a loving smile. “Since I’m the one that’s going to be looking at them the most.”

I couldn’t answer. I was afraid to answer, as if I might say something wrong and shatter the moment. All I could do was nod mutely and bow my head, close my eyes, and pray that this wasn’t some kind of dream. I sat there remaining absolutely still, listening as she very nearly bantered with the Parri as they discussed which scars would remain. She did ask the Parri to remove the large ones, the ugly-looking ones, but most of the smaller ones she had the Parri leave alone. She had most of the ones on my back removed, but left many of the smaller ones on my chest and stomach. And in a way, it was almost...*intimate*. I felt so strange, but so right, sitting there and letting her decide what she wanted me to look like, deciding what parts of me she wanted to keep and what parts she was alright with being changed. It was like I was being made just for her.

But I also understood her gesture for what it was, that it was Sano telling me without words that she could accept my past, accept that I had been irreparably damaged by my years on the farm, and she was quite happy taking me for who and what I was. I didn’t have to be perfect to be perfect for her. She was willing to accept me, to love me, scars and all. And that touched me, touched me all the way to my soul, and made me feel like the luckiest man in the entire universe that a woman as beautiful and kind and incredible as Sano Strongblade would ever love a man like me.

It took them about an hour, and in the end, there wasn’t nearly as much of that poultice on me as I expected when we began. The scars that it covered were the largest and the most gruesome, the scars that would make people whisper or stare, while the majority of them, which were much smaller and less obtrusive, were left behind. The scar across my shoulder

blades, the burns, the ugly patch on my side where my outer layer of skin had been flayed off, and a single scar on my right bicep that was usually partially visible when I wore short sleeve shirts, the scar the result of me getting burned by a searing hot casing of a power tool I'd been using, they were all treated. They were covered over with the flower-smelling poultice and wrapped with what looked like brown linen bandages that were remarkably soft, covering most of my chest and stomach and my right upper arm. And I knew as the bandages were tied off that when they came off, when the scars were treated, I would not be ashamed to take off my shirt at the pool, I wouldn't be afraid to let others see the scars that were left.

The scars that were left behind weren't ugly if Sano decided that they should remain. Those scars were beauty marks.

And in a way, it did feel...liberating. I had never so much as swam in Rita's pool because I wouldn't take my shirt off, not even in front of my best friends, because I didn't want them to see how broken the farm left me. Not even Rita, the one person that would understand the most, had seen the scars on my back. And now, she never really would, not the scars that I didn't ever want her to see. That scar and the others like it would be gone if the Parri female was to be believed, smoothed away by the poultice applied to them, leaving only the scars that wouldn't make people gasp if they saw them.

Removing those scars didn't make me whole, nothing would ever make me whole, but what it did was make me feel much better about myself. What was most important to me, which I knew deep in my heart, was that Sano had seen those scars, she had seen the worst of me, and she was still there. And when the scars were gone, only Sano would know what they had looked like, only Sano would ever be privy to the sight of them and what they represented about me and my past. They would be her secret, our secret, and a powerful part of what made me love her so much.

She accepted me for who I was, even when she knew that I would never be whole. She didn't allow my past to affect her feelings for me. She had seen my scars, and she had accepted them as a part of who I am, even if those scars would no longer be there.

Sano was the light that had banished the darkness in my life, and I wanted to spend every second of every day of the rest of my life at her side.

I was in love. I'd admitted it to myself already, maybe months ago, but I had never felt it more intensely than in the moment that I realized that my love was returned. And for someone like me, it was the most fragile of dreams somehow surviving decades of vengeful, merciless hammers to realize fruition.

I was so lucky, it almost wasn't fair.

This is the end of Citadel Online for now.

There might be more in the future.

Thanks for reading.