

We parted ways with Merl's group on somewhat cordial terms, the agreed-upon alliance was upheld with modifications. If we met each other again during the Great Hunt, there'd be no hard feelings if one group stole the kill of another. I could sense they wanted a rematch. Their tank was especially miffed that I managed to taunt away the monster he was supposed to hold for his party. However, if we entered a PvP zone later on, our parties would help each other take out other players. I was pleased with that arrangement since we badly needed firepower.

"What if they betray us again?" Megan stared at Merl's party going the other way. "Super annoying they tried to steal the big Craggy. We were kind enough to share some regular Craggies with them."

"We can't control their decisions," said Kezo. "We'll just have to do our best. And I know that we will be able to overcome any challenges." Such a classic Kezo answer.

"If we show that our side is the winning side," I said, "they won't betray us. We can also gain more allies that way." This was why I worked hard on the image I presented to the Mardukryon community. On top of starting the world quest, I also gave freebies and leeches new players. *What's not to love with Herald Stone?*

In competitions, people root for the underdog. But if they were playing, they'd want to side with the winners. People naturally want to win. An underdog—yours truly—who was lovable—also, yours truly—racking up wins was a very attractive side to be on.

"How do we do that?" Nitana asked with a snort. "We're not exactly competitive-tier material. Take Megan here—"

Megan tried to poke Nitana with her wands. "Hey, I'm doing my best!"

"Just kidding, Meg."

"Getting that one over Merl's was a start," I said. "The winning side doesn't necessarily mean the strongest. The winning side is comprised of winners."

"Like, duh," Nitana said, chuckling. "But I get what you mean, Herald."

"To me, what's important is they don't hold a grudge," said Melonomi. "I really, *really*, don't want drama. I prevented their Pathfinder from getting the last hit and—"

"And you were awesome with the timing," I said. "If that were me, I would've failed." Of course, I didn't think that. But a little fib to bolster her confidence and make myself look supportive didn't hurt. A small trade-off of ego for possibly wiggling out Melonomi's secrets in the future.

"A job very well done, Melonomi," said Kezo. "I wasn't expecting you to sneak healing the Alpha Cragodon at the right time."

"I'm good at supporting, if I may say so myself," Melonomi replied, facing away from us, suddenly very interested in the trees we passed. "I just thought of the Alpha as a party mate I was saving."

Our next target Ichor was one that only Paritor knew. Supposedly. Melonomi was evasive about it, muttering that she couldn't recall whether she got that one. Arriving at our destination, only boulders, mounds of rubble, and crushed trees greeted us. The monsters that were supposed to be there were not.

"*Déjà vu?*" said Nitana.

Paritor stepped forward, looking left and right. "The Ironback Badgers should be here." His summons dispersed, climbing over the rocks and up the collapsed part of the mountain.

“What happened here?” I kicked one of the rocks. “A landslide?”

Megan raised her hand. “I think this is an avalanche.”

For a moment, I wondered if I, Herald Stone, the Great Linguist, made an elementary mistake. What was the difference between a landslide and an avalanche? I almost opened my interface to check the internet. Nitana was there to confirm I was correct, as always.

“Avalanche is for snow.” Nitana pulled her best friend’s hand down. “These are rocks and dirt. It’s a landslide.”

“Whoopsie,” said Megan.

“Looks like it happened recently,” said Kezo. “Only a thin layer of snow covers these rocks.”

“So, the landslide drove away the giant badgers with blades?” guessed Megan. “Too bad. I really wanted to see them. Like, I can’t picture in my head what they look like.”

“Maybe they’re on vacation with Frost Imp survivors, if there are any,” I said with a bemused smile. This Ichor hunt wasn’t going smoothly. “But the Ichor here isn’t dropped by the Ironback Badgers. Right, Paritor? Maybe we can get to their main hiding spot?”

“The method of finding their lair is to kill only a few of them,” said Paritor, “so that they would not immediately flee by tunneling into the ground. After a sufficient number of casualties is reached, the Ironback Badgers will retreat, but not all of them will burrow if done right. One will carve a path tracing the cliff wall that will connect to a wider path on the other face of this rock feature that is otherwise inaccessible. Following it will lead to an opening, the tunnel leading to the nest of the Grand Ironback Badger. There, an Ichor can be found.”

“Sounds complicated,” said Kezo. “One of the harder Ichors to discover unless somebody accidentally stumbled upon the specific way to get it.”

“Can we find a way to reach that cave from here?” I asked.

Paritor shook his head. “My summons cannot find any. More of the mountain has collapsed on the other side, leaving no path for us to traverse. It appears that this Ichor is currently unavailable to us.”

“Is this another effect of the Great Hunt?” Megan said. “Let’s hang out here for a bit, maybe Craggies will come and bulldoze all these rocks away.”

“Likelier, this is Bawu’s fault,” I said, touching the side of a boulder as large as me. This whole mountainside connects to the cliff walls behind Kurghal Village. When Bawu caused that huge explosion, it might’ve started a landslide here. I’m not sure if waiting—” I cocked my head, hearing a suspicious noise.

Laughter and chatter. We stopped talking and faced the forest behind us.

Other players were strolling along the forest, around a dozen of them. Most had visibly beginner gear. But a few of them were high-level. Just a group of friends, probably looking for something to do because the Hunter-Warrior camp still had a riot going on. They didn’t see us, but they soon would if they continued their path.

“They might be tour—woah! What’s that?” I jolted back as a monster so large it was a surprise I didn’t notice its approach suddenly blocked the players we were watching.

A humanoid monster, half as tall as the trees in these parts, seemingly popped out of the shadows. Armored in glass-like scales, sparkling while reflecting bits of its surroundings, it was disconcerting to look at. Long arms, almost reaching the ground, ended in curved blades. Even its legs were blades, reminding me of running blade prosthetics.

“The Forgotten Blade Stalker,” said Kezo. “It’s been some time since I last saw it.”

“Is it a Great Hunt monster?” I asked.

“No, it’s the mini-boss of the area. It usually hides from players and is quite hard to find. It doesn’t have good drops, so people don’t bother with it, same with the Living Statue. If it’s here, that means it didn’t join the migration of monsters—this place is too far from their path. I don’t think it has Hunting Tokens, though we can’t be sure unless we kill it.”

“Even if it does, we’re not going to kill-steal it,” said Melonomi. “I don’t want issues with all of those people. Just leave it alone.”

“We’re not going to kill-steal,” I said. *Not from that many people*, I added in my head. It’d make me look bad. “But we might need to help them.” The weaker players dispersed while their stronger friends engaged the monster. At least, they seemed to know what they were doing. “Kezo, is this Blade Stalker strong?”

“Not on the level of the Living Statue,” he replied. “But some of the newer Mardukryon players might die even if they’re careful. The Blade Stalker moves quite fast—they’ll be surprised if they haven’t fought it before. The expansive AoE of its blade attacks will get them.”

“There goes one of them,” drawled Nitana. “And two.”

“Oh no!” Megan gasped.

The Blade Stalker slinked through the trees as if it didn’t have bones, evading attacks and going for the fleeing players. It was shockingly fast for its size, moving as if it were swimming. Its bladed limbs glowed purple for a second before it let loose a flurry of airwaves that sliced through the forest. As Kezo had said, the AoE was huge. The players didn’t have time to escape its reach despite the attack being telegraphed.

The veteran Mardukryons could handle the Blade Stalker’s skills, but not their low-level friends—the only way for them to survive was to hide behind huge trunks of trees. But because the Blade Stalker moved fast, it could quickly reposition itself to find new angles and add more victims to its list.

*This is a chance to show off!*

More of the new players died even as they adjusted their strategy of fighting the monster. A couple of their group had res skills, but couldn’t keep up with the casualties.

“Let’s go!” I cast [Horde Stampede] and galloped ahead, waving at my party mates to follow me.

“We’re not going to steal—” Melonomi began to protest.

“We’ll help resurrect them,” I said. My [Embers of Rebirth] was still unused. This was the perfect time for its first drive. I’d be like a benevolent god. *I am a benevolent god.*

“Don’t hit the Blade Stalker unless they ask for help,” said Kezo as they galloped after me.

I didn’t resurrect the first dead player we came across, telling Melonomi to take care of it. The guy was far from his teammates; my act of kindness wouldn’t be very public. Melonomi cast [Ancestral Awakening]. Three golden Mardukryon spirits materialized around the deceased, raising their arms to the sky. The player

was revived with full health. Melonomi likely maxed her [Ancestral Awakening], which was a skill from the higher Quality Healer Ocadule.

I spotted another dead player. Two of her alive friends were a couple of meters away from her, hiding behind a tree. *Audience!*

I cast [Embers of Rebirth], holding out my hands as dozens of tiny plumes of fire danced on my arms. The dead body glowed orange and... nothing. Level one of my ress skill took ten seconds to cast. I shouldn't interrupt it. The Forgotten Blade Stalker was away bothering other people, so it was fine. Kezo went ahead to talk find the leaders of this group and see if they'd want help.

The dead player wasn't so dead anymore, standing up with a tenth of her health unlike Melonomi's full revive. I couldn't heal her back to full; we weren't in the same party. But Melonomi could. She threw a potion bottle at her. The player who owed her life to me thanked Melonomi instead.

That was unfair. *I'm the savior!*

"Look out! It's coming!" someone cried.

The Blade Stalker was heading our way, its blades glowing. Another chance for me to be the hero!