As the merchant faded away, the Centurion turned to Eldren, the Runic Mage who saw to the teleportation pad. "How is our mana after that?"

Eldren saluted with a satisfied smile on his face. "A little over 78k. We actually gained over 4k mana on that exchange. The big stones down at Northguard are kept nearly full at all times, they won't ask us to shift any down. The accountant will be disappointed in not getting to charge a sixty-gold piece fee, but that's his problem."

Marcus looked at the Ozzy and Suzette as they went in search of desert. "I had gotten used to the workers from Sedgewick dropping buy to donate a few hundred or even a thousand mana to us, but 6k from two people? They must be close to Tier 4, which is amazing for how few months they have been here. But it has been a busy time.

Eldren wryly added his own opinion. "And going to get busier. I'll be happy when we have another set of walls between us and that damned city. I'm understanding why we have such a big stone here at this keep. Someone wanted to be sure they could push through a lot of troops on a moment’s notice."

Marcus agreed with his mage. The records here at Rowan had been wiped clean about the location of the ancient city except for cryptic warnings to be wary of strange happenings in the woods beyond the village. He'd always assumed those warnings pertained to the damned wolf. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Well, so far we have had nothing but help from the village. The Baron has held up his end of the contract for meat and hides, even exceeding our demand, and with better quality. And the construction of this fortress is an unheard-of gift by someone in his position. Most of the local Barons pay as little as possible. I hear Baron Clenchfist paid his yearly taxes one year with ten chickens and a cask of bitter ale. I'm happy we aren't stationed in his lands."

"I think all of us here are thankful for that, sir." Eldren watched the level of mana rise to over 80k as two burly stoneworkers stopped by, nodded, and donated some magical power before heading in to have a beer with some of the off-duty soldiers. Marcus had ordered that some casks of beer always be open for the workers as they got off shift, with two free tankards for those that donated mana.

The Centurion watched with a smile. "How long until we are full up?"

The mage thought for a bit. "Just a few days. Then I can begin sending back the excess to the main stone in the Capital. That always looks good to the higher ups. Too many of the local forts run at a deficit"

Marcus nodded. "See to it then. Having a surplus on the books will come in handy. It won't stay this quiet for long."

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As the merchants closed down for the night, Suzette and Ozzy joined up with a group of a dozen workers heading back to Sedgewick.

Earlier, they had walked to the back of the keep where Ozzy had removed two huge beams from his bag. Loaded with two of the massive chunks of wood, Ozzy could just carry the bag. It was handy for holding a lot of stuff, but didn’t negate the weight. He also had to be careful setting it down on something, or someone, that might be crushed. Getting beams out was a little tricky. He needed a good spot to lay the bag sideways, then sort of lift and drag the beam out of the bag. Jorges and the other workers could deal with them in the morning.

One of the stone workers by the name of Cormac, walked over to Ozzy and talked while they traveled. "Are you pulling some shifts up here now? We could use you. Some of the stone slabs that Jorges needs for the base of the wall are tough to move, even with several of us."

Ozzy had seen the huge trenches being dug for the foundations of the walls. Wagon load after wagon load of crushed stone and gravel was being dumped into the base of the foundations. "How do you even get the slabs in the trench without breaking them? A crane?"

"Naw, easier than. We have a long slope at the end of the trench with log rollers running down the slope and into the trench. Shove a 10'x5'x1' slab onto the slope and it rolls down and continues into the trench. Just don't want anyone standing in the way since they weigh about four tons. After that we have to move them along the trench to where the wall is starting. The whole trench is twenty foot wide. Jorges is using the slabs as bricks to build two walls with six feet between them. The center is filled with loose rock and gravel."

Suzette was listening. "So, Jorges needs help from Ozzy to move big rocks?"

Ozzy didn't like the sound of her voice. "I've got a lot to do without you volunteering me for more."

She patted his arm and batted her eyes at him. "Don't worry dear, I value your big muscles way too much to trade you off cheaply."

He sighed. "But you need a favor from Jorges, don't you? I guess since I'm walking up there already twice a week, I can help out some. Just make sure you get what you need for the deal."

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Dougal had stayed a bit too long drinking beer with the soldiers. It was nearly 2 am, and while there were still some of the Sedgewick workers getting things done at the keep, he was going to have to walk back alone. Six a.m. was going to be here soon and he needed a couple of hours sleep before he started harvesting that field of groats.

Still a little tipsy, he hummed as he went along, trying to remember the words of the song. Most of the local wild life didn't care for his singing and left the vicinity. Most, but not all. A few shadows moved on either side of the road, unseen by their prey. Something landed on his back, small claws digging in. It bit his exposed neck, drawing blood, then leaped away before he could grab it. More things attacked his legs, his arms. He was bleeding from a dozen small cuts. He screamed and took off running for the town. He might have made it, with all the stamina a worker has he could have sprinted most of the way.

If that log hadn't been in his way. He didn't see it in the dark and tripped, falling prone. His attackers were all over him then. He tried to get to his knees and stand up, but that gave someone the opening they had been waiting for. Long claws sliced through his neck. Within a minute Dougal was dead. His attackers hadn't gotten away unscathed. Three had been crushed in his strong hands and another stomped to death. The squirrels chittered over their losses, then took their dead with them and retreated. Dougal's body faded to a headstone that simply read. "Killed by wild animals."

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"There was at least a dozen of them! Coming at me from all sides with teeth and claw. I killed some, but there were too many. Huge furry things with sharp fangs. Then a big one ran up and tore out my throat. Something needs to be done I say!"

Dougal had re-spawned with the morning sun, and was telling his tail to whoever would listen to him. Finally, Suzette walked over. "Can you at least describe what killed you? Are you sure it was animals?"

"How could I know, it was dark! There was a pack of them, and a big black one. Fur, fangs."

"Shit. This again. Was it wolves? Did you get a message about the boss?"

Dougal thought about it. "Yeah, it was most likely wolves. Very canny they were, ambushing me."

Suzette still wasn't convinced, but the village controls did say she needed quests each month to keep down monster attacks. "I'll set up some quests and post a small reward. But let's make a rule that no one walks back from Rowan by themselves after dark, especially if they're drunk."

Dougal spat. "Who said I was drunk? Are you accusing me of being drunk?!"

Suzette walked up to him and said softly. "Yes, I am. You're always drunk. Now go get washed up, eat, and try to sit in the sun for a bit until your bad attitude goes away. Haven't you died before?"

"Uh, no. Is that was this is? I thought it was a hang-over". Suzette motion for Cham to grab the resurrected farmer and haul him off for a bit of recovery therapy.

"You think it was the wolf again?" Ozzy was trying to remember if he had heard wolves howling the night before, but didn't recall any.

Suzette brought up the interface. "Could be, and can't hurt to add a small reward for killing him, and another generic quest for killing wolves."

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| **Quest: Wolves in the Night**Wolves have attacked lone travelers near Sedgewick. The mayor offers a reward of 5 gold and 250 experience to anyone that brings her five wolf pelts in the next month. In addition, anyone who kills Chartok the Eternal Menace will receive 10 gold pieces from the grateful town, in addition to any rewards offered by Rowan Keep. |

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Thirty miles away, Chartok had his head stuck into a chick coup finishing his breakfast when he was notified that the bounty on his head had been increased. "Stupid humans, I was nowhere near your village! I suppose I'll have to go over there and actually kill people now. How annoying."

He was so annoyed by the last chicken that was flapping its wings in his face, and the flashing blue box, that he failed to hear the soft sound of footsteps as a local village boy snuck up on him. Doby Finnegan was armed with the old, rusty two-handed sword that his great-grandfather had left on the mantle of his house. The boy raised the blunt, rusty weapon above his head, and brought it down on the wolf's neck like he was chopping wood.

Chartok never knew what hit him, stunned and with his head stuck inside the chicken coup, Doby got in two more chops and took the wolf's head off at the shoulders. Experience poured in as he leveled up and received his rewards. His great-grandfather's sword now glowed in the sun, bright and shiny. The young man skinned the wolf and tossed the body to the pigs to eat.

He strode tall as he walked down to town with his pelt, the wolf's head, and his magic sword. A girl with freckles and red pony-tails gave him a kiss on the cheek and the men at the tavern listened to his story and bought him a round of beer. A few nodded knowingly at him. It wasn't the first or the last time that the village would be menaced by 'The Chicken Stealer', but for now they were safe.