

Chapter 21

Brennan woke up the next morning with only a slight hangover. His head throbbed lightly as he stood from his bed, going about and getting ready for the day. It was later than he would have preferred but it was doubtful that anyone else was really ready to go either. He washed himself from a basin before dumping the water, getting dressed in basic clothes before stepping out of his room, just in time to catch Kyra stepping out of her own. She looked a little run down but otherwise in good spirits.

“How are you feeling,” Brennan asked as she greeted him with a small wave.

“A little rough, but not nearly as bad as I probably should,” She answered, following Brennan down the stairs.

The two enjoyed a small basic breakfast, during which Landen came down and joined them. After a short greeting, and after Landen ordered his breakfast, they discussed how the day was looking.

“I need to go make a reservation and find out when the carriage will be traveling between the city and the guild village,” Brennan explained after swallowing a bit of eggs. “Depending on the schedule I would like to get out of here by noon.”

“That shouldn't be too hard,” Landen said with a nod. “I'll go get Garren and Lily, as well as do a little supply shopping. Anything you two need?”

“Just the basics,” Brennan said, passing the archer four silver coins before standing.

“Use this, then after it's gone, split the rest between you, Lily and Garren,” He said, nodding as Kyra stood up as well.

“Sure thing boss, we can meet up at the guild hall when we are done.”

Kyra and Brennan left back to their rooms, gathering all of their gear and packing it up, before heading back down to the tavern. Brennan waited a few minutes before Kyra appeared and the two headed off.

“Let's make a detour through the shopping district.” Brennan said, turning as they passed through an intersection. “You need to ‘sell’ those boots right?”

Kyra nodded along, understanding what her mentor was saying. The two stopped at the shopping district and perused a few stores before finally leaving for the guild hall, their cover established. They arrived about ten minutes later, with Kyra claiming a seat and removing her

boots, handing them to Brennan. The slightly older diver set down his spear and took her boots, heading to the front desk.

“Hi, yes, I would like to make a reservation for the shield dungeon,” He told the worker, going through the whole process.

When he was done he put Kyra’s boots on the table, alongside a steel piece.

“Could you identify this for me please?” He asked, the worker nodding in agreement, taking the boots back behind the counter.

After about five minutes the worker returned, carrying the same boots.

“Congratulations, you have here a pair of speed enhancing boots,” The worker said with a smile. “Not a bad potency either. Are you looking to sell or...?”

“No, but thank you,” Brennan answered, taking back the boots. “One last thing, what is the next carriage ride to the guild village after noon?”

“There is one at noon, and at Alastor’s speed it would probably be an hour after that.”

Brennan nodded, tipped the worker and headed back to the table where Kyra was waiting for him.

“Alright, our reservation is for tomorrow afternoon,” He said before handing her the boots. “These are speed enhancing boots, I think Garren has a pair of them, but they could be useful. If not, we will start looking for something better.”

“How much faster will they make me?” She asked, taking the boots back and putting them back on.

“There is no real way to know until you try them out, they interact with people differently. You could have a super powerful pair but they only make you slightly faster because you're naturally slow,” He answered. “Why don't you go out to the back and do some laps, try and get a feel for them.”

Kyra nodded and headed out the back of the guild hall to the practice field, leaving Brennan to go to the guild's bookshelves and scanned through them, taking a few and carrying them back to the table. He gently opened one of the books and started reading through it, trying to learn what he could about the next lair.

Meanwhile Kyra was stretching in the back field, taking her time to warm up. The training yard was empty, the usually loud space quiet save for the sound of the city itself. After a short warm up Kyra began to run around the outer perimeter, starting off slow and steadily picking up

speed. As she slowly sped up she could feel what was her normal speed fall behind her, the boots letting her move noticeably faster. She wasn't exactly a blur, but her normal top speed felt easy. When she was satisfied she had her new speed down she slowed to a stop. It felt as if she was significantly faster, but also seemed to have an easier time reacting quickly as well. Satisfied with her efforts she headed back inside, dropping back down into her chair, peering over Brennan's shoulder.

"Learn anything?"

"Yeah, this is going to be interesting to say the least." He responded, turning the book he was reading to Kyra could see it as well.

There on the page was a sketch of a large eagle, talons outstretched like they were about to grab the artist.

"A bird?" Kyra asked, looking shocked. "We have to fight birds?"

"On the plus side they are very much like the lizards, as the normal ones are dangerous but only if they get lucky and you're an idiot." He explained, turning the page. "Their talons are sharp and their pecking is dangerous, but as long as you fight them off the chances of you receiving a mortal wound is low."

Brennan knocked on the table three times before pointing out a line on the page.

"There are two variants apparently. One that drops stones about the size of your fist and the other is a lightning elemental."

"Like the wolves?" Kyra asked, suddenly nervous.

"Kind of, they seem to be much weaker," He explained. "Less of a way to damage you and more of a way to get you to drop your guard."

The two spent a while going over the information on the lair, putting together the salient points, waiting for their companions to arrive. Eventually the three divers walked in and sat down at their table, Landen pushing a cloth sack of supplies to Brennan.

"Here you are friends, a variety of dried meats, fruits and nuts." He said with a smile. "I also bought a few more spices for your collection Brennan, seeing as we will hopefully be hunting for a lot of our food."

"Great, thank you Landen." Brennan said, despite the fact that his bag had plenty of extra spices already.

Kyra and Brennan spent fifteen minutes dividing everything in the sack between them, Landen, Lily and Garren having theirs already packed.

“Alright, Garren, you said you already dove into this lair, want to start us off?” Brennan asked, motioning to him.

“Sure. We dove it a few times, about two weeks ago now,” He started, leaning back in his chair. “It was a long mountain pass, climbing upwards the entire way. I only ever saw the stone dropping eagles, never the lightning ones.”

“The book said they were rare.”

“Well the stone dropping ones aren’t. They started early and kept up, and the stones seem to get bigger the deeper, or higher I guess, into the lair you go.”

Garren spent the next hour describing his dives into the eagle lair, how they were a bit of a pain because you had to wait for them to come to you rather than chase them down. The mountain pass itself could be treacherous, with the possibility to slip off and with rockslides.

“Rockslides? And you can fall off?” Landen asked, looking incredulous. “How is this lair known as being easy?”

“Well if you slip and fall down you end up falling back into the segment you’re in, as if you came from higher up.” Brennan said, having just finished this part in the book. “The rock slides are obvious and loud as well. The worst injury you can expect is a broken bone, which I think we can handle with our current levels of healing.”

The group talked a bit more about the dungeon before Brennan eventually stood.

“We have about an hour or so before the next carriage ride to the guild village,” He said, checking the time. “We can get some lunch on the way. I really don’t want to miss the carriage and have to wait until later tonight.”

As the group prepared to leave Brennan made his way to the guild worker and purchased a copy of the small booklet he had been reading from.

Together the group left the guild hall and made their way to the pick up location, stopping at a food stand along the way. They ate as they walked, Landen finishing just as they all sat down. The group didn’t have to wait long after that for the carriage to arrive. Several guild hall workers unloaded the cart of what appeared to be harvested materials from other divers onto a smaller cart. When the cart was empty the team climbed in, everyone under the protective cloth that covered the wagon.

The wagon pulled away from the pickup location and headed down the road, the horse pulling us along at a steady pace. It was only a few minutes into the trip that it began to rain, and soon after that, thunder began to rumble in the distance. While the group was dry under the wagon's cover, it was more than a little nerve racking to have nothing but a thin sheet of cloth between them and the brewing storm.

The driver urged the horse to pull faster, and eventually they were under the relative protection of the forest and its trees. The wind, now stymied by the foliage, dropped down immediately, though plenty of water still made it down through the leaves.

"Damn, this came out of nowhere." Landen said, shaking his head as he peaked out the back of the wagon. "I saw sunshine this morning!"

"Not a great start to a week of roughing it." Kyra pointed out, not looking forward to the experience.

"It won't be that bad, not once we get a fire going." Brennan assured her. "We have extra waxed canvas to hang above our tents to keep them dry. Though... I'll admit I don't have enough for everyone."

"I have a solution to that, enough for myself at least, maybe one other if we sleep close." Lily said with a shrug. "Perhaps Kyra and I will sleep close and you three can share the wax cloth."

"We will figure it out." Brennan said confidently. "If it's really bad we can hang around by the leaving point and offer to buy extra wax cloth from teams that are leaving."

The group agreed and went back to quietly waiting. After a few minutes Kyra perked up and looked at Brennan.

"Brennan, can I have my book?" She asked, holding her hand out.

The team leader nodded and reached down into his small satchel, pulling out the book she had chosen, as well as his own.

"Anyone want to read this?" He asked, offering it to his companions. "I'm going to keep reading the booklet on this lair."

Lily accepted the book and started reading it, leaning back against the wall of the wagon, while both Landen and Garren both closed their eyes for a long nap. Brennan pulled out a third, smaller booklet from his satchel and began going over the information again, reviewing everything that the guild had gathered about this lair.

Eventually the wagon slowed to a stop, and the driver called back to get their attention. The team offloaded and looked around. There were several small buildings around, the largest of which was a secondary guild hall, followed by a few smaller guild funded businesses. There were also a dozen or so teams camped around, tending fires and huddling under tarps to escape the rain. All of this was wrapped around a wooden lair fort, this one in slightly better condition than the one encapsulating the lizard lair entrance. After a moment or two of looking around Garren stepped forward and pointed to the back of the fort.

“There is some space along the other side, opposite of the fort entrance,” He explained with a smile. “It has a bit more privacy and stays a bit quieter than around this side.”

“Alright, lead the way then.” Brennan said, gesturing him forward with a sarcastically grandiose gesture.

The shorter diver led the team around the back, and then a few steps into the woods. Sure enough there was a decent sized clearing that would suit them perfectly. It even had a ring of stones for a fire pit.

“Alright. I’m gonna start gathering wood, someone help me while the rest set up the tents.” Brennan said, pulling off his pack and handing it to Kyra, who leaned her shield against a stump to take it.

Garren followed Brennan into the trees, the two gathering a few armfuls of wood, dragging it back to the clearing, just in time to hear a not unfamiliar crunching grinding sound. Pushing into the clearing to find Lily’s stone golem forming a large bridge of stone over before freezing in place, shifting back into solid stone.

“That... is a pretty ingenious way to use that spell,” Brennan commented, dropping his first pile of wood by the stone circle. “And it stays after you dismiss it?”

“I haven’t released it yet.” Lily said with a smirk, lifting up her amulet to show it was still glowing. “It’s just under a command to stay solid and unmoving until I say otherwise. What do you think Kyra, enough room for both of us?”

“Ummm looks like it,” she answered, peering under the rock golem. “Are you sure it’s safe though?”

“As sure as I can be, I haven’t set up my own tent since I figured this one out.”

A minute or so later the team was back to work, setting up their camp for the next week or so. Brennan and Garren grabbed a few more loads of wood and the other three set up the tents and extra protection, using both Brennan’s tarp as well as the cloth Kyra used as a tent. Once everything was set up the group convened around the fire pit, which Lily started easily with a simple spell, despite how wet the wood was.

“So our reservation is tomorrow afternoon.” Brennan started when everyone was sitting. “Landen, if the dive goes well would you be willing to go hunting after we are done?”

“Probably?” Landen said with a shrug. “Depends on the weather and like you said, how the dive goes.”

“Well either way we have plenty of supplies, and we could always buy more from the shop by the entrance,” Brennan said with a nod. “I would rather not live off jerky and dried fruit for the next week.”

The group emphatically agreed.

“The store has some food for sale, though it focuses mostly on diving supplies,” Garren explained, poking the fire with a stick.

“It’s worth checking tomorrow, to know what we have access to if nothing else.” Landen pointed out, Brennan nodding in agreement. “We can check it out tomorrow. For now, there isn’t much left to do but wait until tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 22

When the group woke up the next morning the air was still damp. The ambient moisture had seeped into everyone’s clothes, despite the efforts they went through to keep dry. Lily restarted the fire, everyone huddling around for warmth and in a vain attempt to dry off.

“I think this is the first time I’m looking forward to diving because of the weather,” Kyra said with a huff. “I didn’t know it was possible to be this uncomfortable.”

“It reminds me of home honestly,” Garren said with a shrug. “We lived next to a lake and swamp, every morning the winds would pick up a fog and carry it over the village. Some days it felt like your first breath of the morning was also your first drink!”

The team chuckled, passing around strips of jerky and bags of fruit and nuts for breakfast before gathering all of their gear. They left the tents up, though Lily had to store her stuff in Landens as she needed to release her golem spell. About an hour after they had all woken up they were making their way to the small cluster of buildings near the front of the fort.

Landen, Garren and Kyra visited the shop, buying a large sheet of waxy canvas as well as some other supplies while Brennan and Lily headed to the small guild branch. After a few hours of killing time around, seeing what the small business had to offer the group got back

together near the entrance of the lair fort. The three from the shop brought some bread and cheese, which they split between the group and ate with some more jerky for lunch.

They also returned with mundane but serviceable helmets for Lily, Brennan and Kyra, as they were the only ones without any, save for Landen who needed his eyesight clear of all distractions for his shooting.

By the time that they were finished with lunch it was time to enter the fort itself, the team starting their stretching as they waited for the current divers to leave.

“We are going to lean pretty heavily on you two,” Brennan said, looking at Lily and Landen. “Lily, I think we should hold off summoning any of your golems, I just don’t see the point. Garren is going to be sticking close to you to act as your shield, and I’ll be sticking near Landen.”

“What should I do?” Kyra asked, looking up from the ground as she stretched her legs.

“Stick close to one of us and pay attention,” He answered. “You have your shield to cover yourself.”

She nodded and went back to her stretches, moving onto her arms. Before anyone could say anything else the portal activated and the previous team started pouring out. For a moment Brennan ignored them, until he heard one of them crying. The entire team turned to watch as two of the divers held each other, the other two looking lost as they kneeled beside an unmoving body.

It took a while for them to move out, all of them working together to carry the body from the fort on a cloth and wood stretcher. After they were gone Brennan headed over to talk with one of the guards, the team silent as they waited for him to return. He walked back with a grim look on his face.

“A moment for a fallen diver,” He said formally, the crew looking down for a long pause before Brennan looked back up.

“What happened?” Lily asked, having stepped closer to Landen, holding onto his arm.

“A freak accident, as much as you could call anything that happens in a lair an accident,” Brennan answered. “He slipt and fell down the mountain, reappearing over the section and falling back in. He rolled back and smashed his head against a particularly sharp edged rock.”

Garren cursed under his breath as everyone absorbed the information.

“What are we going to do?” Landen asked. “Do we take advantage of the grave boon or bury the dive?”

Before Kyra could speak up, Brennan answered her question.

“When someone dies in a lair the next run is usually luckier. It's not massive, but enough to get noticed. Burying the dive means I step in and immediately step out, which resets the lair back to normal.”

“Some divers believe that the luck is a gift, an apology for killing someone, but most-” Lily started to say before Garren cut her off.

“Those people are nuts. A lair wants nothing more than to kill every person who enters, it would never apologize,” He said, vehemently shaking his head. “A grave boon is a lair celebrating that it got someone.”

Lily frowned at being cut off, but glumly nodded in agreement.

“I don't necessarily agree with that level of intelligence when lairs are concerned.” Brennan said. “But I would just assume bury the dive anyway. It feels too much like corpse farming for my tastes.”

“Will we still get our turn?” Kyra asked, looking nervous to ask the question. “I'm just curious, not saying it's more important or anything.”

“Yeah, the guild makes allowances for burying the run.” Brennan assured her, before looking among the rest of the group. “Lily, Landen?”

“Do as you like.”

“Bury it.”

With a nod, Brennan turned and headed back to the guards, having a short conversation before heading to the portal. It activated and he stepped through, the portal shutting down a minute later. The fort was silent as the group waited, the portal eventually glowing as Brennan returned.

“Alright, let's wait for the portal to reopen.” He said as he got back to the group. “Unless anyone doesn't want to dive today at all.”

“If we had less than five people I would consider it.” Garren said. “But I don't think we will have any issues, not with our current group.”

“Alright then, let's get ready, the portal should be open again in a few minutes.”

When the portal flare settled, the team quickly got ready. Kyra made her way to Brennan's side, following him as he walked. The team stepped into the portal, quickly adjusting to the lairs' pressure. The group quickly got into a loose formation, with Landen and Kyra sticking close to Brennan and Lily sticking close to Garren.

"Damn... so much for better weather," Landen said, the rain coming down in a light mist.

"Maybe you guys aren't good luck after all," Garren said with a chuckle. "The weather was fine when I ran it with my other group."

Brennan chuckled and stepped forward, getting closer to the path to the next segment. It was disguised as a fallen rock restricting the twelve or so foot wide path that made up the rest of the segment.

"Damn, tight fit," Brennan said, looking around before turning back to the group. "Make sure you have enough room to swing your sword, Garren."

As he talked Brennan leaned his spear against the hill, locking it in place with a few rocks before pulling out his sword.

"I'm leaving my spear behind, I'm more likely to accidentally stick someone with it than I am to actually hurt an eagle."

The group pushed through the first transition, Lily and Garren going first. Not seconds after Brennan, Landen and Kyra joined them, they heard the screech of a large bird. About forty feet up and twenty feet off the side of the path were two black feathered eagles.

"Damn those are some big birds," Landen cursed, knocking an arrow and immediately letting it fly.

The arrow flew into the first eagles, piercing its chest with a strangled screech, before Landen could pull the next arrow from his quiver the second screeched as well, dive bombing the group, aiming right for Landen. Before it could get close however it exploded in a burst of feathers as Lily nailed it with a large spike of ice. Both of them spiraled down until they hit the side of the mountain, tumbling for a moment before disappearing and reappearing above the segment and falling down into it, rolling down to the flat area.

"Gods, that was strange," Garren said, stepping back as the dead eagles fell right by his feet.

Kyra stepped forward after a moment, kneeling by the corpse of the second lair beast, shaking her head after a quick look.

“Almost none of this is harvestable,” She said, frowning slightly. “It’s solid so its heart is still intact, but the feathers are useless. The largest talons are still good though.”

“Do you have anything less hefty Lily?” Brennan asked, turning to look at the mage.

“I suppose, but it’s less accurate.”

“That’s fine. Garren and I are ready if you miss.”

The team pulled back together and pushed into the next segment, quickly dispatching the two eagles inside. This time Lily fired a sphere of fast moving water, seemingly still breaking the eagle enough for them to fall and either die on impact or get finished off by Brennan. Landen took out the other, waiting for a long moment or two to let the eagle get closer so it had less to fall.

This pattern continued until the fourth room, when the number of eagles bumped up to four and one of them was much higher. Landen managed to take out two when the highest dropped its payload, a palm sized stone falling from the sky. Brennan pulled Landen under his shield, Kyra lifting her own. The stone smashed into Brennan’s shield, shattering, its pieces scattering.

“Alright guys, gotta keep your eyes open now,” Brennan said, peeking out from around his shield.

“Were we not doing that already?” Garren asked, just in time for Landen to peek out from the shield, pull an arrow and draw his bow back, taking down the last bird as Lily took down the other.

Over the next six segments more and more eagles appeared over the flat area, until there were four flying above and three off to the side. By then there were too many to easily pick off before they dived bombed, especially as the group was distracted by the now double fist sized rocks that were plummeting down onto their heads.

In the eleventh room, three eagles made it to the group, one of them going after Kyra and the other two going after Lily and Garren. The shorter diver managed to kill the first eagle with his sword, running it through and swinging it to the side before the second eagle was him. It snapped and scratched at him, the first attack skittering off of his protective barrier, which broke after one hit. The eagle pecked at him as well, the massive bird managing to cut his neck before he slashed at it with his short sword, nearly cutting its head completely off.

“Dammit, that hurt!” Garren called, putting his hand on his neck. His wound was bleeding but not dangerously so, more like a particularly deep scratch than anything.

Kyra was fending off her own bird before Brennan got to it, smashing it with the hilt of his sword and carving it up. Kyra kicked it in frustration before stepping back.

“So much for my protective barrier,” Garren said, holding a cloth to his neck. “What a bad match up.”

“Its pretty useless for any lair beast that attacks with many small attacks rather than singular large ones.” Landen pointed out.

The group did a quick search of the small segment before heading to the next. This time Landen and Lily managed to take down more of the eagles, meaning that by the time they made it to the group they were easily handled. The problem became more and more difficult to handle in the next three rooms though.

“This may be easier than fighting for your life but its almost not worth it!” Lily shouted over the screeching eagle that Garren was holding off with his shield. “Hold still!”

The mage reached around her protector and cast a lighting spell that shot a small bolt of electricity out of her hands. It zapped the attacking avian and caused it to seize up and drop, smoke coming off of it.

“Damn, I ruined another one,” She lamented. “Forgot about the rain.”

“It’s not a big deal, there are a few dozen of them to harvest at this point.” Brennan said after he finished off the two harassing him, Landen and Kyra, kicking it for good measure. “As long as its heart is intact- Look!”

Brennan excitedly pointed at the singed bird Lily had just killed, the smoke shifting into dust as the corpse quickly disintegrated. In its place was a small buckler shield, only about a foot in diameter. Lily leaned down and picked it up, examining it for a moment before handing it to Brenna.

“I don’t think this is what you were hoping for in a shield.” She said with a smirk.

“No, it’s nearly useless,” He agreed before passing it to Kyra. “Unless it has some sort of monstrously useful ability...?”

Kyra accepted the shield and focused on it, using her amulet to check its general ability. After a moment she shook her head.

“No, it’s just basic gear,” She said before.

“Still, the agreement was that armor and shields go to Kyra.” Landen pointed out. “Looks like you have a spare shield.”

“Oh, it's alright-” She said, beginning to refuse before Brennan shook his head.

“It's important to hold up the contract,” He said, taking the shield from her and motioning for her to turn around so he could store it in her pack. “It probably wouldn't be a problem with this group but allowing flexibility in a contract that wasn't built to have it will let people wiggle and scheme. Trust me, it's better this way.”

“He is right Kyra, no hard feelings,” Garren assured her, Kyra relenting with a sigh.

“There are so many etiquette rules for diving,” she complained. “How do you keep track of them all?”

“They sink in eventually.” Lily answered with a smile. “No one worth your time will call you out if you explain your new anyway.”

“It's another benefit for diving with a team,” Landen pointed out as the group prepared to cross into the next segment. “Though it's good to have a solid agreement for loot in those cases as well. Even a tight knit team can fall apart if boundaries aren't made and respected.”

Kyra's eyes flickered to Brennan, who nodded and then shrugged, both of their minds going back to Brennan's story of his old team.

After a moment to investigate the area they moved onto the next room, then the next, and the next. Each member picked up scratches and cuts from the sharp talons and beaks of the birds, their numbers making it impossible to block and defend against them all. By the time they reached the final segment before the lair boss Brennan's, Krya's and Garren's arms were sore from blocking the head sized stones that the lair beasts were dropping in the last two segments.

“This lair is terrible!” Lily said, dabbing a cut along her cheek with a cloth, conveniently produced from Brennan's bag.

“It's frustrating for sure,” Landen agreed, sitting beside her on a rock. “Is this standard for what you saw Garren?”

“Very much so,” He answered, already sitting on the wet ground. “I dove it twice with Marta and a few others. We never saw the lightning eagles, just these bastards.”

“I can't imagine they are worse than this.” Lily said, getting a nudge from Landen.

“Don't say things like that.”

“Fine fine,” She relented, before looking over at Brennan. “How about a ten minute break leader?”

“I think that will be fine,” He answered as he sat on his shield, which was face down on the ground.

Garren cursed when he saw that, doing the same despite the fact that his butt was already wet from the soggy muddy ground.

“Won’t we be delaying the next team?” Kyra asked.

“Not for a ten minute break.” Brennan said. “There is no reason to rush.”

The group spent a few minutes tending to their minor wounds, passing a water skin around and generally letting their muscles relax. When about fifteen minutes had passed Brennan stood back up, his hand extended to help Kyra to her feet.

“Alright everyone, let's not put this off any longer.”

Chapter 23

It was immediately apparent that the boss lair was very different from every segment they had been through before. Instead of a small path with a drop on one side and a rise on the other, it immediately opened up into a large flat area with no walls or barriers on any side. The ground was no longer gravel and rock either, but instead a matted sheet of intertwined sticks and branches.

They had entered a nest. A nest for a bird that no doubt dwarfed a human.

Before anyone could say anything a loud screech, lower and more visceral than any the group had heard yet, startled everyone. Luckily Landen immediately spotted where it was coming from.

“Up and to the left!” He called, already pulling and nocking an arrow.

A massive bird, whose main body was just bigger than Brennan, streaked down, its claws stretched out in an attempt to grab someone. Luckily with Landen's call out Garren had just enough time to grab Lily and jump to the side, both of them getting out of the way. Landen cursed and let his arrow fly, but the massive eagle was too quick, flapping its wings and gaining altitude fast, the arrow missing by a wide margin.

Lily and Garren scrambled to their feet, managing to stand just in time to watch Brennan, Kyra and Landen have to dive clear of another divebomb. Landen tumbled, screaming as he held his arm, blood already leaking from between his fingers.

“He got me!” he called out, rolling over and managing to climb to his feet, his bow still on the ground.

Brennan, who was helping the archer to his feet, looked to Lily.

“Get your golem up!” He called out. “Use it to hide behind!”

Lily nodded and quickly started casting the golem spell, her body pulsing with magic. The massive eagle swooped and turned, as if attracted to the potent spell. It dived directly for her, trying to beat her casting time. Just before it reached her however a massive golem broke through the branches sticks and whatever else was folded and woven into the nest floor. The massive bird smashed into the rising golem, screeching and yapping as it tumbled and rolled, losing all its momentum before finally stopping at the far edge of the nest.

The golem, which hadn't even really been finished, shattered, scattering into chunks that followed the bird's trajectory. Luckily the larger ones seemed to miss Lily, who had been behind the golem when the bird collided with it. She was thrown clear by the impact but was already standing under her own power.

In the meantime Landed had already healed himself with his own crystal, his blood stained arm fully fixed. He was already picking up his bow when the sound of shattering stone and screeching lair boss filled the arena.

“Lily!” He called out, taking two steps toward her before she held up her hand, calling back.

“I'm fine!”

The large bird interrupted any response when it slowly got upright, untangling its wings and screeching.

“Hit its wings!” Brennan called out. “Before it takes off!”

Both Lily and Landen turned to the massive bird, both of them focusing immediately. Landen's bow glowed orange and fired a glowing arrow, while Lily did a short chant and fired a spear of rock from the ground. Both of them hurtled to the bird, who was just starting to take off. The arrow hit first, impacting the left wing and exploding, sending chunks of flesh, splatters of black blood and feathers into the air. However, the explosion and resulting carnage stunned the unnatural beast, causing it to fall to the ground, the three foot spike of stone barely missing its other wing.

“Lily, get another golem on it!” Brennan shouted before dashing into the stunned birds range, using his sword to slice at the un damaged wing.

The enhanced sword did surprisingly little damage, cutting through feathers but not much deeper, barely a scratch compared to the rended flesh of its other wing. Still, it was a start, and Brennan followed his first strike with a second and third before he was forced to dash back from the recovering beast.

By then Lily was done summoning her golem, the second large massive rock construct grabbing hold of the beast, keeping it from moving. It slammed its massive stone fist against its wing joint, smashing it until it shattered, causing the beast to screech out again, this time loud enough to stun the divers. The golem held on though, pinning it to the ground.

“Hit it again!” Brennan called, dashing back and stabbing at the pinned beast, both Lily and Landen hitting the large avian. Garren joined Brennan, slashing and cutting at the eagle, his blade glowing as he cut into it.

Finally, with his last glowing arrow, Landen managed to catch the beast in its eye, the arrow exploding and blowing out the side of its head. It convulsed once before collapsing, finally dead. The team held their breaths, waiting for the other boot to drop before eventually letting it out.

“Dammit, that was difficult.” Landen said, letting out a rare curse before making a beeline for Lily. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She said, waving off her worried friend. “Might have a few bruises but nothing a healing stone won’t fix.”

“You, Garren and Kyra can have one charge each from our stone once we leave.” Brennan said. “To keep off infections and heal up all those scratches.”

“What about you?” Kyra asked, sounding worried.

“I’m pretty much intact,” He answered with a shrug. “I’ll take a charge tomorrow morning.”

“I would just like to say that that bugger was bigger than either of the beasts I fought before,” Garren said, having sat down on his shield. “By at least a few feet. And there were not that many smaller eagles in the other segments either.”

“Sounds like we got unlucky,” Landed said as the team took their time to recover, passing the healing stone between three of them. “It happens, could have been worse.”

"We survived, came out on top and no one lost any limbs," Brennan pointed out with a shrug. "Sounds like a win to me."

After a few more minutes taking a break they started investigating the nest, looking for anything valuable while Kyra started harvesting the boss. At first they thought there was nothing of worth until Brennan happened to peer under the nest where Lily's first golem had sprang from the stone below. There, under everything was a series of thick green vines, somehow still vibrant despite being on stone and under the nest.

When Kyra was done harvesting she took a look and nodded.

"That's worth about a silver per pound," She said, turning the vine over in her hand. "Used for making some sort of potion I think."

They spent the next thirty minutes watching two golems tear the nest apart, pulling out almost fifteen pounds of the vine, surprising the whole group. Done with this segment they began the long process of harvesting each previous segment, not finding anything extra until five rooms back when Lily found a hidden space a few feet up the mountain side. Getting it open involved her summoning another golem to lift a large rock, but inside they found a singular ring. A quick scan by Kyra showed that it was an agility increasing ring, and by no small amount.

"I would actually like to have that, if no one else is interested," Landen said. "With a bit more speed I should be able to fire my arrows. Not to mention agility upgrades sometimes increase hand eye coordination too."

"That's fine. I would have asked to have it but simply because getting a flat upgrade is never a bad thing," Brennan said with a shrug. "That said, you realize something like that is going to be worth multiple gold pieces, right?"

"Of course, and I believe between what we will be making here and what I have saved up should cover it," The archer said confidently, accepting the ring as Brennan handed it to him, tucking it into a pocket.

The team slowly made it through the rest of the segments, Kyra taking her time to harvest everything. In total she managed to get two talons, two eyes, ten pinion feathers and the occasional gizzard stone. She estimated as she was working that they would get three steel per bird, four or five if they had a stone.

"What good are the stones?" Garren asked as he watched her extract one from a black ichor coated intestine.

"Potion makers use them. They are put in the bottom of a brewing vessel for a bunch of recipes to maximize potency," She explained, putting the stone in a bag. "Which is about the only use it could possibly have. Lair beasts don't eat."

“Thank the gods for that.” Landen said darkly. “I can imagine there would only be one thing for them to eat.”

The group looked at the archer for a moment before Brennan nodded in understanding.

“He means us.”

“Oh hell.” Garren said, eyes wide before looking back at the bird being harvested. “That would be dire wouldn't it?”

By the time everything was harvested and all rooms had been inspected the group was tired and ready to leave. They all grabbed bags full of harvested materials, this time only a few full ones given the size of the creatures Kyra was harvesting, before stepping through the portal and out of the lair. Brennan, as usual, was the last one out, carrying his reclaimed spear as he stepped into the portal.

It didn't take long once they had left the lair to make their way to the guild hall to get their harvest appraised and get their stuff identified. In total each of the team members made nine silver pieces and three steel, making another four silver each from Landen's share as well as the extra he owed for the ring. The guild worker happily took the materials and gave them their money, directing the group back out of the cramped building now that business was completed.

The sky was still gray and while the rain had stopped they could feel its constant threat to come back as they made their way back to their camp. It was still damp, but the extra tarp they had bought was up relatively quickly, and only minutes before the rain started to fall again. Everyone pulled off their armor and extra bits, leaving them by their tents before gathering around the fire pit. Again Lily used her magic to start a fire before basic food was passed around.

“I'll go hunting tomorrow,” Landen said after pulling off another chunk of jerky with his teeth. “Feel like coming with me Brennan?”

“Yeah, sure,” He responded with a shrug.

“You know... there is a river a five minute walk that way,” Garren said, pointing to the east. “There is a path and everything. We would have to head there to refill our waterskins anyway. If we got some fishing rods.”

“Fishing rods? Please,” Lily said with a scoff. “Unless you are looking to give fish a fair chance there's no reason to use fishing poles when you have a mage around.”

“So... fishing instead of hunting?” Landen asked.

“Worth a shot. No way of knowing if there will be anything good swimming in the river though,” Brennan pointed out. “We can all walk out there tomorrow, unless someone wants to stay here.”

When no one spoke up Brennan nodded. After a moment or two the group got quiet before Garren reached into his own pack and pulled out a bag, giving it a slight shake. It rattled faintly, but not like coins.

“Anyone up for a game of dice?” He asked with an eager smile. “For low coins or just for fun, either way is fine.”

“Ah! Yes I will,” Kyra said happily, getting a look from Brennan. “My father loved playing dice, he taught me when I was ten.”

“I guess that means we will have to watch out for you then!” Landen said with a smile. “Lily, think you could magic up a table or two to play on?”

“You want me to use the magic I worked my ass off to get to make you a table?” She asked, looking at her friend like she was annoyed before suddenly smirking. “Fine, but only because Kyra looks so excited to play.”

Lily went about using some earth moving magic to raise a slab of stone, as well as some simple stone seats. Everyone made their way to the table, settling down while Garren dumped his dice onto the stone surface. They played until it was dark, and then for a bit longer when Lily summoned a floating globule of light.

Eventually, with high spirits and exhausted bodies, the group made their way to bed, Lily summoning a golem to shelter her and Kyra from the elements.

Chapter 24

Brennan used his healing stone a single time almost immediately after waking up, letting out a soft sigh of relief as the dozens of small cuts left over by the previous day's dive were healed. He resisted the urge to use another charge to soften his other soreness, instead making his way out of his tent

Surprisingly Garren was already up, waving to his temporary leader as he climbed out of his tent and stood.

“Morning Brennan,” The shorter man said softly, trying to keep from waking up. “I bought a kettle yesterday at the shop. Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please,” He responded, sitting down in front of the already burning fire.

The two divers shared small talk as they waited for the tea to warm up, Garren pouring a cup for both of them when it was done. Not long after that the others began waking up, each of them having a cup of tea.

“That was an amazing purchase, Garren.” Kyra said, taking a deep breath of her hot beverage. “I’m so glad you spotted it.”

“Couldn’t resist honestly,” Garren responded with a shrug. “I had one before but a travel companion made off with it one night. Learned me good not to trust strangers off the cuff.”

The team talked for a little while, enjoying the warm fire on the cool morning, talking about poor travel companions and their experiences. Eventually Brennan brought up the day’s schedule.

“We need to make a reservation for tomorrow’s dive,” He said, leaning back on his hands. “After that we could head for the river. I would also like to stop by the store, to see if they have any soap.”

The team agreed and was soon preparing to leave for most of the day. First stop was the small group of buildings, more specifically the small guild hall. As Brennan was inside making a reservation Kyra turned to Landen.

“How does this guild hall and the one back in the city communicate?” She asked, looking back at the wood and stone building.

“I... That is a really good question,” Landen said after a moment. “Smoke signals? Mirrors maybe?”

“Communication spells probably.” Lily said, slapping Landens shoulder. “It’s a pretty common spell.”

“Oh... that sounds useful, what’s its range?” Kyra asked, curious now.

“That I can’t tell you.” Lily answered with a shrug. “Enough to get between here and the city.”

“You get to be sassy but I’m not allowed?” Landen asked, pretending to be annoyed.

“Yup!”

Brennan returned not long after, the group making their way to the shop, Brennan quickly walking in to buy a few bars of soap for everyone. After that they headed out of the small town to the forest edge, Garren pointing out the trail. After one last check to make sure they didn't need anything else the group started the short walk to the river.

"Our reservation is later in the afternoon tomorrow," Brennan said after a few minutes. "An hour or so after yesterday's was."

Eventually the group arrived at the river, seemingly the only group there at the moment. Just as they did the clouds began to break, sunbeams starting to break through the layer of gloom that had been over the world. Landen and Garren went about making a small fire while Lily, Kyra and Brennan looked over the waters edge.

The river itself was flowing at a respectable rate, the current noticeable as it swirled around rocks and boulders, as well as a fallen tree on the other side. The river was about thirty feet across, and already they could spot a few smaller fish swimming along with the current.

"Alright. Here is the plan." Lily said, turning to Brennan and Kyra. "I need you two in the river. I'm going to walk up stream and zap a few big fish that I see, and you two will catch them as they float down."

"Uhhh... how cold is the water?" Kyra asked hesitantly, looking at the clear moving liquid not a few feet away.

"It shouldn't be too cold," Brennan answered, already pulling off his armor and sword, his spear up at the camp where the other two were starting a fire. "It's an offshoot of the Fremarch River, which means it's had plenty of time to warm up."

Kyra nodded and started to pull off her own armor while Brennan waded into the water, he got a few dozen feet in before he slipped on a rock, his feet coming out from under him, falling back into the water with a large splash. When he came to the surface both Lily and Kyra were laughing, the latter getting closer to the water.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up." Brennan said, wiping his face.

Still chuckling to herself Lily walked along the water's edge, peering into the relatively clear river as she did. Eventually she let out a noise of triumph before starting to chant, her hand pointed at the river. After a moment a bolt of electricity fired from her palm, hitting the water with a loud sizzling impact. After a few seconds a fish, about a foot long, floated to the surface. It followed the current down the river where Brennan caught it, throwing it onto the embankment.

It didn't take long for them to gather a half dozen fish of respectable size. By then the fire was going and Landen and Garren watched from the edge of the river. With their meal caught, Brennan called out to Landen.

"Throw me a bar of soap."

Landen quickly found and tossed it to him, the experienced diver scrubbing himself and his clothes with the soap, effectively cleaning both at once. He handed the soap to Kyra as he climbed out of the river, who quickly followed his lead. When they were both clean Brennan sat down by the fire, changing into different clothes while the now clean pair hung to dry. Kyra did much of the same, though instead of sitting down at the fire she was gutting and cleaning the fish with a practiced hand, working on a flat stone surface Lily made for her.

Not long after that six fileted fish were arranged around the fire, their bodies cleaned and prepared with shaved sticks. A pot of water was also boiling. The meat was already cooking, filling the small camp with amazing smells. Everyone, now cleaned and changed, was sitting around the fire, waiting for the meat to be done. With a smirk Brennan stood, heading to his pack. He pretending to go through it before returning with a bottle of a sweet berry liquor, his other hand carrying five wooden mugs. Kyra had been watching and saw him pull them both from his satchel.

"I saw this at the store and figured it might be nice to enjoy a drink." He said with a smile, pouring a small mug for himself, passing the glasses and the bottle to Landen, who was sitting next to him. "It's sweet but good, at least in my opinion."

The group shared a drink while they waited for their food to finish, talking about the previous day's dive, as well as tomorrows.

"What are the chances of seeing the other form of the eagles tomorrow?" Landen asked, looking at Brennan.

"Small but possible," He answered. "According to the book it shows up one out of eight times."

"I hadn't realized the chance was that low," Garren said with a sound of surprise. "The way the last group talked about it was every other dive."

"Not according to the official guide."

"I would be happy to give that one a chance." Lily said with an annoyed frown. "The stone dropping eagles were not fun."

"You try blocking stones the size of your head next time," Garren said with a huff before continuing. "My arm is still sore."

“Mine as well. We can use the last two charges on my healing stone right before we head to sleep.” Brennan assured the other diver.

For the next few hours the team drank, ate and talked. Lily and Landen shared a few stories of their old group, while Garren told a few stories about what he did before he became a diver. Apparently being a caravan guard was a horrible experience.

“It was absolutely not worth it,” He explained, taking another sip of his liquor. “There could be threats at every corner, between bandits and lair beasts, not to mention just simple wild animals, though they don’t cause much of a problem. Imagine having the same constant stress you feel while lair diving except it lasts for days, sometimes weeks, except you don’t get paid nearly as well. Sure the chances of you actually getting attacked were low, but it only had to happen once and you can never relax on the job again.”

“Did you...?” Kyra started to ask, trailing off before she could finish.

“Get attacked? You bet I did. I worked for four years as a caravan guard. We were ambushed by bandits a few times, and had to drive off escaped lair beasts a few times as well. The last time I got injured pretty badly, made me seriously reconsider my chosen career.” Garren said with a shrug. “Figured if I was going to be putting my life on the line like that I may as well be making money worth the risk. Haven’t looked back since.”

About an hour of chatting later the group packed up, heading back to the guild village. The river had become a bit more populated as time went on, and while no one was being obnoxious, it wasn’t difficult to tell that being around random heavily armed divers, way out in the wilderness made Brennan nervous, as well as Lily surprisingly. Thankfully nobody commented on it.

When they arrived back at the slowly drying camp Garren brought out the dice again and they spent the rest of the day playing for fun, making the occasional friendly bet to make it interesting.

It was an hour after noon when the team entered the lair again, having spent the morning decompressing and preparing. The difference between this diev and the previous was immediately noticeable.

The weather had calmed, the rain and winds replaced by a gentle breeze, only slightly cooler than the air outside. The segment’s walkable area was slightly larger as well, though only by a couple of feet. Unfortunately it wasn’t all good. Where the previous days segments had been flanked on both sides by relatively shallow hills, this time they were much more steep.

“Alright everyone, back into the same formations. Keep your eyes open and stay away from the edge. That’s looking much more like a fall that breaks something rather than one that will just knock you around a bit.”

The first few segments went more or less the same as their first dive had. The low amount of eagles meant they could be handled easily by Landen and Lily, with the shield barriers only having to step in twice before all the way to the sixth segment. They knew that it was likely to get harder quickly though.

After a short break the team quickly got back into their loose formations, make their way into the seventh segment, everyone had their eyes on the “sky”. It took a moment to spot the eagles this time.

“Their! Looks like five of them!” Garren pointed out, his hand pointing much lower than the previous eagles had started. “Two look a bit different!”

Three of the eagles dived immediately, screeching as they did. The remaining two eagles hung back, only diving when Landen and Lily were distracted. These new eagles had surprisingly light blue feathers that blended into the sky behind them, making them pretty hard to spot. As they dove they remained silent, where the normal ones screeched at every opportunity.

“Get ready!” Brennan shouted, holding his shield up to block the two birds swooping down.

Before the two ranged capable divers could take them down, the eagles got closer. As they did the sound of electricity sparking was audible, though it wasn’t just before they impacted Kyra and Brennan’s shields that they were close enough to see where it was coming from. Their talons were crackled with electric energy, and as they scratched and pecked at the divers, all the while electricity sparked and traveled through their shields, shocking them both.

“Nnggg Fuck!” Brennan shouted out, gritting his teeth and jamming his sword into the one attacking him, while Garren chopped through the one harrasing Kyra. “Dammit, that hurt!”

“You two alright? Landen asked, stepping closer to Kyra to check her over.

“Y-yeah, it was more surprising than anything,” The harvester answered. “I didn’t expect it to pass through my shield... though I suppose I should have with all of the metal.”

“It’s enough to cause problems if they catch you at the wrong moment,” Brennan added, shaking off the effects of the shock. “You guys need to focus on them, they need to get taken out first.”

Luckily, as they progressed through the lair, the number of lightning eagles per segment only went up once, between the thirteenth and fourteenth segments, meaning that Lily and Landen were able to consistently take them down before they reached any of the shield carriers. However, with the ranged capable divers focused on the light blue eagles, the normal eagles made it through much more frequently. In the end Brennan and Garren were covered in small cuts and nicks, Garren's one hit shield from his helmet having long since shattered. Luckily the group hadn't sustained any large injuries as they made their way to the crossing into the final segment, the lair boss arena.

"I'm going back to the start to get my spear," Brennan said as everyone found spots to rest. "If the nest is anything like what we dealt with last time there was plenty of room for me to use it."

"I'll go with you," Kyra said, starting to stand, only to get waved off by Brennan.

"No, enjoy your rest. I'll be back in a few minutes and then a few minutes after that we will crack the seal and head in," The temporary leader said. "There is a large chance that this lair boss has elemental elements, I want everyone to rest up."

Brennan left the last segment and headed back through the lair, making it through with no trouble, grabbing his spear and returning to the last segment, his sword sheathed. He plopped down next to Kyra, taking his own break for a few minutes. The group passed around some rations and their waterskins before eventually standing, preparing to enter the final room.

"Lily, I want you to summon a golem before we head in," Brennan said, getting a nod in return. "We have no idea what this bastard will be capable of, so keep your head on a swivel and play defensive at first. If everything goes well we can repeat what happened last time. If not, it will be up to you Lily and Landen to bring it down to our level so we can finish it off. Kyra, you have been doing a great job helping keep the smaller bastards from cutting us up to bad, but I really want you to hang back."

Everyone nodded in confirmation as Brennan went through his plan, mentioning a few more things before nodding.

"Alright. Is everyone all set? Good, let's head in."

The temporary leader turned and activated the barrier preventing them from accessing the boss' lair. Everyone formed up into their groups, Lily's golem leading them into the final segment.

Chapter 25

The team entered into the boss arena with their eyes on the fake sky, tensely trying to spot the large eagle. The structure of the arena was the same as before, a large nest made of sticks and branches, woven together haphazardly. As they slowly step closer to the center of the vaguely circular nest. Landen directed his aim upwards at a shallow angle.

“There!” He shouts, only to curse and continue. “Its already dive bombing us! Move!”

Kyra, Garren and Lily were all looking at the eagle's general direction and were able to spot it and dive clear, but Brennan was looking in the other direction. The streak of blue feathers knocked him backward, tumbling and rolling before coming to a stop a dozen feet from where he had been.

As the monster flew over the golem attempted to stop it, but was inevitably too slow. Landen shot two arrows as it dove, but was unfortunately unable to hit it. The bird was still silent, even its flapping wings were only making soft whooshing noises as it flapped hard to gain more altitude.

With a grunt Brennan struggled to stand again, cursing as he felt a grating sensation in his hip. He pulled out his healing stone and focused, the stone glowing as healing energy suffused his body. The pain and grinding sensation mostly faded, only a bare minimum still noticeable.

Both Landen and Lily followed the avian's movements, launching their own attacks that streak after the bird. Lily's flare of fire fell low, unable to keep up with the steep climb, while Landens arrow slammed into the unnatural creature's back. For the first time the beast screeched, a lower sound than even the previous lair boss.

As if in reaction to the landed hit the bird turns and hovers, moving its wings in long steady flaps. Its blue feathers start to glow a bit before its talons start to crackle. It dives again, the glowing electricity leaving an after image glowing streak as it moves.

“Don't let it hit you!” Brennan called out, activating his boots to dash, using his momentum to dive and knock Kyra and Landen off of their feet.

As all three of them rolled out of the way the massive eagles crackling talons cut through the air just where they had been standing, narrowly missing them. As it passed again, Lily's golem tried to grab it again, this time managing to grab a fist full of feathers, only for them to get yanked out of the bird's body, who screeched again.

The bird flew up and away, getting out of range of the two range capable divers, coming around and diving again. It seemed to be a bit less stable with a chunk of feathers torn from its

right wing, but it still managed to line up another attack, its talons still crackling and glowing. As it screeched and dove Brennan dashed, having just stood up from his dive to save Landen and Kyra.

His dash brought him right into the path of the giant unnatural bird, narrowly avoiding the talons as he jabbed the beast's wing with his spear, the metal tip glowing as he stabbed, freezing ice magic spreading into the punctured wing. The lair boss screeched again as its left wing was frozen and damaged, stuck in place and unable to move. It tried to compensate but instead tumbled, slamming into the ground at speed, rolling and tumbling just as the first one had two days ago. It rolled and slammed before coming to a rest, its large body turning and scrambling to stand up straight. Its wings were lightly injured by its fall, but the slamming and tumbling also seemed to have freed its wing from the ice.

"Hit it again!" Brennan called. "Keep it from taking off!"

Lily's golem was on the bird before Brennan could even finish his order, the mage also attacking its wing with a spike of rock, which slammed into the same wing that her golem was holding onto, snapping the large bone inside like a twig. Landen lined up a shot and fired a glowing orange arrow, only for it to narrowly miss the beast and explode the nest behind it.

Before anyone could follow up the bird's beak began to glow the same crackling blue its talons had been. It darted its head forward, snapping out an attack that smashed the golems stone head into chunks, electricity pulsing down its body as the construct disintegrated. Garren, who had been charging to take advantage of the bird's pinned state, was caught by surprise when its wing flung out and caught him in the shield, having just barely gotten it up in time.

The back liner was flung back, slamming into the ground and rolling, coming to a stop by Kyra, who kneeled to help him to his feet, making sure to keep her shield between the both of them and the lair boss.

With everyone pushed back, Lily's golem shattered and the bird pulling its trashed wing up against its body, there was a heavy and tense pause in the fighting. The color in the bird's beak receded, its energy already spent. Brennan gripped his spear tightly as Landen and Lily prepared their next attacks, before finally the spear wielding diver charged, ending the momentary lull.

Lily and Landen both launched attacks at the unnatural beast, Landen's an exploding shot and Lily's a sizzling ball of fire. Proving its unnatural nature the blue eagle lifted its damaged wing in a half turn, catching both of the attacks and sacrificing its limb in the process. Moments after impact both of the attacks detonated, tearing the limb to pieces and destroying it. The bird didn't even seem to care, turning and launching itself forward as it attempted to take at least one of its attackers with it.

Brennan, however, was ready. Activating his shield the experienced diver sent a wave of force blasting out, impacting the massive bird's head. The damage was minimal, but the blast of force batted the head to the side. The large bird screeched and attempted to stop, but was unable to control the momentum of its large body. Taking advantage of the opening he had created, Brennan stabbed forward with his spear, activating another ability, the glow starting from the base and rocketing to the tip, the energy of the stab massively increased and focused directly into the creature's neck.

A resounding crack echoed through the arena as the force of the attack snapped the creature's neck. The body went limp, its forward momentum still knocking Brennan to the side as it tumbled and skidded to a stop. It still snapped at Landen, who was a few feet from where it had come to rest. The creature was clearly paralyzed and beaten, but its own unnatural drive to kill divers prevented it from giving up. With a sigh Landen knocked an arrow and fired it directly into its eye, killing the massive avian instantly.

The group waited for a long moment, holding their breath before finally letting it out when no new threats arrived. Brennan, who was still on the ground, let out a long groan.

"Why the fuck is this lair considered easy?" He asked, looking up at the false sky. "There was nothing easy about this boss. Either of them!"

"We need more ranged options." Garren offered, now sitting down on his shield. "We had three archers and one of them lent me a crossbow. Marta was really the only dedicated melee fighter when we ran it with that other group."

"... and you didn't think that was worth mentioning?" Brennan asked after a pause, his voice tense.

Silence reigned over the arena for a full thirty seconds before Garren spoke again.

"Sorry," He apologized sheepishly. "I should have, especially after the first one."

Brennan picked up a stick, pulling it from the nest and throwing it at Garren. The other diver, who was looking down, wasn't expecting and stumbled backwards. He looked to see what had hit him, only to see Brennan making a rude gesture at him, getting a chuckle out of Kyra.

"I'm just going to lay here for a bit more," Brennan said, closing his eyes. "Feel free to start harvesting whenever you're ready, Kyra."

Kyra nodded, choosing to take her own break before starting her work a few minutes later. While she worked the rest of the team started inspecting the nest, checking for anything worth taking. Unfortunately they found nothing, even after tearing up a considerable percentage of the nest itself.

Soon they started working their way back through the previous segments, investigating it closely while Kyra harvested what she could from the large eagles. After a few segments, Garren stumbled on their first bonus resource. A small group of rough mountain flowers hidden behind a rock, three or four feet up the hill.

A few segments later they found a bracelet that Lily immediately called for herself after Kyra examined it. The bracelet, which was hidden inside a hollow stone the size of a fist, was a special type of storage item that Lily was extremely excited about.

"It's a grimoire holder!" She said excitedly, barely containing herself. "It holds a singular grimoire inside its gemstone. You can summon and store it whenever you want! God I've been looking for one of these for forever! Garren was right, you guys are good luck!"

"What's it worth?" Brennan asked, looking very curious at the mention of a way to store a grimoire.

"Uhh less than a gold piece?" She answered, with a shrug. "They aren't super rare, they are more of a convenience thing really. They aren't secure or anything, anyone could take it, put it on and pull your grimoire out of it. Plus it's kind of obvious. I would have recognized it by looks alone, without Kyra's description."

As she talked she showed off the bracelet. It was mostly made of a gold like metal, with a chain that encircled the wrist with a larger plate with crystal set into it. It was distinctive, and apparently all of them shared the same general look. Brennan pretended to be interested a bit more, but let her have it without any issues since his only interest was in its ability to hide his own grimoire in a way people wouldn't know about.

An hour and some change later the group left the lair and headed to the guild hall offshoot, trading in their materials and splitting the money. In all everyone got just a bit over a gold coin each.

"I'm telling you, no other group I've been in averages a gold piece per dive," Garren said excitedly, adding his money to his own coin pouch.

"Thank Kyra," Brennan said with a smile, gesturing to the slightly younger diver. "I don't think I've ever heard a guild worker ever compliment a team's harvester and this is the third time I've had one go out of their way to do so since I started mentoring her."

"I just do what my dad taught me," Kyra said, blushing and waving away the incoming complements.

"Well he clearly did a good job." Garren said with a smile, patting her shoulder. "Now I'm going to the general store. With any luck they will have a few bottles of something good to celebrate with. Any of that liquor left Brennan?"

“Maybe enough for another round,” He answered, handing the man two silvers. “Buy some fresh food as well.”

Garren nodded and headed to the store, the rest of the team waiting patiently for him. When he returned one of the store clerks was carrying a large canvas bag behind him, while the diver himself was hefting a large barrel of some kind. The store clerk handed Brennan the bag, who was shaking his head at Garren’s purchase.

“What?” The man asked defensively. “It was all they had. Besides, we don’t have to drink it all tonight.”

The group made their way to the campsite, Brennan cooking up a simple dinner from the vegetables and meat that Garren had bought. As the temporary group waited the temperature started to drop with the setting sun. Those not occupied gathered wood to keep the fire going into the night.

Landen helped Garren tap the medium sized keg, setting it up on a rock stand made by Lily, pouring drinks for everyone as the food was being finished. The meal was pleasant, if a bit basic, while the mead was warm, helping stave off the creeping wet cold permeating the night. Garren suggested a game of dice or cards, but his heart wasn’t truly in it. It was getting late, and everyone was tired. With subdued goodnights they headed crawled into their tents.

The next morning was a late start, the crew sleeping in to enjoy their day off. Landen had woken up earlier, walked to the store and bought eggs and bacon, cooking both on a flat slab of rock Lily had made for him. The rest of the group woke up to the pleasant smells of breakfast, which was eagerly eaten.

It was quickly decided that they would spend the day relaxing. Brennan needed to make another reservation, going off on his own to visit the guild hall offshoot after he finished his breakfast. He returned with two medium sized crossbows and two quivers of bolts, all of which were made from lair materials. He passed one of the crossbows and one of the quivers to Garren.

“You know how to use one of these?” He asked, watching the man closely.

“Well enough not to shoot myself or my friends in the foot,” He responded. “With some practice I’m sure I could help.”

With that, the day’s plans were set. Garren and Brennan practiced with their crossbows, getting pointers from Landen who was apparently almost as familiar with them as he was a normal bow. Eventually that turned into everyone trying them out, taking turns passing them around and playing dice or cards as the others gave it a shot. Lily spent at least an hour

perfecting her grimoire summoning, the book popping out of the bracelet and into her hands. By the end of the day she could control which part of the book it came out open to.

Meals were basic for the day, relying on the travel stable food until dinner, when Garren walked back to the shop and bought more fresh food, even going as far as to refuse the money Brennan offered him.

With the meal done and the keg down to its last third, the group wound down around the campfire, making small talk and discussing strategies for the next day.

“If Garren and I are going to be shooting then you will need to have a golem up,” Brennan said, talking to Lily. “It’s going to take up a lot of space but you need some sort of protection.”

“I’ll protect Landen,” Kyra volunteered, continuing quickly to cut off Brennan. “I know harvesters aren’t supposed to but the eagles were all over me when I wasn’t doing anything, so I may as well be doing *something*.”

Brennan took a moment before eventually nodding, albeit reluctantly.

“Fine. But you need to be careful. I know you can handle yourself but it’s all worthless if you can’t harvest properly. This lair... I don’t want to jinx it but this isn’t the kind of lair where I’m worried about it. Even if they get one of your fingers between my healing stone and Landens we could reattach it, assuming they don’t take it with them. But it’s a bad habit to get into. So yes, you can help defend Landen, but you need to remember that a harvester’s first non life or death responsibility is to stay whole so they can do their job when we are done with ours.”

“Gods this is refreshing.” Lily said, cutting in before Kyra, who had gotten a little pale at Brennan’s slightly worrying speech, could respond. “Most harvesters I know are not nearly as worried about doing their fair share. I’ve met harvesters who won’t even go into a new segment until it’s cleared, never mind volunteering to help fight.”

“What? But that’s... I don’t know but it feels wrong.”

“It’s also asking for the lair to do something unexpected,” Brennan explained. “Imagine if you had been waiting in the previous segment in our first dive together.”

For a moment Kyra looked confused before her eyes went wide, her face going pale.

“But... stuff like that doesn’t happen often...Right?”

“To that degree, no,” Brennan assured her. “I have never seen or heard of anything like that happening before. But lair’s do occasionally mix things up.”

“I’m sorry, but what happened in your first dive together?” Garren asked, getting a look from Brennan. “Sorry, but you brought it up.”

“... That is fair,” Brennan admitted after a sigh. “Well it’s not exactly a fun story. I had been living in Permonte for two years...”