

JAMES A HUNTER
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CIVIL WAR

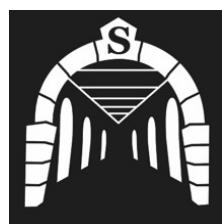
THE ROGUE DUNGEON BOOK TWO

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SUMMARY

Build. Evolve. Conquer. Welcome to the Civil War...

Roark von Graf—former noble and hedge-mage, current mid-level mob in a MMORPG—has his sights set on taking down the tyrannical Dungeon Lord. But the reigning Troll despot is nearly as devious as Roark, and his followers are much higher level.

With forever-death on the line, civil war breaks out in the Citadel, pitting Roark's new regime against Azibek's horde of loyalists. To survive, Roark will have to outfox the Dungeon Lord, forge new, dirtier weapons and shady alliances, and above all, Evolve ...

But while the Trolls are entrenched in their civil war, an outside threat is growing. Eyes from the IRL world are beginning to turn toward the Citadel. There's something strange about this Roark, and they intend to find out what.

*From James A. Hunter, author of the litRPG epic *Viridian Gate Online*, and eden Hudson, author of *Path of the Thunderbird* and the *Jubal Van Zandt Series*, comes an exciting new litRPG, dungeon-core adventure you won't want to put down!*

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CHAPTER I

TROLLED AGAIN



The mist-veiled graveyard was silent when Scott Bayani, in the form of his main, PwnrBwner_OG, crept through the rows of run-down tombs toward the outer wall of the Cruel Citadel. Under normal circumstances, this place was overrun with Shambling Revenants. Tonight, though, their bodies lay around the gravestones, overtop vaults, and hanging halfway out of mausoleum doors. Somebody else's party must've come through and wiped out these low-level mobs while he was respawning.

Good news for him. Scott didn't have time to waste on Shambling Revenants. At ten-thirty he had to be at Taco Bell for the munchies shift, serving up reheated chalupas and floppy tacos to stoners. The wonder twin rejects Kevin and Kellie—better known as Dude_Farkowitz and RogstarKel when they were playing their alts—had already logged out for the night out of frustration after the failed raid. Well, screw 'em both sideways and upside down. PwnrBwner_OG didn't run away crying like a baby when he died. You didn't get to be a level twenty-frigging-two High Combat Cleric by giving up in this game. No, PwnrBwner_OG was going back to get his shit.

And not just that, he was gonna pwn that little shithead Roark. Him and his stupid crew of reject freaks. Maybe not on this run, but he'd get him eventually.

Scott paused at the gate and spoke the ritual prayer to the High Combat Cleric's god, Rajthorne the Mighty, to cast Shield of Blades on himself. A spherical barrier of ghostly swords surrounded him, shining pale lavender, then disappearing. The only sign he was still

protected by the spell was the double circle of lavender light around his feet, but any enemies who walked into the barrier would instantly take 22 points of slashing damage—one for each character level, stackable if he backed off and ran them through the invisible meat grinder again.

Sufficiently protected, Scott equipped the Three-Headed Cerberus he'd bought at the Averi City market in his right hand and readied a Wreak Injury spell in his left. He gave the lever outside the pitted iron portcullis a kick. Chains clanked somewhere inside the walls, and the heavy grating gave a rusty screech as it rose as if it were trying to get the attention of everybody within a hundred miles.

Scanning the moonlit courtyard for movement, Scott slipped inside and cautiously made his way toward the crumbling staircase that led down into the Cruel Citadel.

He had cleared this dungeon at least a couple of different times in various alts. The first few floors were a common gold and XP farm for new to mid-level characters, brimming with easy mobs—though the bottom two levels of the dungeon were a nightmare.

At least it had been until about two days ago when that Griefer chode started ganking him. From the very beginning, Scott had known there was something weird about that Changeling. Either the devs were trying to restructure the citadel without telling anybody—a total dick move—or Roark the Griefer was some modding asshole dressed up like a mob and hiding out in the dungeon to steal loot for his main. That was the best explanation; after all, a *literal* online Troll? That was just too on the nose to be anything other than some douchebag modder. Supposedly, the studio's security had cleared up every backdoor that allowed hackers to do that with the 5.9 patch, but Scott knew that if you locked a door, a hacker would just write in a window and smash it open.

Whatever it was, this shit had to stop. Scott was going to teach this body-camping Troll a lesson. He just had to recover his OG gear first.

A shadow by the staircase caught his eye. A little trash mob, level 2, all scrawny blue arms and legs and jiggling potbelly. The Changeling should've attacked Scott as soon as he stepped inside

the creature's aggro zone, but it took one look at him, turned on a heel, and darted away, disappearing into the inky depths of the stairwell.

Wary of a trap, Scott gave the Changeling a ten-second head start, then slowly—*carefully*—followed it into the citadel, ready to lash out with his three-headed flail and Wreak Injury spell.

Yep, there it was. As soon as he stepped out of the shadows and into the first room, a pair of Reaver Bats dove screeching at his head. The first one hit the Shield of Blades and died right off, toppling to the floor, its wings still twitching sporadically. The second one had slightly more HP. It pulled out of the dive with its Health bar flashing below ten percent. Scott swatted the flying rat down with a massive overhand swing of the Cerberus. The blow hit like a semi-truck, and the creature's bones crunched like potato chips under the spiked balls. It hit the floor in a spray of gore, dead.

A croaking shout of pain rang out behind Scott just before a blunt object hit him in the back of the head and knocked off a handful of his Health. He spun around to find that level 2 Changeling swinging a spiked club like a baseball bat. Little blue turd had hidden off to the side of the doorway, waiting for him to come into the room and expose his back, but the Shield of Blades had chopped it up good. Blood dripped from dozens of gashes all over its body, and the Changeling was down to half Health.

Scott slapped it with a Wreak Injury. Green light sliced through the Changeling's lumpy shoulder, and its left arm dropped, useless. It kept swinging the spiked club with its right, but Scott easily jogged out of the way—the little fartsack was slow as balls—then pushed forward again and fired off another Wreak Injury, shaving away the last of the Changeling's HP. It tumbled backward into the doorway and died, choking on a lungful of its own blood. Awesome.

Scott spun around, eyes squinted, brow furrowed, looking for more Trolls to kill. There didn't seem to be any more in this room. He checked the ceiling overhead for the giveaway distortion of Stone Salamanders—those annoying little bastards had literally gotten the drop on him too many times over the last few days—before continuing down the steps and into the doorway to his right.

Immediately, he was faced with a fork in the road. He remembered the hallway to his right leading to a dead end full of traps and mid-level Thusrss the last time he'd come through. Probably couldn't survive a horde of those on his own without his Thorny Armor of Major Casting. He took the hallway to the left.

That opened into a dining hall where the remains of a feast were strung out around the long table, chairs, and floor. Smoked meats, flagons of mead, and bowls of half-eaten stew were everywhere—the scent of the food enticed his belly into a low rumble. That was another thing. Since when did mobs cook or eat? Yep. Some bullshit hackery was definitely afoot, though he had no clue why the devs hadn't swooped in to fix this shit. Whatever. He would fix it for those stupid losers. Despite the food, no Trolls wandered the room or fought over the scraps. No Reaver Bats dangled from the chandelier overhead.

A shadow moved on the wall beside him, not quite right with the flickering torchlight.

Scott spun, bashing the Stone Salamander with his Cerberus. The trio of spiked heads hit the invisible creature with a series of dull *thuds*. Blood splattered the stones and the creature's Health bar flickered into view. Down by a quarter. The salamander growled and snapped at Scott even though he was out of reach of its needle fangs. He took a step closer, just within range to dice the creature up with Shield of Blades, but the spell timed out and went into cooldown. He wouldn't be able to recast it for two and a half minutes.

Rolling his eyes, Scott shot a Wreak Injury at the betraying distortion on the wall. More blood flew as he shaved off another slice of its HP. He downed a Mana potion with one hand while he swung for the fences with the Cerberus. It connected, the heads *thud thud thudding* into the creature's back like a screwed-up heartbeat. The third one snapped the salamander's spine.

“Eat it, assbag!” The creature squeaked in agony and winked into view—all fat and slimy gunmetal gray skin—as it dropped to the floor.

Paralyzed. Scott finished it off easily. Nothing attacked him from behind while he did. That, in itself, sent up more than a few red flags.

That Roark was a tricky little turd and seemed to have a million tricks hiding up his sleeves.

Scott climbed up on the table while his Shield of Blades cooldown ran out and kicked plates and scraps around. No Trolls wandered into the room. No Reaver Bats flew by.

Yep, definitely suspicious as hell. There should've been more activity. Was this some kind of trap to lull him into a false sense of security, or had whoever cleared the graveyard wiped out most of the first level, too?

If somebody had wiped them out, where were all the mob bodies? He saw PC corpses waiting for their owners to come retrieve their crap, but no Infernal chimeras.

The cooldown timer flashed. Scott recast Shield of Blades on himself.

Protected once more by the sphere of ghostly swords, Scott moved out, slipping down a torch-lined hallway. There were only a few PC corpses here. As he stepped over them, the feeling that this was all some sort of prank started eating away at him. Let's all pull one over on the awesome level 22, hahaha! That Griefer cockmouth was probably hiding around the corner ready to spring some bullshit trap. Scott switched his Wreak Injury for a Lightning Lance, his highest-level attack spell.

But when he edged around the corner, Lightning Lance ready to fry some Griefer ass, the hallway was empty.

What the crap is going on here? Why is this so easy? Did somebody really come through and clean the place out? That might explain why only a few of the mobs near the beginning were there. They'd been the first to die, so naturally they were the first to respawn. Maybe there weren't any Infernal bodies left lying around because the rest were getting ready to respawn at any second.

To be safe, Scott dropped his High Combat Cleric into Sneak, wrapping shadow around himself like a cloak, and crept down the hallway to the throne room.

The portcullis was already standing open. That Other Party theory was starting to look pretty plausible.

Scott stopped in the doorway, a frown pulling down the corners of his lips as he examined the ceiling and walls all around the throne room. The spiny obsidian throne sat like a tribute to hemorrhoids on the dais, empty and uncomfortable looking. Tapestries fluttered along the walls, but no visual distortions gave away any invisible Stone Salamanders stalking the room. Even the corners were yawning with empty shadows.

PwnrBwner_OG's corpse lay in front of the door, less than twenty feet away, hands clutching the broken end of the long, thin stone spear the Griefer had kebabbed him with in their showdown. Complete and utter bullshit was what that was. Scott had searched every inch of the H-boards while he was respawning—in the eight-year history of the game, no one in any of the forums had mentioned anything like a stone spear spell. And certainly not one cast by a cockbag Changeling.

Scott checked the ceiling over his OG corpse once more—really studying the shadows thrown between the rotten beams by the glowing stained-glass windows—then stealthed across the stone floor toward the High Combat Cleric's body.

Nothing dropped on his head, no army of mobs poured out of the doorway leading to the second level over in the corner. Maybe somebody really had come through and slaughtered the Griefer while he was out.

Cautiously, Scott opened up the corpse's Inventory and started transferring items. It was all there. Not a potion or Crusty Bread out of place. Talk about weird. When PCs died in a place the first time, they were supposed to drop one random item and 2-4% of their total gold, but nothing seemed to be missing. Was it possible that whoever cleared this level out had somehow forgotten to loot the PC corpses on their way? Idiots. He sure as balls wasn't going to make that mistake. As soon as he recovered everything, PwnrBwner_OG was going to turn around and loot everybody on this level. Kellie and Kevin would assume it was somebody else. Junior would probably assume Scott'd done it, but she was almost never on at the same time he was, so who cared?

Besides, she would do the same to him.

He finished transferring the items and traded his Three-Headed Cerberus for his infinitely more powerful Unique Rose Mace of Thorn Tethers, then put on his matching set of Thorny Armor Boots, Gauntlets, Breastplate, and Helmet.

The moment Scott equipped the Thorny Helmet, a notification popped up.

Potent Contact Poison (Rare) Absorbed!

Effect: Immediate loss of life.

“Better luck next time, mate,” came an all too familiar voice.

The world went black as his level 22 High Combat Cleric died.

“Shit!” Scott roared, ripping off his CandorSight UIVR headset and chucking it across his living room.

CHAPTER 2

REPAIRS



A box of text appeared before Roark von Graf's eyes, obscuring his view of the blade he had just shoved into the glowing red coals. He let off the bellows and read the notice.

[The Potent Contact Poison (Rare) you applied to Unique Thorny Helmet was absorbed by PwnrBwner_OG!

Reminder: Passive kills (i.e., by poison or trap outside combat) yield only 50% Experience points.]

Roark grinned. When he had applied the poison to the dropped piece of armor and returned it to PwnrBwner_OG's corpse, Roark had told himself he would be satisfied with anyone it managed to take out. Gaining Experience while he was doing something else was just as efficient no matter who the points came from. However, now that he had confirmation that the points had come from PwnrBwner, Roark was forced to admit they tasted twice as sweet. That contact poison had been well worth the pile of gold and newly forged set of Breath of the Cockatrice—steel throwing flechettes with a hollow channel leading to the point for delivering any number of nasty concoctions—he'd traded Zyra.

Macaroni, who'd been sleeping curled with his fat-padded belly pressed to the forge, chirped angrily as if the suddenly motionless bellows had disturbed his nap. Roark dismissed the box and stooped to scratch the Elite Salamander behind its bulbous slate-colored

head. Mac gave a second, mollified chirp and returned to his spot, blinking lazily, before shutting giant, gold-rimmed eyes.

With a touch more enthusiasm than before, Roark went back to the longsword his Vassals had looted from the fallen heroes in their failed raid. Blasting the blade with heat wasn't how he'd learned to dismantle a weapon, but that seemed to be how smithing functioned in Hearthworld.

Another pump of the bellows brought up the option to improve or destroy the longsword. He selected Destroy.

[Warning: Destroying items results in a small amount of materials lost to waste, therefore destroyed items cannot be reforged as they were without the addition of more material. Are you sure you want to destroy this Quality Steel Longsword? Yes / No]

Though Quality weapons and armor were a step up from the Shoddy ones most heroes dropped on their first death in the citadel, Roark had leveled his Blacksmithing Trade Skill enough that he could forge better himself. When he confirmed that he wanted to destroy the weapon, the heavy clang of metal being tossed on a scrap pile rang through the smithy. A page appeared listing the reclaimed components.

[Quality Steel Longsword yielded (1) Iron Ingot, (1) Powdered Gemstone, (4) Rivets, and (5) Leather Strips]

Without looking, Roark knew the new components had also been added to the totals on his Crafting and Inventory pages. Over the past hour, he'd amassed quite the treasure trove of smithing ingredients as the pile of scrap items from the raid dwindled. Now only a handful of daggers remained. Once those were dismantled, he would begin forging new weapons and armor to outfit the Trolls of the first floor. An off-rotation group of Trolls milled about the forge now—mostly Changelings, though there was one level 4 Thusr

mixed in with the crowd—eager to see what their Floor Overseer would create for them.

Roark returned to the heap of scrap weapons and picked up the daggers, inspecting the blades on instinct. As he went through the process of destroying each one, his mind wandered. As much as he loved working the smithy, with nearly fifty Lesser Vassals to outfit, it wasn't practical for him to be the only one crafting gear. But from what he'd read about Trade Skills, the only ways to acquire one was by apprenticeship with a Guild or by reading an enchanted Trade Skill book.

Between daggers, Roark pulled up the character page for the level 4 Changeling skulking by the workbench.



Troll Overview	
Name:	Grag
Level:	4
Type:	Changeling
Current Infernali Points:	0
Next Level:	2240

Attributes:	
Health:	38
HP Regen / 5 Sec:	6
Weapon Damage:	10
Attack Damage:	28
Base Armor:	10
Armor Rating:	28
Movement Rate:	.5 x Speed of Opponent
Critical Hit Chance:	5%
Critical Hit Damage:	(+) 50%

Special Skills:	
Rapid-Regen	
Cannot be killed by normal weapons!	
Backstab Modifier	
Trade Skill: OPEN	



As a Lesser Vassal, the Changeling only had one Trade Skill slot to fill, whereas Greater Vassals such as Kaz and Zyra had two.

Roark frowned as he dismissed the screen and plunged the next blade into the coals. Forty-nine unused Trade Skill slots running around. Something had to be done about that wasted potential as soon as possible.

In addition to that, Roark had noticed that a few of the Trolls beneath him were leveling their weapons skills every time they fought, whereas he himself had never gained a single level with his rapier. Even the Level 4 Changeling whose page he'd checked earlier had unlocked a skill called Backstab Modifier. The few Vassals who had unlocked their weapons skills were getting better at combat, but Roark seemed to be stuck with only what he'd known of fighting when he leapt through the portal into Hearthworld.

According to his mystic grimoire, weapons abilities fell under Melee Skills, which had to be unlocked by trainer, book, or guild apprenticeship before he could begin to level them up. Until then, every hero he fought was wasted potential, not to mention the fact that he couldn't hope to level up enough to take on the Dungeon Lord, Azibek the Cruel, on his griefing and Trade Skills alone. The Exarch had ruled the citadel for as long as any of the Trolls there could remember, so odds were good that he was higher than the Final Jotnar evolution level of 36. If Roark was going to dethrone that tyrant, he needed experience points coming in from all the areas he could get.

No matter which way Roark looked at it, a trip back to the Averi Marketplace was becoming unavoidable. He could search Mogrifa & Mogrifa for a Melee Skill book for himself while finding Trade Skill books for his Lesser Vassals. With their recent influx of gold and saleable loot, they might be able to afford as many as a dozen.

Roark finished dismantling the final dagger, then forced himself to go straight to the workbench and select a set of scrolling pliers to start making Superior Ringmail Shirts. They were the cheapest material spend to Armor rating, and they had no Strength or Dexterity restrictions, so even the Changelings could wear them.

What he really wanted to do, however, was craft something from the pair of Obsidian Ingots he'd acquired from a Double-Bladed Battle-axe found on one of the heroes' corpses. He'd never worked with the black lava glass before. Still, he resisted the terrible temptation, forcing himself to complete four Ringmail Shirts, two sets of Fulgorite Gauntlets, and a myriad of wicked-bladed Steel Machetes, Khopeshes, and Falcatas.

While he was at the grindstone improving the newly forged items from Quality to Superior, another notification appeared.

[Congratulations, you have leveled up your Blacksmithing Trade Skill to Level 7! You may now improve and repair Enchanted weapons and armor.]

Very interesting. He would have to try that later with some of the enchanted items they'd looted. But for now, he had a date with some lava glass. After all, keeping promises to yourself was just as important—perhaps more so—as keeping promises to others. That was the way of self-discipline.

Roark fished out the Obsidian ingot from his Inventory, tracing the intricate whorls and lines on its surface with the pad of his thumb and grinning with excitement. If there was one thing that made him feel like a child holding a brightly wrapped present, it was smithing with new materials.

At his thought, a page appeared listing the items he could craft from the Obsidian, along with slowly rotating images of each option. He read through them and was about to choose a Tower Shield for its impressive defensive numbers and gorgeous lines when he caught sight of a new category at the bottom: Repairs.

The page turned to reveal an image of Neveret's Last Laugh: the eyeless, mouthless mask he'd found in the hot coals of the torture chamber what seemed like ages ago. He'd used the mask early on to defeat PwnrBwner and his miscreant crew of heroes. A crack angled from where the mouth should've been across the left cheek to where the wearer's ear would sit.

[To repair Neveret's Last Laugh, you will use (1) Obsidian Ingot, (1) Iron Ingot, (2) Powdered Gemstones, and (8) Rivets. Repair? Yes / No]

From Roark's limited experience with the mask, he would never have guessed Obsidian had gone into its making. He knew different kinds of gemstones were used in Enchanting, though he'd had no chance to try it out for himself yet. Did the Powdered Gemstone in the mask power its enchantment?

Intrigued, Roark selected yes.

Though this was his first experience with lava glass, the knowledge he'd gained from Trade Skill books led him through the process as if he were a master. First, he settled the Obsidian and Iron into a large crucible along with a fistful of Powdered Gemstones. Then, he picked the melting pot up with tongs and stuck it in the forge, the muscles in his back straining with effort, perspiration dotting his brow and trickling down his chest and back. Lucky he was a Jotnar now. As a Changeling, there was no bloody way he could've managed to lift that.

After a few minutes spent stoking the heat up to the right temperature, he grabbed the mask with the tongs and stuck it into the bed of glowing coals beside the crucible. The metal began to blush and soften. Roark grinned to himself, his brooding over skill levels forgotten, and pulled the mask from the fire. The next several minutes were spent pinching the crack closed and hammering rivets into it.

Roark had been concerned the work would be made awkward by his new height—when he'd evolved into a Jotnar, he had grown to nearly seven and a half feet tall—but the anvil seemed to have grown with him. It sat at the perfect height.

With the crack fastened together, Roark returned to the forge. The Obsidian and Iron in the crucible had melted and mixed with the Powdered Gemstone to form a brilliant yellow compound, not so different in appearance from liquid gold.

Carefully, Roark used the tongs to pull the pot from the fire. He took it to the workbench, where a small, hinged cast sat magically open and waiting. Sparks flew from the mold as he poured half of the molten Obsidian-Iron compound into the bottom. As expected, the liquid stone settled into the nadir of the bowl. Roark grabbed the mask and lowered it in place with a hiss, pressing the fiery mixture up the sides in an even layer. Then he added the rest of the Obsidian and Iron, closed the cast, and screwed shut the bolts so it wouldn't shift as it cooled.

Roark took the Iron Gauntlets of Minor Endurance they'd taken in the raid to the grindstone while he waited—planning to improve the few enchanted items they had—but found his gaze returning over and over again to the workbench. Finally, he set aside the gauntlets and checked the cast.

Whereas back in Traisbin, it would have taken hours or even overnight for the mask to finish cooling enough to open the cast, in Hearthworld it took only a handful of minutes. Roark unscrewed the bolts holding the halves together. The mask had shrunk as it cooled, so the top piece came away easily. Roark lifted the repaired mask from the mold.



Neveret's Last Laugh

Durability: 52/52

Armor Rating: 12

Properties: Grants the wearer 100% resistance to unenchanted weapons at the cost of (2 x character level) HP / second!

“You can only listen to a bloke run his mouth so long before you've got to shut it for him ... permanently.”



He dismissed the information with a thought and returned his attention to the mask.

Hells, it was beautiful. In the red-orange glow from the forge, it shined a rich jet like spilled ink. Roark turned the piece over in his hands, reveling in the contrast of his smoke-white fingers against the mask's luxurious black. Looking at it, he could almost forget the thing was meant to burn a man's eyes and mouth shut.

"Are you going to wear that thing or mate with it?" a dusky voice from behind Roark asked. "Because the rest of us would like some warning if we need to leave the two of you alone."

Resisting the urge to guiltily tuck the mask away in his Inventory, Roark slowly turned around. Just because he'd been caught admiring his own handiwork was no reason to react like a youth caught ogling a bawdy painting ... though the grouchy old bag of a mage-smith Roark had been apprenticed to at the academy had always treated the two as equally depraved.

Zyra was crouched by the forge, patting Macaroni's sides fondly. Her expression was hidden in the shadowy depths of her ever-present hood, but when she stood, the slant of her shoulders and hips conveyed the laughter her face couldn't.

"Some of my best work yet," Roark said, deciding to take the honest, if slightly conceited, road. He held out the mask to give the hooded Reaver a better look at it. "Not counting your new flechettes, of course."

Zyra waved one leather-wrapped hand.

"You don't have to worry about me getting jealous and stealing your fancy trinket, Griefer. I prefer the sorts of masks you can see out of." With a lazy rotation of her wrist, one Breath of the Cockatrice appeared in her fingers. "Besides, these little beauties still have that new weapon shine to them. They just helped me take down a pair of heroes and level up my Ranged Attack. I'm just here to give my compliments to the smith."

Roark's brow furrowed as he recalled his resolution to search out Melee and Trade Skill books. He scratched at his jaw with one black claw.

"We need to find Kaz," he said.

"I said smith," Zyra enunciated. "Not chef."

“I know, but he’ll be brokenhearted if he misses a trip to the marketplace.” Roark returned the mask to his inventory and headed for the smithy door. “Come on.”

CHAPTER 3

SCOTT “PWNRBWNER_OG” BAYANI



The game had force logged Scott “PwnrBwner_OG” Bayani out, and the haptic feedback had cut off the second he took off the helmet, but he could still feel the contact poison burning in his veins.

“Better luck next time, *mate*.” Scott stomped across the living room and grabbed his helmet off the floor. “Fake-ass pirate accent bullshit. Think you’re so fucking cool.”

They would see how cool that dickface Roark thought he was when Scott reported his ass. Hearthworld’s customer service might be completely worthless when it came to overcharges and bugs, but they didn’t screw around when there was an unsanctioned modder messing with their game.

Scott tossed his helmet onto the crappy couch crammed up against the short wall of his studio and grabbed his InfiniTab. It’d cost a buttload—and he’d had to go to an actual physical store and stand in line for like two days to get one—but the InfiniTab ran the best sensory graphics of any all-in-one on the market at a sleek quarter-inch thick. It was the perfect tablet for the serious gamer pressed for space.

“Hey,” he said to wake it up.

The projector flipped on, throwing up the holographic image of a smoking hot naked redhead. She grinned.

“Hey, sexy.” She slid her fingers through her hair, letting it fall across her eyes. “What can I do for you today?”

“Search my Trash for unread Hearthworld announcements. Something like, ‘Play as a mob’ or ‘dungeon giveaway,’ or whatever.”

She blinked and bit the corner of her full bottom lip.

“You don’t have any unread Hearthworld announcements containing those or similar terms. Should I search again for limited time offers and special events?”

“Yeah. But this time run both for read and unread.”

“Hmm.” She raised her arms over her head and stretched. “You have one read announcement for Rising Sun Casts Diamonds onto Dewy Grass – Rogs of the Great Plains Expansion Pack. Would you like me to read it?”

“Delete forever.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Message deleted.” The redhead reclined on some nonexistent surface in midair and braced herself on her arms. “Is there anything else I can do for you today, Scott?”

“Open Hearthworld H-boards,” he said, dropping onto the couch beside his helmet. “Search for posters with Roark in their handle.”

“I’m sorry, sexy, did you mean Rory?”

“No. R-O-A-R-K.”

“I can’t seem to find any posters with Roark in their username. There are over 1200 usernames containing Rory, though.”

“Forget it,” Scott said, rolling his eyes. “Search the posts for ‘Roark the Griefer’ and ‘Cruel Citadel.’”

She bounced forward and started back at the beginning of her motion loop, tousling her hair into her eyes again.

“There are 879 posts and replies containing those terms. Would you like me to read them?”

Scott shook his head. He had seven times that in feed-followers alone.

“No, see if any of them are talking about lodging a complaint with HW customer service.”

“There are sixty-four posts and replies contai—”

“So nobody basically.” He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees, letting the InfiniTab dangle from his hand. Its horizon line detector compensated so the holographic redhead wasn’t suddenly

sideways. “Fine, I’ll do the heavy lifting on this crap. Start a new post from my OG account.”

The redhead grinned and bit her lip. “You got it, sexy.”

“Title: Some asshole modder. Post: Some asshole modder going by Roark the Griefer set himself up in the Cruel Citadel outside Averi City, and he’s getting around the PvP debuffs by making himself a high-level Troll instead of a player, coding in all his own OP spells and shit. He’s even changing all the mob scripts in the dungeon so they’ll grief anybody who goes in. Hearthworld’s customer service isn’t going to do crap about this dickweed unless we all lodge complaints, so get off your butts and put this Griefer in his place. Contact customer service and threaten to cancel your membership if they don’t deal with him, and then round up your posse, bend the son of a bitch over, and gank him so hard his mom walks funny for a week. End post.”

“Would you like me to read that back to you?”

“Yeah.” Scott listened to his post, added in a bunch of exclamation points, and decided it was good. “Submit post to the Overall, Hearthworld Issues and Troubleshooting, Strafe It, and PvP Reporting boards.”

“Done.” The redhead raised her arms over her head and stretched. “Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

“Yeah, PM the link to all my followers, then open a new message to Hearthworld Customer Service.”

As soon as he finished dictating his complaint, Scott pulled his UIVR helmet back on and logged in again. Time to grind some levels so he could lay the smack down on that chump Roark.

CHAPTER 4

MARKET RUN



“...And the skewers!” Kaz said, clasping his wide belly as he gazed fondly into the dancing flames of the kitchen’s hearth. “So juicy and yet so crisp. It was that moment that Kaz fell in love with food,” he concluded, bobbing his oversized head enthusiastically.

“Love at first bite?” Zyra offered.

Roark chuckled as he equipped the Ilexim Royal Guard Helm the huge Thusr had looted from his latest turn at griefing. On their first trip to the Averi market, Kaz had passed himself off as a hero, hiding his face behind a menpō faceplate from the boxy wooden O-Rogiri armor. Too small to do the same at the time, Roark had posed as Kaz’s unique Changeling familiar. Now, however, as a Jotnar, Roark was tall enough to pass for one of the pale elves. He hooked the black veil across the helm’s opening, obscuring his nose and mouth. An over-gangly and very pale elf, true, but still passable.

So long as no one looked too closely.

“Are we ready?” he asked, eyeing Zyra and Kaz in turn as he pulled the Town Portal scroll from his Inventory. He cracked the seal with a razor-sharp thumbnail and tossed the parchment to the flagstones. A shimmering violet portal opened just this side of the rough-hewn table.

“Yes!” Kaz lowered his menpō into place with a *clunk* as though gearing up to go into battle.

Zyra hesitated, fiddling with her hand wrappings. “On second thought, I’m going to stay here. Catch a couple more rounds of griefing.” She shrugged, doing an appalling job of projecting indifference. “I’m not too far from level 7. And with you two out,

someone's got to keep an eye on the citadel. Make sure none of the Changelings burn the place down."

"But Zyra has to come!" Kaz protested. "The marketplace is full of the strange and wonderful. So many sights Troll eyes have never seen before, so many smells Troll noses have never smelled—"

"So many places Troll guts have never been spilled ..." Zyra offered, tugging at one of the snowy ringlets spilling from beneath her hood.

Roark opened his mouth to reassure her, but before he could, Kaz settled a hand as wide as a stewpot on Zyra's shoulder.

"Roark was afraid the first time he went to the marketplace, too," the mighty Thusr said. "But Kaz explained to Roark that he only had to pretend to be like everyone else and the heroes wouldn't even notice him—"

Roark raised an eyebrow. "That's not how I remember it."

"—and now Roark's not afraid at all," Kaz finished.

That wasn't entirely true, either. Experience told Roark that the day he stopped feeling anxiety at walking through the streets of a city where most of the populace wanted him dead was the day he would end up with his head on a pike at the gates. But the benefit of this trip far outweighed the risk.

"No one will recognize you for a Troll," Roark said, gesturing toward Zyra's hood. The Reaver took a step back as if he had tried to pull it off. "With that, some mage's robes, and a pair of gauntlets, you'll look more human than two-thirds of the heroes out there."

The shadowy hood swiveled back to stare down the shimmering portal. After a moment, Zyra sighed. "Which one of you has mage's robes?"

Roark opened his Inventory and pulled free *Robes of the Acolyte* —the fabric silky smooth and of the deepest purple, edged in loops of silver. They looked custom built for the Reaver. He tossed them to her with a flick of the wrist and a lopsided smile. With a reluctant sigh, she slipped them into place. Once they were all properly disguised, Roark led the way into the portal. The black veil over his nose and mouth fluttered as an icy breeze blew across his skin.

Goose bumps prickled down his back and arms, and then he was stepping out into brilliant yellow sunshine.

A great stone fountain stood just ahead at the center of a cobblestone plaza, spraying diamond-clear water into the air. Surrounding the fountain were dozens of shimmering portals with heroes stepping into and out of them, chatting to one another or laughing or inspecting wounds and battered armor as if they'd just escaped a harrowing battle.

Once again Roark marveled at the ease of portal travel here. Back in Traisbin, the mildest side effects one might expect were vomiting and blinding headaches, and portals frequently spit the traveler out in unexpected places: half in, half out of a stone wall to die in agony, at the bottom of the ocean to be crushed under billions of tons of water, or a few miles from the intended destination to be slightly inconvenienced if it happened to be inclement walking weather. Roark would've given the skin off his back to know what it was about Hearthworld that made portal travel so reliable.

The gentle *tock* and *clunk* of wooden armor behind Roark let him know that Kaz had made it through the portal in one piece. Together, they turned and watched the portal for Zyra. Just as Roark was beginning to think she'd gotten cold feet, the hooded Reaver stepped through, the purple robes fluttering behind her as she moved.

She glanced around the fountain court at all the heroes, then raised a leather gloved hand to the sun even though its light didn't appear to pierce the shadowy depths of her hood.

"It's bright out here," she grumbled.

Her fingers were trembling just slightly.

"Even Infernal chimeras need a little sun once in a while," Roark said, hoping to dispel some of her unease with a little needling. He nodded his head in the general direction of the marketplace. "Come on, we'll want to be quick. We should be fine, but no point in overstaying if we don't have to."

They followed a cobbled street away from the fountain court, double- and triple-story buildings rising up around them. The crowd wasn't nearly as thick as it had been on Roark's first trip to Averi City. The three of them were still surrounded on all sides and occasionally

had to shoulder their way through particularly dense bunches of heroes clustered around stalls and street performers, but more often than not they were able to walk abreast down the street, boots clacking on the cobblestones.

As they drew closer to the marketplace proper, Roark caught the scent of roasting meat, baking pastries, and fresh fruits and vegetables. On his right, Kaz kept licking his lips and drinking in great lungfuls of air. To Roark's left, Zyra seemed to be trying to look in all directions at once and listing closer and closer to his side, which wasn't entirely unwelcome. If not for the likelihood that she would misunderstand the gesture and poison him, he might've taken her hand to reassure her.

Soon they had come to the outskirts of the sprawling bazaar. The whole place was a haphazard warren of shifting, narrow alleyways composed of wooden stalls with colorful awnings that cast shade over the cobblestone streets. Humans, dark and light elves, and muscular rogs wandered between impromptu shops and stacks of goods laid out on vibrantly colorful tarps. The low roar of hundreds of conversations was punctuated by the shouting of merchants hawking their wares—blades, spices, armor, charms, healings—loudly flattering customers, or bullying passersby who didn't give in and stop.

"A spice seller!" Kaz exclaimed, pointing a fat finger at a red-and-orange-striped canopy over shelves filled with glass jars, wooden bowls, and copper-ringed barrels. "Roark, Kaz has to visit the spice seller! Salt is a good spice—maybe even the best—but Kaz has also read about garlic and paprika and many others besides."

Roark scrutinized the vendors surrounding the striped tent. A stall stocked with weapons and armor caught his eye; presiding over the little shop was a familiar merchant with a too-wide grin, who was haggling amiably with a rog over a battle-axe.

"Looks like our old friend Variok's here, too," Roark said. "I've got a few items to sell before we head over to Mogrifa & Mogrifa. You might as well see what the spice seller's got to offer in the meantime."

The Thusr bounded off toward the spice tent like an overgrown puppy. Hopefully he wouldn't break anything in his eager rush—they were blending in but couldn't afford any extra attention.

Still, Kaz's simple enthusiasm for life—and food above all—was joyous to watch. Smiling behind his black veil, Roark headed for the weapons and armor stall at a much more reasonable pace with Zyra trailing just behind him like a shadow. The rog was just leaving one battle-axe richer as the two of them stepped up.

"Ah, my friend," Variok boomed cheerfully. "You have come just in time! I am desperate, absolutely desperate to rid myself of this Unique Kite Shield of Elemental Fury. The price I am asking is ridiculous—cheaper than the air we breathe. Something must be wrong with me to part with such a unique item for such a paltry sum. You simply cannot afford not to buy."

"Actually, mate, I'm here to lighten my load," Roark said. "And I think you're going to be impressed with how little I want for such quality workmanship."

Variok threw back his head and boomed a laugh.

"Come," the merchant said, slapping Roark on the back. "Let us haggle together."

While they dickered over the extra Ringmail Shirts and the set of Fulgorite Gauntlets Roark had brought along, Zyra stood close by, watching the crowd as if she expected someone to leap out of it and accuse them of being Trolls. At one point, a mage in a shining silk kimono wandered a little too close, and a poisoned flechette appeared in the hooded Reaver's hand. Without pausing in his haggling, Roark reached out and closed his hand over hers, pushing it down. Reluctantly, Zyra made the flechette disappear again with a little flourish of one hand.

When the last of the gold and armor changed hands—at a price that would've done Roark's Lyoku traveler mother proud—Roark dipped his head to the grinning merchant.

"I'm afraid you got the better of me," Roark lied. "Next time I'll come better prepared for your tricks."

"You rob me blind and slander my good name in one day!" Variok shouted cheerfully. "I cannot afford another visit from you, my friend."

As Roark left the stall, the merchant called, "You come back to Variok any time you are in Averi City," after him.

Zyra fell into step beside Roark.

"See, that wasn't so bad," he said. "We've got a little extra gold for books, and you didn't have to poison anyone. That's what we call a *win-win* where I come from."

"And where is that exactly?" she asked, voice low, but tone indicating she was genuinely curious.

Roark paused, grimacing. "I hail from the city of Korvo in a land called Traisbin. It's a beautiful place, similar to this in some ways, though different in many others. In my world, there are no Trolls, no chimeras. It was a free land once, until the Tyrant King, Marek Konig Ustar, rose to prominence and power." He reached up, running his fingers over the World Stone Pendant, tucked away beneath his armor, pressed up against his pale chest. What role did the strange pendant play in Ustar's rise he wondered for the hundredth time since coming to Hearthworld. "In that land, the monsters rule with an iron fist, while people like me grasp to whatever glimmer of hope we can find."

Roark fell silent as they stepped into the spice seller's tent. Kaz was inside, listening enraptured to the dark elf behind the table.

"And he defeated every single Infernali and Malaika who came to take it," the elf was saying. "And fixed himself up delicious and diverse meals the likes of which no man had ever yet tasted. Meals so divine that they gave him powers of strength and speed like no man had ever yet had."

Kaz ooohed with wonder. "Where can it be found?"

"Well, I got this moth-eaten old rag about it." The elf held up a crumbling book with water-stained pages. "That is, if you're interested and you've got a little gold burning a hole in your pocket."

"Kaz has plenty of gold! Please, take it! Take it all," the Thusr said, holding out both hands filled to overflowing with gold pieces.

Roark shouldered in between his friend and the suddenly very cheerful spice seller.

"He'll give you two gold," Roark said, eyeing the battered tome with exaggerated disdain. "And that's being generous."

“Roark, no, it is worth all the gold in the world,” Kaz hissed in a whisper that could’ve carried a rural mile. “This book tells of a legendary weapon and cooking utensil known as the Meat Tenderizer, which turns any food you touch into a Gourmet feast!”

“Two and not a cent more,” Roark said firmly.

“I couldn’t take less than five,” the elf said, lovingly caressing the disintegrating cover. “Do not let its humble appearance deceive you. It isn’t the book that’s of value, you see. It’s what’s inside.”

“Damn it all,” Roark cursed under his breath. The old bastard sure knew how to twist a book-lover’s heart. “Four—and that’s highway banditry of the highest order.”

Roark thought he heard a choked feminine laugh behind him, but when he looked back, Zyra was facing away, supposedly watching the crowd. He returned his attention to the elf, who was still hemming and hawing over the new price.

“Oh, I suppose I could give it away for that,” the elf finally said.

Kaz whooped with joy and shoved his gold at the spice seller.

CHAPTER 5

THE WEAPON TRAINER



Roark stopped outside the spice seller's tent, looking for the fastest way across the marketplace to the arcane bookshop. Kaz barreled into the back of him, nose buried in the decrepit book.

"Kaz is sorry," the Thusrer apologized, looking up from reading. "But Roark has to read this. Look!" He held the book out. "It was written just for Kaz!"

As Roark leaned in to get a closer look at the text, a box appeared before him.



Gourmet foods provide a range of temporary boosts to the body and mind, but not everyone who can stir a stew possesses the necessary culinary acumen to become a Gourmet. To prove you have what it takes, locate and gather these exceedingly rare Ingredients:

(2) Saffron Crocuses

(4) White Truffles

(2) Buzz Fish Caviar

(4) Chocolate Orchid Bean Pods

Objective: Gather the Ingredients before time limit

Rewards: The Legendary Meat Tenderizer, *The Gourmet Troll's Cookbook*, 100 gold, (1) kilo Salt

Time Limit: (1) month

Failure: Fail to find all Ingredients before the time limit,

or gather the wrong Ingredient (for example: coquelicot crocuses, black truffles, sawgar caviar, vanilla orchid bean pods)

“It takes a discerning chef to taste the subtle differences between a good meal and a Gourmet meal.”

– *The Flavor Text*



Roark dismissed the box, then immediately leapt backward, startled. Kaz's nose was an inch from his face. The Thusr's black eyes shined with excitement over his wooden menpō.

“Kaz has to complete this quest, Roark. Cooking food is a good and noble calling—*Cooking with Gry Feliri* said so—and no Troll has ever had such a calling before. But to become a *Gourmet*,” he whispered reverentially. “Kaz has never wanted anything more in his life.”

“I'll help if I can,” Roark said, slapping the Thusr on the boxy wooden pauldron, surprised to find that he made the offer with complete sincerity. Just a few short days ago, he would've brushed off the errand as a silly waste of time. Having friends had a strange way of shifting one's priorities, it seemed.

“Roark.” Zyra's leather-gloved hand touched his elbow. She nodded toward a pair of heroes standing in front of a nearby stall that sold nothing but enormous wheels of cheese. “Listen. Sound like anything you're looking for?”

“... had to clear Eternal Rest Overlook and bring back this sword,” a human wearing bulky silver plate mail was saying, raising the pommel of the heavily notched shortsword resting on his shoulder. “It's way worth it, though. Once you're in with the dude, he'll train you in basically any weapon.”

His rog companion gave a low whistle. “If I didn't have so freaking many quests active right now ...”

“It won't hurt anything to pick up one more,” the human said. “And it's usually just a simple fetch quest someplace close by. Total cakewalk, broski. I got this done in like an hour. I have to log out

pretty soon, but I'm headed over there to drop this off first, if you wanna come with."

"What the hell," the rog said with a shrug, "I'm not getting anything else done today."

The pair of them turned and headed into the hustle and bustle of the crowd, quickly swallowed from view by the press of bodies.

Cogs whirled in Roark's mind. A combat trainer who would take on multiple students at a time would be infinitely more valuable than a single-use enchanted skill book. Probably easier on the purse than buying books for each Troll on the first floor as well. And if there was a chance this trainer could help Roark unlock his Melee Skills, then it would be well worth the time spent finding him.

"Quick, we need to follow them," Roark said. "Without attracting their attention."

Zyra's hood dipped in a nod. "Then you need to follow me. Try to keep up."

She sank into a crouch and took a step into the shadows of a nearby tent filled with rolled carpets. Wisps of black smoke curled up from where she'd been standing.

Roark jerked his head at Kaz. "Come on."

They made their way through the marketplace throng, catching glimpses here and there of Zyra's back as she stepped between shadows. None of the heroes milling around the stands and booths paid the Reaver any attention except the few who clutched their purses close and snapped at her to keep her hands off.

"Kaz and Roark should sneak, too," Kaz said as they left the bazaar behind. "It will help us blend in with Zyra."

Roark shook his head. "At our size, sneaking isn't bloody likely, mate. If anything, the pair of us trying to tiptoe around will only draw *more* attention."

But Kaz was already hunched over and creeping toward the street with exaggerated care. His boxy O-Rogiri armor clacked and rattled like wooden wind chimes as he moved. As Roark had suspected, the Thusr made more noise sneaking than when he walked normally.

Just ahead, Zyra showed herself long enough to beckon them toward a side street, then disappeared again. Kaz nodded emphatically at her, then looked over his shoulder, wheeling his arm wildly at Roark with a sound like a wine barrel full of stones bouncing down a mountainside. The heroes and merchants at the edge of the bazaar stared as the Thusr in disguise threw himself into a graceless roll down the side street.

Roark sighed and followed, standing upright, trying his best to ignore the legion of curious stares and barely concealed laughter.

Their slow chase wound through a narrow alley, then doglegged off between a series of leaning, decrepit buildings that stunk of liquor and rotting fish. When Kaz and Roark turned the final corner, they found Zyra leaning against a cinder brick building down the street. Over her head hung a wooden shingle with the picture of a face with stringy black hair and a pair of ghostly eyes poking out of what appeared to be murky water.

The Sulky Selkie

Seeing her, Kaz threw himself into another tumbling roll across the street, then bounced to his feet and pressed his back up against the wall beside her with a wooden clatter. Roark shook his head, lips pursed into a thin line, and walked across the street.

“Your heroes are inside,” Zyra said matter-of-factly, gesturing toward the door. “They never even suspected they had a shadow.” Her hood glanced pointedly in Kaz’s direction. “Well, not a Reaver shadow, anyway,” she amended, picking a nonexistent bit of dirt from the sleeve of her mage’s robes.

Roark tried and failed to suppress a smile. “No one likes a showoff.”

“Tell that to your face,” she said as she pushed away from the wall, “because your grin says otherwise.” She opened the cockeyed door studded with rusty rivets and made a flourishing bow. “After you stealthy gents.”

Inside, the Sulky Selkie was just like many a little back-alley tavern Roark had frequented back in Traisbin—dingy, smoke-filled, and loud, but a good place to while away an hour or two eavesdropping on local news or meeting up with other Resistance fighters. A musician with a long-necked sitar plucked out a sharp-sounding melody in the corner while a drunk nearby swayed mostly against the rhythm. The majority of the patrons were clustered together in twos and threes at rough wooden tables scattered around the room, all wearing the drab colors of hard laborers.

The heroes they'd tailed to the Selkie were easy to spot—they were the only ones in the tavern wearing armor. The pair had taken a seat near the bar and were chatting with a pale, grizzled-looking man with a leather eyepatch and a ring of wiry gray hair encircling a shiny pate.

Roark led Kaz and Zyra to a table by the wall. Though their armor would mark them as obviously not locals, Roark slouched into his chair as if weary from a hard day's work and signaled the doughy bartender. Nothing was more suspicious than sitting around in a tavern without a drink. Zyra and Kaz were drawing enough attention—one coiled tightly enough to spring on the first person who walked by and the other with his wooden faceplate deep in a book that was nearly disintegrating in his oversized hands.

Up by the bar, one of the heroes they'd followed pulled out the battle-notched shortsword and handed it to the grizzled old man.

“Well, now, there’s a sight for a sore eye,” he said, his gruff voice cutting through the sitar music like a gnarl-toothed hacksaw. He raised the blade to the light, turning it this way and that, the edge gleaming in the dull light cast by wrought iron wall sconces. “Never thought I’d see this beaut again. ‘Course, I haven’t much to repay you with. Gold’s hard to come by for an old arena hand. But if you’re interested, I might be able to show you a move or two with that warhammer you’re wearin’.”

The bartender brought their drinks and slammed them on the table, foam sloshing over the sides. Zyra jumped at the sound, but thankfully didn’t stab the man in the neck.

"That'll be a gold apiece," the bartender said, hooking his thumbs in his belt, which struggled mightily to hold his pants up.

Roark handed over the coins, eager for the man to get lost so he could go back to eavesdropping on the conversation at the bar.

But as the bartender turned to go, Kaz stopped him.

"Dude sir," the Thusr said in his best attempt to sound like one of the heroes. "Do you know where Kaz can find a saffron crocus, white truffle, buzz fish caviar, or chocolate orchid? They are for a quest."

At the bar, the grizzled old fighter took a few demonstrative swings with the hero's warhammer, cords of wiry muscle appearing in his arms. His movements weren't the feeble motions of an old man past his prime, but precise and deadly. Experienced. Not a bit of energy wasted.

Roark tried to listen past Kaz and the bartender, but couldn't hear what the old man was saying as he handed the weapon back to its owner. The hero gave the warhammer a swing, mimicking the trainer's motion.

"Well, I don't know nothing about any truffles or orchids," the bartender was saying, wiping his hands on a rag stuck in his belt. "But me mam used to gather crocus flowers off the slope of the Hearth. They won't grow nowhere else. And you'll find the buzz fish spawning not far away—down in the mineral hot springs. They like the heat."

"Thank you," Kaz told the bartender, dipping his head graciously. "Pwned it."

The hero and his friend were leaving, their business finished. Roark scowled behind his veil.

"You come on back anytime you get a bit of spare coin," the grizzled fighter said, waving a calloused hand. "Ol' Griff'll be happy to train you again anytime."

"Wait here," Roark whispered, grabbing his tankard as he stood. Then he stopped and nodded at the untouched tankard in front of Zyra's tensely still form. "Drink your ale and try to breathe a little, Mistress Stealth. You look like a stone statue."

Her hood turned to him in what Roark felt certain was a glare, then Zyra picked up her tankard and took a series of spitefully large

gulps. Slurps almost. For a moment, the huge mug pushed back the bottom of the Reaver's hood, and Roark found himself mesmerized by a glimpse of a midnight blue chin and cheek amidst the snowy curls.

Then she slammed the empty tankard on the table and let out a loud burp, the hood falling back into place.

"Better?" Zyra asked.

Roark had to scramble to figure out what she was referring to. His comment about sitting still as a statue. Of course.

"A bit," he said, fighting to sound glib. "Though somewhere in the middle ground between stock-still and ale-guzzling might be preferable."

"Gry Feliri says a satisfied expellation of gas is one of the highest compliments a brewer can receive," Kaz said without looking up from his book.

Zyra raised one gloved hand as if to say, *There you have it.*

Roark shook his head and offered the two of them his back. The grizzled old fighter Griff had returned to his stool at the bar, the shortsword tucked safely away in his Inventory. Roark slipped into the seat beside him and gestured with his tankard.

"Can I buy you a drink, mate?"

The old man chuckled and gave him a sidelong glance—a tricky thing to accomplish with only one eye. "I wouldn't spurn a scotch if you've got the gold."

Roark nodded. The bartender hustled over to the shelf, pulled down a dusty green bottle, and filled a short clay cup. Rather than drop this onto the bar as he had the ales, the bartender withheld the cup and proffered an empty, expectant hand, waiting for Roark to pony up four gold coins. A near fortune, really. But the fighter's services would be priceless, so Roark happily forked over the coins. Once payment was safely in hand, the bartender eased the cup onto the sticky wood surface, placing it down carefully. Almost reverently.

"I thank you, friend," the grizzled old fighter said, toasting Roark before taking a sip. He grimaced, then sighed with pleasure. "Mighty fine. That'll buy you a sympathetic ear and a closed mouth about the three of you bein' out on the town."

“Excuse me?” Roark said, feigning ignorance. “Why shouldn’t we be in town?”

“Nobody’s judgin’ nobody here. I’ve fought back-to-back in the arena with more mobs than a pup like you can count.” The old man swirled the scotch around his cup. “Folk think chimeras are nothing more than mindless beasts, but ol’ Griff knows better. I learned it firsthand. Paid for that lesson in blood and sweat.” He scratched at the wiry gray hair behind one scarred ear. “What I can’t figure is why a group of your kind would be wanderin’ around Averi City.”

This was certainly unexpected. Roark looked down into his ale to cover his surprise and found a strand of hair the same pale yellow as the bartender’s stuck to the lip of the glass. Rather unsavory, that.

“Less you’re with that Troll outfit everybody’s been flappin’ their gums about of late,” Griff added, not quite hiding his knowing grin behind his own cup. “The dungeon that isn’t actin’ like a proper dungeon anymore.”

As if he hadn’t heard, Roark picked the hair off his tankard and tossed it down.

“We’re looking for a Melee trainer,” he said. “I don’t know what your going rate is here, but I can offer you a steady stream of customers ready to pay it. At least fifty of them to start.”

Griff choked on his scotch. The grizzled old fighter cleared his throat and tried to regain some of his dignity with a careless shrug. “Mayhap we could work out an arrangement of sorts, but there’s no way you could ferry that number of”—he paused, dropping his raspy voice low—“your kind all the way up here.”

“Indeed not,” Roark replied. “You would need to relocate for this particular position.”

“The Cruel Citadel?”

“The Cruel Citadel,” Roark confirmed. “But I could offer you a sizeable bonus if you were willing to move. Say, one percent of the value of whatever we take from the unwanted visitors to our realm.”

Griff lifted his mug, swirling it as he searched the amber liquid as though it might contain some secret wisdom.

“One percent,” he replied after a time, “but I always get a flat rate, ten gold, from anyone who wants to train with me. And I’ll need

assurance. I don't plan to take up your cause, mind you—for me it's all about the gold—so I need protection from both the heroes and your folk. My kind, we respawn, but death is no pleasant thing, so I'd avoid it if I can."

"Understood," Roark replied with a nod. "All of those arrangements can be made. I'd also like to offer you an opportunity to earn more. We need more specialized workers and skill trainers such as yourself. So, if you think of anyone and can persuade them to work with us, I'll reward you with a bonus. Let's say, an additional quarter-percent share increase for every new member you bring on board."

Roark could see the wheels turning in Griff's head accompanied by a greedy glint in the man's one good eye. "Mob gold spends just the same as hero gold to me," he said after a time. "When do I start?"

CHAPTER 6

LEAD FROM THE FRONT



Roark, Kaz, and Zyra returned to the Cruel Citadel with Griff in tow. As they descended the crumbling staircase, the old fighter's good eye—or remaining eye, rather—scanned the antechamber. Only one Reaver Bat hung from the ceiling at the moment, looking from Roark to the unfamiliar human as if uncertain whether it should be attacking. Roark gave it a terse shake of the head. The corpse of the other Bat lay broken on the floor at the bottom of the steps, near a pair of gore-spattered Changeling corpses.

Obviously, a party had been through recently. Roark listened for signs that they were still on the first floor but didn't hear the echoing crash of battle. They must've been taken down farther in. He could check the body position and how many Changelings they'd sent for respawn when he got to the Overseer's throne.

"Not a bad place, as dungeons go," said Griff from beside him.

Roark eyed the corpses. "It's a bit dead at the moment."

"Yup, that happens even to the best of us at times." Griff folded his hands behind his back, brow furrowed. "So ... Where do you want me to set up shop?"

"The great hall should do for now." Roark looked at Zyra. "Could you show him the way while Kaz and I let everyone know he's here?"

Her hood dipped in an affirmative and she beckoned to the grizzled old fighter. "This way, human," she said, leading him toward the wide doorway to the great hall.

Roark and Kaz took the door opposite, heading down a set of winding passages that led past the library and forge.

“Roark does not really need Kaz’s help, does he?” the Thusr asked as they walked. “Kaz should be checking on his apprentice chefs. Making sure the evening stew is not *too* salty.” Roark couldn’t help but notice Kaz had his new book tucked up beneath a meaty arm, one of his sausage-sized fingers holding his place. As if that weren’t obvious enough, his large body was already half turned toward the library.

“I think you’re headed the wrong way, mate,” Roark said, not bothering to hide the knowing smile. “The kitchen’s that way.”

The Thusr looked down sheepishly, the black plumage on his antlered headdress jiggling. “Well, Kaz would stop at the library first to see if any of the books could tell him where chocolate orchids or white truffles might be found.”

Roark shrugged. “Fair enough. Just make certain you meet up with Griff later to unlock your Melee Skills. They’ll help you level up faster, which means more evolutions to come.”

“Oh yes, Kaz promises.” Before the final word had left his mouth, Kaz had already turned on his heel and practically sprinted toward the library.

Chuckles to himself, Roark continued down the hall alone, enjoying the brief moment of solitude—a rare treat as of late. He rounded a bend, then edged around two heroes’ corpses and a pair of Thusrss busy looting their bodies. A dead Changeling and a trio of Stone Salamanders lay scattered nearby.

“Did those two do all this?” Roark asked, his steps faltering.

The larger of the Thusrss, a broad female with spiked pauldrons, nodded vigorously.

“They were right tough, Overseer. Level 12 and 14.”

“Returning to pick up their gear from the raid?” Roark asked.

“No, no, these were first-timers.” She pointed at her companion, who was busy struggling with a piece of parchment and pen. That was another skill they all needed to work on. He’d have to get a line on a few more Cartography tomes. “Bort’s marking them for griefing now.”

Roark nodded and continued on his way, though a frown tugged down the corners of his mouth. Strange. Before PwnrBwner_OG’s

guild raid, Roark hadn't seen any heroes over level 7 in the citadel. But then Roark hadn't been there that long, either. Time was hard to judge in Hearthworld, but he estimated he'd come through only a few days ago. A week at the most.

His mind wandered. How much destruction could Marek Konig Ustar have wreaked on his beloved Korvo in a week's time? Already, there might not be one brick left standing on another or one of her hardy people left alive to mourn her.

Roark was so focused on these dark thoughts that he didn't notice the telltale distortion on the ceiling overhead until it let go of the stones and plopped down on top of him. Three hundred pounds of Elite Salamander landed on Roark's head and shoulders like a sack of grain, buckling his knees and slamming him to the floor under the mass of fat, muscle, tail, and pebbly slate skin. A sliver of red liquid drained from his filigreed Health vial on impact.

Macaroni rested both wide forepaws on Roark's chest and chirped down at him happily. The salamander's fat black tongue shot out, licking Roark's pale cheek, before retreating back into its wide mouth.

"Hells, Mac." Roark planted his hands on the creature's fat-padded chest and gave it a shove. The Elite Salamander blinked its eyes slightly out of time with one another, then clambered off him. "I'm happy to see you, too, but if I were still a Changeling, that would've killed me." Roark stood and brushed the dust from his backside. "You're much bigger than you used to be, mate."

Mac fell into step beside Roark, not at all chastened, and followed him the rest of the way to the throne room.

Once there, Roark took his seat on the twisted obsidian throne and pulled up the Overseer's Grimoire. In addition to giving him access to a roster of the first-floor creatures and allowing him to change the layout of the floor once a day, the grimoire also acted as something of a telepathic focus. From it, he could contact all the creatures under his supervision, either individually or en masse.

Roark selected the mass option.

"The first floor now employs a weapons trainer. If you wish to unlock your Melee Skills or level up your abilities with a weapon, you

may meet with him in the great hall starting immediately. He charges a flat rate of ten gold per training session, so have the coin handy when you go.” Roark was about to end the message, then recalled the uncertainty of the Reaver Bat in the antechamber. “The trainer is a human male with an eyepatch. Griff, by name. He’s not to be harmed under any circumstances, and if heroes threaten his life, you’ll be expected to protect him.”

That done, Roark pulled up a page marked *Floor Design*.

At the top was a detailed map of the first floor’s hallways and rooms: each door, chest, trap, and bit of furniture carefully depicted. Beneath that was a point counter, which read *0/100* in glowing golden numerals. Each of the rooms and items on his floor had a different cost, and as Overseer, Roark could tweak the floor layout in any way he desired, so long as he stayed within the allotted points limit. Currently, all of his points were tied up in rooms, traps, and furnishings. If Griff was going to stay on with them, however, they would need somewhere more permanent than the great hall to train. Likely, he would need sleeping quarters as well. So far as Roark could tell, Trolls didn’t need sleep—in fact, he’d only ever seen them do it when passed out from too much ale—but Griff was human and would likely have the physical requirements of one.

Macaroni climbed up onto the throne to curl around Roark’s back, though they’d both grown much too large to fit comfortably in the seat together. Mind still focused on the floor design, Roark scooted absently to the edge of the throne. Mac settled in contentedly, wrapping his fat tail around Roark’s stomach.

Roark played with the values in his head. They could stand to part with a few traps. Admittedly, he’d overdone them a bit in his desire to teach PwnrBwner_007 a lesson. Now that the lesson had been taught, though, there was no reason he couldn’t shift the points toward something else. Something a bit more pragmatic. Especially if that something involved making all the Trolls on the floor into more formidable opponents.

“Lord Overseer,” Zyra’s teasing voice cut through his brooding.

“That’s not funny.” Roark closed out of the grimoire with a thought and glared at the hooded Reaver. “Do you have any idea how long it

took to get the Changelings to stop calling me that?"

She shrugged one bare shoulder, then gestured back toward the great hall. "Your brilliant training plan is having some issues."

"What issues?"

"Best if you see for yourself," she replied, voice rather smug.

With a sigh, Roark stood and followed Zyra from the throne room. When they made it to the great hall, the issue became immediately apparent.

Griff had pulled one of the rough-hewn tables over to a corner and was sitting behind it, waiting for pupils to train. The room was filled with squat little Changelings and brawny Thusrss—even a pair of newly evolved Reavers. But no one approached the grizzled vet. Instead, the Trolls milled around the tables, talking to one another, eating, or shooting surreptitious glances toward the outsider in the corner. The *human*.

With the claw-tipped thumb and forefinger of one hand, Roark massaged his temples. "Please tell me there isn't some Troll taboo against weapons trainers," he said.

"None," Zyra said. "This is a matter of uncertainty. You got them to trust one another. The trick now is getting them to trust an outsider."

Roark dragged his hand down his face, then nodded. Leading a revolt to overthrow both a tyrant and the *status quo* was fraught with far more nuisances than he would've imagined. True, he'd dealt with the bureaucratic numbskullery of the *T'verzet*—the Rebel Council—back in Korvo, but he hadn't been a leader then. In truth, he'd been an outsider, even amongst his fellow rebels.

"Very well," he finally said. "Go get Kaz. Sometimes the only way forward is in front of the pack."

As the hooded Reaver stalked off toward the kitchens, Roark strode up to the table. Every eye in the room followed him, Troll and human alike. Macaroni was busy climbing up the wall and frisking after another Stone Salamander, not paying much attention to the goings-on below.

Griff folded his scarred hands in front of him and tilted his head back until he could look Roark in the eye.

“What can I do you for?” he said, as though this were the first time they’d ever met.

“I’d like training in the rapier,” Roark said, fishing a stack of golden coins from his Inventory and dropping them on the table.

The grizzled old fighter nodded and swept the coins into a small purse before standing with a groan.

“Let’s see your blade,” he prompted, twirling one hand through the air. *Let’s get along with it*, that gesture said.

Roark presented his Slender Rapier of the Falcon for the older man’s inspection. Griff raised the pommel to his nose, staring straight down the blade, then rested the flat on his finger less than an inch from the guard, checking the balance.



Slender Rapier of the Falcon (Superior)

One-Handed Damage: 20 - 29

Durability: 50 of 50

Level Requirement: 5

Strength Requirement: 12

Blade Class Weapon - Fast Attack Speed

+10% Attack Speed



“Quality work.” With a flick of his wrist, Griff tossed the rapier up and snatched it by the hilt.

Though Roark was well versed in the rapier, he watched Griff’s motions with keen fascination. The blade sliced through the air in a complicated series of *mandritto* and *riverso* slashes, all *dal polso*, or from the wrist. Roark tended to favor *dalla spalla*, swinging from his shoulder for the added momentum, but that technique left the body open to a counterattack for a comparatively long time. By contrast, Griff’s quick, precise cuts hardly left openings long enough to spot them, let alone exploit them. Any doubts Roark had regarding Griff’s skill vanished at once.

This man was competent and deadly.

“Next time you’re blade to blade with an opponent, give this a shot,” Griff said. He moved away from the table, then danced across the floor, his footwork impeccable. He flicked his wrist, bringing the blade around in a tight circle, *stramazzone*. “Why, that’ll throw him right off and free you to cut his hand up something cussed.”

The old fighter handed the rapier back to Roark and motioned for him to try the move. Roark settled into a defensive guard, imagining that he had just attached swords with someone to the inside, then twirled the blade in that same close circle Griff had demonstrated.

[*Congratulations! You have unlocked a Melee Skill: Bladed Weapons! Once unlocked, Melee Skills, like all combat skills, gain abilities and levels through use. You can also purchase additional levels from trainers once per day. Warning: Players only have (3) Melee Skill Slots, are you sure you would like to add Bladed Weapons? Yes/No?*]

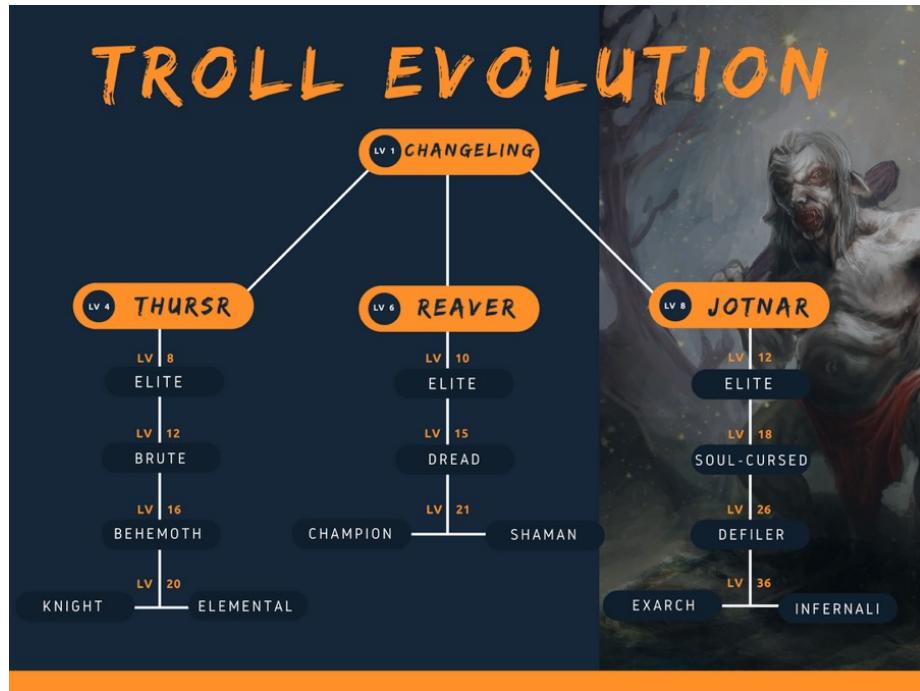
[*Congratulations! You have unlocked a Weapon Specialty: Rapier! When using a Specialty Weapon, you level up more quickly, deal additional damage, and have an increased chance to score a Critical Hit! Warning: Players only have (1) Weapon Specialty Slot, are you sure you would like to add Rapier? Yes/No?*]

Roark read and reread the prompt, thinking through it for only a moment before accepting both prompts. Obviously, he needed access to Bladed Weapons, and since his favored weapon was the rapier, it made no sense not to accept the added benefits. An ascending chime rang through the room and another message appeared, this one gold and glimmering.

[**LEVEL UP!**]
[*You have 10 undistributed Stat Points!*]

Level 9, finally.





Only three more levels before he hit his next evolution: Elite Jotnar. He needed to distribute his Stat points, but that could wait until he was no longer pinned down under the staring eyes of fifty Trolls. Roark dismissed the magical grimoire page with a thought, then returned the rapier to the narrow sheath hanging from the leather frog at his belt.

“Much appreciated, mate.”

Griff grunted. “Come back when you’re ready to add the dagger to your off hand, and I’ll teach you this little trick I learned in the arena.”

Though Roark was tempted to spend the extra gold right then to find out what the trick was, he saw Kaz and Zyra loitering at the back of the crowd, watching curiously. Roark caught Kaz’s eye, then jerked his head at the trainer.

The Thusr’s onyx eyes widened with understanding and his huge mouth formed an O. As if he’d just stepped out on a massive stage, Kaz pulled himself up to his full height and strode through the crowd to Griff. “Kaz would like to purchase a level of training as well,”

he said in a loud, stilted voice. Thespian would never be in the cards for Kaz, but bless his soul for trying.

Griff rubbed his calloused hands together. “What’s your weapon of choice, big fella?”

Kaz handed over his twin hooked swords while Roark slipped to the back of the room. The rest of the Trolls weren’t ready to swarm the table demanding the trainer take their money yet, but it wouldn’t be long, he suspected. With the crowd creeping closer to the trainer, it was easy to fade into the background with Zyra and simply observe.

Roark spoke up before the hooded Reaver could make a clever quip.

“Get your gold ready,” he said, gesturing to the front. “You’re next in line.”

The hood swiveled in his direction. “I’ve already unlocked my primary combat skills.”

“Then you can level one of your abilities. It’s faster than griefing. And far more efficient.”

Zyra sniffed, then begrudgingly admitted that was true. When Griff finished with Kaz, she took his place, presenting the trainer with a handful of her matte-black flechettes. The lower-level Trolls watched eagerly as the grizzled old man demonstrated a way to throw three of the poisoned darts at the same time. Roark knew that they wanted to follow suit and train as well—it was written all over their lumpy blue faces and carved into the lines of their malformed bodies—they just needed something to push them over the edge.

The old man returned the flechettes to Zyra and had her practice the motion. Her eyes slipped out of focus for a moment, no doubt reading the notice that she’d leveled up her Ranged Attack.

“What,” a reedy teenage voice echoed off the walls, “in the hell, bro?”

CHAPTER 7

CUSTOMER SERVICE



Randy Shoemaker clutched his mug of coffee as he beelined for his glass-fronted office, keeping his head down, trying to avoid eye contact—muttering a silent prayer that no one would stop him or try to make small talk. Someone invariably *would*, however, since his office was directly adjacent to the lounge that housed the ping-pong table, an oversized leather couch, and a seventy-inch vidwall where employees could come to “unwind.” A place to play video games. To “hang out.” Or “jam.”

Frontflip Studios—maker of the bestselling ultra-immersive MMO *Hearthworld*—was one of *those* types of companies. A place where there was no formal dress policy. Where people wore blue jeans and flip-flops to work. Frontflip insisted it “inspired an atmosphere of creativity.”

Randy Shoemaker, one of Frontflip’s many senior software engineers, didn’t approve. Not at all. He liked things to be orderly, for everything to have its place. For the rules to be spelled out.

He dressed plainly. Dark, professional no-nonsense slacks, a white button up, and penny loafers. He also sported a clear pocket protector, crammed with pens and markers, but he’d been wearing it long before they were “ironically” hip. No, he wore his pocket protector out of sheer practicality.

“What’s up, Randy?” one of the concept artists grunted as he passed, not even bothering to look away from the first-person shooter buzzing with life on the vidwall.

“Not much,” Randy mumbled in reply, offering the man a thin smile. Then he quickly took a sip of his too-hot coffee, hoping to

stave off any other verbal communication. Thankfully, the artist on the sofa had already forgotten about Randy—clearly, his greeting was perfunctory at best—which was fine. A lot of the other techs and devs were social types, but not Randy. He was quiet, introspective, polite. Not antisocial exactly, just not good at being with people. Some days he wished things were different. That he could be like Brad over in Customer Service or maybe Danny, the vice president of marketing. Cool. Suave. Casual. Their words seemed to come as easy as the wide smiles they always wore.

But that wasn't him. Which was also perfectly fine. This wasn't a popularity contest. He was here to work. Not to socialize or gallivant around or play games on company time or any of the other nonsense Frontflip allowed its employees to get away with. Randy arrived fifteen minutes early, ate his muffin while he made his coffee, then settled in to his work. Every day.

He pushed open the door with the toe of his loafer and shuffled over to his desk chair. Carefully, slowly—anxious that he might spill even a *drop* of his coffee—he set his mug down on a coaster, then settled into an ergonomic, high-backed chair with *plenty* of lumbar support. He tapped his mouse. Blue light flickered as his computer whirred to life with a gentle, reassuring hum. While his machine booted up, he meticulously organized the papers on his desk. His best designs always started on paper.

That done, he moved on to straightening the already straight books lining the shelf above his desk. *Rational Database Theory and Applications. Advance Digital and Systems Analysis. Fundamentals of Radiant AIs. Refactoring. Design Patterns: Elements of Reusable Object-Oriented Software.* Book after book. He knew most of those manuals by heart, but there was a comfort in having them near at hand, even though he couldn't remember the last time he'd actually reached for one.

His monitor flashed, and with a few keystrokes, he was logged in.

Another sip of coffee—still just a tad too hot—then he opened his email.

A tight knot formed in the pit of his stomach. 113 unread messages, most of them forwarded over from customer service reps.

Generally, he didn't work with Customer Service. They had *exactly* his opposite skill set. They were talkers. Chatters. People persons. But these were exceptional days. Something was happening in Hearthworld, something no one understood. Not even Randy, unfortunately, which was extraordinary in itself.

He opened up the first email, wondering which dungeon this newest complaint would be about: Cruel Citadel or the Vault of the Radiant Shield. And the winner was ... Cruel Citadel. He wasn't entirely surprised. The Cruel Citadel was a low- to mid-level starter dungeon of Infernal alignment. A lot of new players, *lowbies*, worked through the top levels of the citadel, grinding out easy experience and earning trash-tier loot. By contrast, the Vault of the Radiant Shield, a Divine-oriented dungeon, was a relatively high-level zone, so the anomalous discrepancies weren't quite so noticeable there.

Randy pushed his boxy black glasses up on the bridge of his nose, then craned forward to read the complaint. This one was from a player with the handle of PwnrBwner, real account holder name Scott Bayani.

This is like the millionth time that asswipe Roark the Griefer has killed me. He's some kind of douchebag modder, and you guys aren't doing anything! Seriously, why in the hell are you guys not doing anything about this?! This modding dickhole has ruined the whole dungeon. Like none of the Trolls are acting normal. They gang up on you. Form teams. That brohole Roark even coated my gear with contact poison! WTF! I was talking with one of my buddies who swears up and down they have an NPC trainer down there—and I saw screenshots, so I know he's on the level. Cruel Citadel is listed at Tier 2, but it's gotta be hitting Tier 4 difficulty, which is bullshit! I've lost soooooo much gear so much money. I'm serious, you guys better unfuck this!

Randy frowned and closed out of the very strongly worded email. The contact poison was new, and Scott wasn't wrong about the NPC skill trainer. Griff the Arena vet from the Averi Marketplace had, in fact, relocated to the first level of the dungeon. And he was indeed training the Trolls, which defied all explanation. Mobs weren't designed to operate that way. The best Randy could guess, this was

some new form of game modding, except that *couldn't* be. Hearthworld was a bastion of gaming purity.

And yet ... This Roark, who was obviously a player, had somehow hacked the system. He was at the heart of the Cruel Citadel's problems, *the prime anomaly*. He also happened to be invisible. Sure, Randy had seen screenshots, even video footage, but the player didn't exist. He had no account. The character class was impossible. Everything about him was wrong. Even the spells he cast defied logic. There was simply nothing like them in the game. In short, Roark was a glitch. A bug. One that Randy had no idea how to fix.

Worse, this Roark seemed to also carry some sort of virus which was altering the other creatures in the Cruel Citadel. Infecting them. Changing their script. Giving them skill classes. Those secondary anomalies Randy could identify, but that was *all* he could do. All anyone could do. They seemed immune from tampering on his end; just another impossibility on top of all the rest. He puffed out his checks, rubbed at the bridge of his nose—already a tension headache was forming, dull horns of pain curling around his skull—then took another sip of coffee.

Now it was too cold. Lukewarm at best. He sighed, deflating a little.

It was going to be a terribly long day ...

CHAPTER 8

HELLBENDER



A broad-shouldered rog clad in obsidian plate armor and a slender olm in flowing jade robes stood in the doorway to the antechamber. Apparently in all the excitement, the pair had managed to infiltrate without setting off a call to arms. An oversight to be fixed in the future.

“This is insane,” the rog, [Han_Pwno], said, his voice cracking. He pointed the blade of his naginata at Griff. “Do you think they kidnapped that NPC?”

“Isn’t that ...” The olm, [SquirrelGirl80], paused and squinted. “Isn’t that the retired arena vet from the tavern in Averi City?” she asked, tilting her slime-coated head slightly to one side. “Holy crap. Yep. Definitely is. Dude ... I think they might be training.”

“No way!” Han_Pwno shouted, delight etched into the lines of his green face. “That’s even weirder than Kamal said! I’m so screenshotting this. Seriously, no one is gonna believe this!”

Though Roark was mildly annoyed about the interruption, he realized that with just a little effort he could manipulate this situation to his favor. True, he could’ve rallied the small army of Trolls milling around in the great hall, bringing down a tidal wave of blue flesh and slashing weapons upon the interlopers. But that simply wouldn’t serve his purpose.

“Allow us to demonstrate the benefit of martial training,” Roark said to the assembled Trolls, his voice reverberating off the stone walls. “Kaz, Zyra, to arms. The rest of you, watch and learn.”

Roark slipped his Slender Rapier free of his sheath, then nodded toward Kaz. The Thusr nodding in reply, *ready*, a hooked sword in

each meaty fist. But Zyra was the closest. Before the heroes could take even a single step, she hurled three flechettes as one, using the motion Griff had just taught her. The olm flinched, squawking in shock, then threw herself out of the way of an incoming flechette. The rog whirled his oversized naganata, knocking one of tiny black blades aside, but the third flew true, lodging in his shoulder. The red bar over his head flashed green. Poisoned.

Zyra disappeared in a puff of shadow and smoke. Gone like a specter banished to the dark waters of *Tuonilla*.

Kaz ran at the poisoned rog, bellowing his new war cry, “FOR SAAAAALT!”

Han_Pwno ducked, narrowly catching one hooked sword on the edge of his naganata. But Kaz’s other sword swooped in low, the flat edge denting in the side of the rog’s left greave while the hook tore into the meat of his calf. He yelped and stumbled backward, wildly swinging his naganata. The blade landed with a wet thud, scoring a deep gash across Kaz’s broad shoulder. An eyeblink later, the butt of the staff whistled toward Kaz’s head. Ignoring the brutal wound, Kaz threw his hooked swords up in an X, trapping the naganata in place before the strike could land.

While Han_Pwno wrestled with Kaz for control of his weapon, Roark bolted into the action, circling right then lunging in from the flank, *stocatta di quarta*—an upward thrust that slid between the plates of the rog’s armor. Han_Pwno cried out in a combination of shock and pain as his Health bar dropped to three-quarters, then to half as Roark spun away and repeated the thrust from the opposite side.

Off to the side, the olm came out of a roll and bounced to her feet. She began weaving her hands in an intricate pattern, a chant building on her lips. A black rift, shimmering with streaks of angry crimson light, appeared in the air before her. A massive chitinous claw like that of an enormous crustacean shot out, grabbing Kaz by the leg. The limb was massive, the chitin a blue-black shot through with streaks of brilliant pink. Roark couldn’t even begin to envision what sort of monstrosity such a claw could possibly belong to. He hoped he would never find out.

The Thusrsh shouted in surprise as he was lifted off his feet and pulled toward the rift.

Roark took a final hack at the rog, finishing him off, then lunged *pie' fimo* at the armored claw. He slashed and swung at it, but his rapier did little more than score the chitin.

With an inky puff of smoke, Zyra stepped out of the shadows directly behind SquirrelGirl80 and lodged a gleaming dagger in the olm's kidney. The olm spun. Her hands dropped and scrambled for a cloudy glass mace with odd fingers peeling off in every direction from the head, but Zyra raked her free palm across the olm's face, opening several lines of black blood and poisoning the olm. Her stick-death needles at work. The hooded Reaver moved like smoke in a strong wind, ducking under a swing of the mace, then launching three quick strikes with the dagger right into the olm's gut and ribs. The olm screamed, clutching at her wounds as blood dribbled from her lips.

As if in response to its caster's pain, the enormous claw changed directions suddenly, using Kaz's flailing body as a club. On instinct, Roark thrust out his left hand and conjured up his new Jotnar Spell, *Infernal Shield*. Unlike the carefully written spells located within his grimoire, this ability required no writing at all, and was tied directly to his Infernali Magick. A filigreed bar—this one filled with odd purple liquid—appeared in the corner of his vision, while a shimmering shield of violet energy erupted to life before him.

Kaz slammed into the conjured shield like a battering ram, and though the mystic energy absorbed the damage, the sheer force of the blow sent Roark flying across the room like a cornhusk doll. He slammed into Griff's table, his head bouncing off the corner. Agony radiated from the impact point in angry white waves.

[*You have been temporarily dazed! Dexterity decreased by 75% for 11 seconds!*]

Roark rolled forward onto his hands and knees. Luckily, he'd somehow managed to maintain his grip on the rapier. Now if he

could just get to his feet.

Another scream drew his attention. The claw was retreating into the rift once more with Kaz still in its grip. Kaz was howling, a single long note, terrified eyes fixed on the black-and-red void while he pounded frantically at the chitinous appendage with his hooked swords.

Roark staggered onto unsteady legs and lurched toward the claw, rapier at the ready. Beneath his feet, the floor seemed to lean and list like a ship on the Great Sea. Damn. And he still had eight seconds before the *daze* wore off. Kaz would be long through the rift by then. Sent off for respawn, which would be costly since Kaz was so close to unlocking his *Elite Thusr* evolution. For a second Roark considered tapping one of his first-level fireball spells, but that would defeat the point of this little demonstration—the assembled Trolls needed to see the value of weapons training in action.

Jade fabric whirled past Roark, followed closely by midnight blue skin wrapped in black leathers, knocking him off course. He had to grab the stone wall to stay upright.

Roark lifted his head just in time to see Zyra sink her dagger into the olm's neck. The toxic green bar over SquirrelGirl80's head flashed out a warning, then emptied. The olm collapsed in a heap on the floor. Eyes glassy, chest unmoving, blood seeping from her neck.

The black rift vanished, slicing the claw off cleanly just behind the colossal pincer. Kaz dropped to the flagstones with a *thud*, then rolled to his feet, spinning this way and that, searching for any other threats. The black plumage on his antlered headdress danced and bobbed.

For several moments, the only sound in the great hall was the rough wheezing of three Trolls trying to catch their breath.

Then an ascending chime echoed through the room as Zyra leveled up.

“She beat that level 11 Voidcraft Mage all alone!” a Changeling croaked. “She trained with him”—the potbellied creature thrust a dirt-caked claw at Griff—“then she defeated the hero on her own!”

A roar went up from the rest of the Trolls, all shouting at once as they rushed Griff's misaligned table, begging to be trained next.

The Reaver's hood swiveled in Roark's direction. He shrugged. He was just happy her level had convinced them to give Griff a chance.

Kaz limped over to the pair of them, guzzling a Modest Healing Potion. Seeing the wisdom in this, Roark found one of the sickly-sweet magenta concoctions in his inventory and did the same. A line of text appeared as he drank: *Brought to you by Mountain Dew Code Red! Thanks for drinking!* Such odd spells, this world had. Mountain Dew Code Red must've been some sort of local deity or perhaps a potent magical herb, which might explain its miraculous ability to heal. He dismissed the wording with a flick of his wrist. Warmth and vitality surged through his body; the dazed feeling bled away, and the ground stopped pitching and rolling beneath his feet as red returned to his filigreed Health vial.

"You know, I almost didn't survive that," Zyra told them under her breath, though no one would know it, looking at her. Unlike Roark and Kaz, her life bar was completely full, thanks to the level she'd gained from the combat. "I used up the last of my poison on that lizard wench."

"Am I imagining things," Roark asked, "or are these heroes getting stronger?"

Kaz shook his wide head. "It is not Roark's imagination. Levels so high never used to come to the citadel in the past."

"Not unless they were coming back up from the lower—" Zyra cut off suddenly, and she leaned forward. "Is that a ..."

Roark craned his neck, trying to follow the line of sight from the direction of her hood. She was no longer looking toward the dispatched heroes, but instead was staring at the door that led back toward the throne room. He strained his eyes, but all he could see was a long distortion about the size and shape of one Elite Salamander flowing over the stone ceiling toward the doorway.

"Mac, no!" Zyra shouted. "It's a Hellbender!"

With a gurgling growl, Macaroni appeared, hurling himself at the doorway. He crashed into something there, then dropped.

They hit the stone floor with two wet, meaty thuds. Mac thrashed and rolled, grappling with some creature still invisible to Roark's

eyes. Mac struck like a Black Ridge pit viper, his fangs conjuring a splash of purple-blue blood, seemingly from thin air. Mac rolled again, offering a throaty growl as he gained his feet and scampered back. There was the *tinkling, clinking* sound like a sea of broken glass shifting, then a blast of brilliant amethyst energy arced toward the Elite Salamander. Mac gave a snarling bark—half pain, half anger—as the amethyst blast melted away his right front leg. Flesh and muscle dissolved until only a stump of gleaming white bone was left.

What in all the bloody hells is going on here? Roark thought.

He pulled out his Initiate's Spell Book and pen, hastily scrawling a Rebound Spell in his only level 3 spell slot.

[55% of all damage done to target rebounds to the opponent for the next 30 seconds.]

The damnable arbitrary rules that governed Hearthworld wouldn't allow him to give the spell more power. Ripping the page from his book, Roark cast the spell on Mac.

This time, when the glasslike clinking came and the amethyst blast hit Mac, the majority of the arcane power bounced backward. With a startled croak, a huge brown salamander appeared, as tall as a pony and wide as an apple cart. The creature looked like a bigger, beefier version of Mac, though there were a few significant differences. The creature had formidable black spikes protruding along its back, and its tail ended in a spiked ball, which could likely be used as a mace. Four deadly talons, perfect for rending flesh and meat, protruded from each foot. Over its head floated thin white letters:

[Hellbender]

The creature let out an angry hiss, then opened its mouth wide, that strange *tinkling* sound building once more as a spectral purple glow appeared deep in its throat. The creature whipped its head

forward, unleashing another attack, which screamed toward Mac. The terrible power ripped through another quarter of Mac's filigreed Health vial, but thankfully the Rebound spell was still in place. Purple light shot back, slamming into the Hellbender's face, its right eye dissolving under the ricochet of its own attack.

A puff of smoke erupted from the shadows at the Hellbender's back, and Zyra slashed at the creature's fat belly with her dagger. The Hellbender whipped its globular head around, hissing and snapping at the Reaver, but she had already disappeared back into the shadows.

It was all the distraction Mac needed. Using his remaining three legs, the Elite Salamander launched himself at the Hellbender's back and sank his Venomous Fangs into the creature's neck. The Hellbender thrashed and bucked, finally whipping its thick tail about. The spiked ball slapped Mac in the side of the head with the *crack* of breaking bone. Mac's Health bar—already down below seventy-five percent—dropped another fifth, but the Elite Salamander only dug in deeper with his fangs. He was a murderous, bloodthirsty little bastard, and it made Roark fiercely proud to have Mac as one of his Greater Vassals.

The Hellbender reared back, spun, and tore off down the stone corridor, dragging Mac with him.

Roark dashed after them, inscribing another spell in one of his level 2 slots.

[The target's strength is increased by 30% for thirty seconds.]

When the spell hit him, Mac swelled, nearly doubling in size. He was nowhere near as large as the Hellbender, but the added strength allowed him to batter the larger creature with his head and tail. It cried out and stumbled under Mac's weight. Mac didn't relent for a moment, ripping off blubbery chunks of brown meat and leaving deep furrows in its skin with his claws.

Movement down the corridor caught Roark's eye. A lanky [Reaver Shaman] appeared, waving a gnarled oak staff at him. The

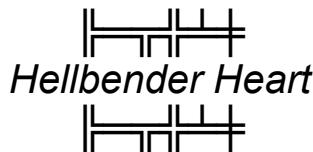
staff was covered with complex sigils, burning with unholy emerald light. The air crackled as a javelin of ice dancing with electrical sparks spiraled toward Roark's chest.

Before he even had time to dodge, a massive shoulder crashed into Roark's side, tackling him to the floor. Kaz. The lightning ice spike shattered on the wall. As Roark struggled to disentangle himself from Kaz, Zyra streaked past them after the cackling Shaman.

But apparently the Shaman could do the same shadow-jump trick Zyra could, and at twice the speed. It flashed down the corridor, dancing in and out of the shadows thrown by the flickering torchlight, pulling out of Zyra's reach with every puff of smoke. The pair of Reavers disappeared around the corner, headed toward the throne room, and presumably toward the stairs leading to the lower levels of the Dungeon.

When Roark finally managed to extricate himself from Kaz, he found Macaroni standing over the bloodied pulpy remains of the Hellbender. The Elite Salamander had shrunk back down to his normal fat-padded self and was busy limping around the much larger creature's corpse on three legs, nuzzling its side with his head as if he were trying to slip underneath it.

Curious, Roark bent down and checked the Hellbender's Inventory. The only thing inside was a lumpy piece of vibrant burgundy meat the size of a bull's liver.



Roark took the organ and stood. The heart was disturbingly hot and soggy in his hand.

Mac chirped up at Roark expectantly, still shuffling around with only one front paw.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Zyra said, coming back around the corridor.

“Did Zyra get her?” Kaz asked.

“No, she Gloom Dodged me between floors. She could be anywhere by now.” The hooded Reaver stopped at Roark’s side, fiddling with her hand wrappings, putting away her palmful of poisoned needles in frustration. “A Shaman and a Hellbender. You never see them above the fourth floor. Not in all my time in the Dungeon.”

Mac chirped again, louder. More insistently. The lump of ghastly meat didn’t seem to have any properties or uses—at least none that Roark could find—so he tossed Mac the Hellbender Heart. The Elite Salamander caught the chunk of meat in midair and shook it down his gullet.

“So was she here to assess my politics as Floor Boss in the hopes of joining us,” Roark sneered, “or was she sent to spy for our dear Dungeon Lord, Azibek?”

“Spy? Doubtful,” Zyra replied grimly. “My money’s on an assassin sent to kill you before you gained any further evolutions.”

Roark scratched at the back of his neck, razor-sharp claws running through his shaggy black hair. If this was how Azibek wanted to play it, then alliances with the lower levels of the citadel couldn’t wait.

“I think it’s time we pay a visit to our downstairs neighbors,” he said.

CHAPTER 9

WURGFOZZ THE SADISTIC



Before descending, Roark took a moment to loot the corpses of the dead heroes and distribute his Stat points. After careful consideration he added four points to Intelligence, another four to Dexterity, then split the last two between Strength and Constitution. He carefully examined his Character page, noticing that both his Greater and Lesser World Stone Authority had increased along with his level. Considering just how valuable Kaz, Zyra, and Mac had been so far, the notion of finding another Greater Vassal was exciting, though Roark would have to choose carefully.



Character Overview																																			
Name:	Roark	Level:	9																																
Gender:	Male	Player Class:	WARRIOR																																
Type:	Troll-Hybrid (Jotnar)	Alignment:	Infernali																																
Current Experience:	280	Next Level:	6840																																
Health:	202	Infernali Magick:	480																																
H-Regen / 5 Sec:	30	Magick-Regen / 5 Sec:	20.75																																
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Satisfied, Roark accepted the changes and closed out of his grimoire.

With that done, Roark gathered his honor guard—Kaz, Zyra, and Macaroni—and headed through the door in the throne room and down the winding stairs to meet with the second-floor Overseer. As they reached the bottom of the steps, Mac left Roark's side to climb up the wall, his colors shifting until he disappeared into the shadowy stone. The Elite Stone Salamander would be hidden in the vaulted ceiling overhead, ready to rain down vengeance on any who might dare attack the three of them.

The torchlit stairway opened onto a sprawling torture chamber. Cages hung from the ceiling, many of them dripping with fresh gore. Others contained grinning skeletons from distinctly nonhuman creatures. Roark guessed most of them to be Troll. Breaking cradles,

blackthorn beds, stretching racks, and grime-covered stocks were scattered around the room, interspersed with blood-soaked tables. In the far corner stood a raging furnace next to a cartful of dismembered body parts waiting to be burned.

Low-level Thusrss wandered the room while Reavers stalked the shadows like hungry wolves. Several of the Trolls on the second floor were Lesser Vassals of Roark's who had migrated down after their first evolution. Unlike his last visit, when Roark had received a host of hateful, distrustful glowers from the inhabitants, these familiar faces gave him smiles and friendly waves.

Several hallways jutted from this room, but Zyra led them straight to a heavy metal portcullis on the far side of the space.

They stepped out into another huge room with an open floor plan. Here pits of lava were the norm; suspended above the pits were rectangular iron-lattice cages—coffins, really—on spits, many still containing the remains of burnt corpses. Below each cage, molten rock bubbled and hissed, sending up plumes of white smoke. A quartet of heavy wooden doors studded with brass rivets lined the far wall. Zyra led the way to the final one, grabbing the rusty handle and leaning her full weight into the dark rotting planks until it creaked open.

From there, they made their way down a twisting passage festooned with flickering torches, rusty chains, and blood-caked meat hooks. This hallway was a new addition since he'd last been through.

As they pushed farther into the second floor, the familiar faces disappeared, replaced by the wary, distrustful glares Roark recalled. He went on high guard, noticing the Reavers clinging to inky pools of shadow and the telltale signs of traps—a trip line here, a spiked plunger there. Neat. Effective. Deadly.

Eventually, they made it to the throne room proper, which was lit by troughs of flowing lava along each wall and filled with even more devices of torment. Blistering heat rolled off the troughs, and the scent of slag and blood hung heavy in the air. An Elite Reaver and three colossal Brute Thusrss patrolled the chamber, each one

studded with sharp bits of rusty metal and staring Roark, Kaz, and Zyra down.

Roark felt a touch of anxiety tingling along his nerves as he remembered his first formal meeting with the former first-floor Overseer, Ugoraz the Vile, in excruciating detail. Roark had been beaten within an inch of his life and rudely thrown out on his ear. An unpleasant experience, to say the least.

This will be different, he reassured himself. He was an Overseer now, and a Jotnar to boot. Calling on the noble bearing he'd learned in childhood, Roark straightened to his full seven and a half feet and strutted into the chamber as if it already belonged to him. The wooden clacking sounds of Kaz's armor followed him, along with a whisper of fabric that was Zyra.

As they crossed the floor, the throne room guards surrounded them in a loose circle. Roark glanced overhead at the gloomy, shadow-darkened ceiling, hoping Mac was up there somewhere. The orange glow from the lava troughs didn't penetrate that far, so there was no way to know for sure until trouble broke out.

At the head of the room, on a throne of human, olm, elf, rog, and Troll skulls, sat a musclebound Level 18 Thusr Behemoth, his name spelled out in white letters floating on an aura of bloody red.

[Wurgfozz the Sadistic]

Wurgfozz was easily twice the size of the Brute Thusr stalked his chamber, so wide that he overflowed his throne. Like his honor guard, the Behemoth's enormous body was pincushioned with rusty spikes, the largest shoved through his crooked blue nose.

"Well, well, well," the Behemoth purred in a voice oddly high-pitched for his size, "if it isn't the new first-floor boss." He leaned forward in his massive throne, beady eyes fixed unwaveringly on Roark. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Even standing to his full seven and a half feet, Roark had to crane his neck to look up at the towering Behemoth.

"A Reaver Shaman and a Hellbender came through here not long ago, didn't they?" he asked.

"Ah yes, nasty little things bound for the first floor." The Behemoth nodded, twisting the spike impaled through one large nipple

thoughtfully. "Obviously they found you well."

"Well enough to put down the amphibian and send the Shaman running."

"Bit off more than she could chew, then," Wurgfozz said. He tapped one hooked black claw on the spike through his nose. "These things happen." He shrugged beef-slab shoulders.

"The one thing we can be sure of is that she didn't find her way to my floor of her own initiative. She was one of Azibek the Cruel's agents," Roark said. "Sent either to spy or assassinate. She came through your floor, so you bear some of the responsibility for allowing her to pass."

"I see. You can't catch her, so you think you'll exact vengeance on me because I don't run." Wurgfozz laughed, a high-pitched crowing sound, and leaned forward on his throne. "Well, I've news for you, Griefer. Running is for the frightened and the weak. I'm neither. I know what you did to Ugoraz the Vile. If you've come with a mind to challenge me, dispense with the excuses and let's have it out."

"I'm not here to threaten or fight you," Roark said, spreading his hands. "Just the opposite. I'm here to offer an alliance between our floors, one that will make us both stronger." He filled his voice with a certainty he didn't feel, as if Wurgfozz the Sadistic's agreement was already a foregone conclusion and all that was left was to dispense with the formalities. "Your people can share access to our trainers and kitchens, as well as benefit from our leveling strategy in exchange for the second floor refusing passage to any of the Dungeon Lord's minions."

Wurgfozz flapped one hand at Roark in a dismissive gesture. "You must not understand how business works down here in the citadel. The Trolls obey the Overseers and the Overseers obey Azibek. He is the Dungeon Lord. He alone has the authority over us all."

A muted rumble of agreement came from Wurgfozz's honor guard.

"No lord has any more authority than his subjects allow him," Roark replied coolly. "Do you benefit at all from his rule or are you

simply trying to survive without being crushed by him?"

"I know your type," the Behemoth said after a long beat. "You reek of ambition. The fact that you chose the Jotnar path is a clear sign that you intend to take over the dungeon."

Wurgfozz paused, waiting for Roark to leap to his own defense, to claim he had nothing of the sort in mind. But Roark remained silent, holding the Behemoth's gaze. He had every intention of taking over this godforsaken citadel. Any denial would sound like the lie it was and only damage his case and his reputation.

"No," Wurgfozz the Sadistic said. "I'm not in any hurry to have my throne stolen away by the ambitions of a Troll who couldn't leave well enough alone."

It was all deflection, Roark noticed. A multitude of words and accusations not referring to any benefit Wurgfozz received from remaining loyal to Azibek.

"So, let me see if I have this straight. You'll continue to support a Dungeon Lord who brings you nothing in return for your service," Roark said, cupping his chin and nodding. He glanced around at the empty torture devices scattered about the room, then up at the spike-studded Thusr Behemoth. "That's a poor choice considering I can get you far more victims than Azibek can."

A flicker of greedy excitement sparkled in Wurgfozz's onyx eyes, but was quickly hidden behind a derisive chuckle. "Of course you can," the Behemoth said. "You'll feed me. Placate me. Until you are strong enough to challenge me for my throne. And then?" He drew a hooked thumbnail across the layers of double chins concealing his throat.

"I don't have the time or inclination to take over every individual floor," Roark said. "And if I did, a torture chamber is hardly my idea of comfort. You're not wrong about me, mate. I am a creature of ambition and I want the entire citadel. Unlike Azibek, however, I don't want to rule through force and fear. I sincerely believe we can all thrive. We can make these heroes, who think to invade our home, pay dearly. Now, in my experience, it is easier to make friends than it is to conquer enemies. And the more loyal friends I have, the faster I can take this citadel. If you help me, I'll pass right over the second

floor to the third and let you keep your throne to yourself. Working together, neither of us will need to guard our back for the other's knife."

"Hmm." Wurgfozz twisted his nipple spike again, considering this. "I'll need a show of good faith if I'm to believe you. Send down three of your level 4 and 5 Thusrss for my honor guard to play with."

"Yeah, that's never going to happen, mate," Roark said lightly. "But let me offer you a compromise we can both be happy with. I'll funnel the next group of heroes down to you. Play with them all you like."

For several long seconds, the Thusr Behemoth sat without speaking, cracking each one of his thick knuckles as he stared into Roark's eyes.

"And I get to keep any agents of Azibek's that we stop on their way up to you," Wurgfozz demanded.

"They're yours," Roark agreed. He would have no need of them, and so much the better if stories began to circulate through the citadel regarding those who tried to take him out for the Dungeon Lord.

Wurgfozz nodded and sat up straighter in his throne of skulls, gripping the arms with both hands. His raised his strange high-pitched voice until it rang through the throne room. "Let it be known that as long as I, Wurgfozz the Sadistic, am Overseer in this place and our terms are upheld, the second floor is allied with the first."

A piece of parchment appeared in Roark's vision, lined with black text.

[Congratulations! You have forged an alliance with the Trolls of the Second Floor.

Warning: Solidification of this alliance is dependent upon the delivery of (1) group of heroes to Wurgfozz the Sadistic. If you do not deliver (1) group of heroes in the next 11 hours 59 minutes 59 seconds, this alliance will be broken.

To Maintain the Alliance: Allow second-floor Trolls access to first-floor kitchens, trainers, and strategies; allow Wurgfozz the Sadistic to

*continue ruling the Second Floor as Overseer.
To Break the Alliance: Challenge Wurgfozz the Sadistic for the
position of Second-Floor Overseer or fail to deliver (1) group of
heroes in the allotted time limit.]*

As Roark watched, the seconds in the time limit ticked down. 58
... 57 ... 56 ...

He dismissed the parchment with a thought. Another notice took its place.

*[Congratulations! You have unlocked the Troll Leadership skill!
Leadership skills, like all interaction skills, gain abilities and
experience through character-to-character or alliance-to-alliance
interaction.]*

Roark closed out of his grimoire and turned to his guard. “Time to move. We have heroes to kill and promises to keep ...”

CHAPTER 10

SETBACKS



“You Jotnar are all the same,” Zyra teased as they headed down the torchlit staircase to the third floor. “Silver-tongued and full of promises.”

Roark snorted and rolled his eyes. “What can I say, we creatures of ambition have to achieve our ends somehow.”

“Well, you seem to be doing a fine job,” she said. “I can’t remember Wurgfozz stringing more than one sentence together in all the time I lived on the second floor. Not unless he was standing over a helpless victim.” She hopped lightly off the bottom step and led the way into the gloom-filled third-floor corridor. “Nice thinking, offering up a group of heroes.”

“It seemed our best option,” Roark replied with a shrug. He followed the hooded Reaver, his attention fixed on the way the midnight blue skin of her shoulders and black of her leathers melted into the shadows. Not a single torch burned in this hallway. “We can spare a few heroes for an alliance like that.”

From behind Roark came a rumbling throat-clear, a sound like rocks and phlegm. It was the closest Kaz could come to a polite interjection. When Roark glanced over his shoulder, the mighty Thusr chef had lifted one claw-tipped finger the size of a sausage.

“Kaz does have some reservations about that,” he said, his onyx eyes shining with something akin to worry. “Not the sort Gry Feliri writes about in the wonderful tome *Cooking with Gry Feliri*. Kaz has the other kind of reservations.”

But Roark didn’t get to hear what Kaz’s reservations were.

Just ahead, Zyra gave a startled hiss. “Get lost, parasite! Overseer’s business.”

“Dungeon Lord’s business trumps all,” came a guttural snarl—the sound of an earthquake given voice. An enormous Level 13 Brute Thusr emerged from the gloom ahead. He was at least two hands taller than Kaz, wore matte-black pieces of mismatched armor covered in vicious spikes, and carried an enormous weapon that looked like the bastard child of a meat cleaver and a machete. Jutting horns protruded from his sloped brow, reaching heavenwards, swaying as he lumbering forward like a charging Timber Bear.

He raised the weapon high, winding back for a killing blow, clearly hoping to dispatch Zyra as quickly as possible.

“Zyra, down!” Roark commanded with a roar as he conjured his *Initiate’s Spell Book*.

Pinpricks raced across Roark’s hand as the tome appeared, levitating a few inches above his outstretched left palm. Roark had a grand total of six level 1 spell slots, three level 2 slots, and one level 3 slot. Most of the spell slots were empty, however—he found writing tailor-made spells on the spot was the best options, though slower. Still, he had a pair of level 1 spells and one level 2 spell on standby, for instances just such as this. Instances where even an eyeblink could be the difference between life and death.

With a thought and a flick of his wrist, Roark unleashed a level 1 Fireball spell.

A blazing ball of orange, twice the size of Roark’s closed fist, exploded outward, streaking through the air, narrowly missing Zyra, before slamming into the Brute like a ballista bolt of raw power. The orb exploded, tongues of inferno flame momentarily engulfing the creature, scorching his poorly maintained armor and charring exposed blue flesh. But the Brute hardly seemed to care. Nor did his Health, which dropped only a sliver. Ignoring the flames completely, the Brute struck.

The clang of metal on metal rang out as Zyra dropped into a defensive stance and countered the raging Thusr’s enormous, pitted cleaver with her long knife and dagger. He lurched forward,

trying to drive an oversized knee into her face, but she danced back with lithe grace, dragging the edge of her blade across his shin—a bright line of red appeared in the weapon's wake. The Brute let out a roar, but didn't retreat or slow his assault.

With a curse, Roark ripped his Slender Rapier free of its sheath and darted forward, ready to add his blade to the fray, but their attacker had chosen the choke point well. This was the same bottleneck they'd nearly been ambushed in on his first trip down to meet the Dungeon Lord. He couldn't squeeze past Zyra without tangling her up or knocking her off balance, and he couldn't reach the Brute Thusr she was battling without getting one of her blades in his gut.

Crossbow bolts flew over Zyra's hood, strangely not aimed at her. A second assailant! A shadowy Reaver, lurking further down the dimly lit hallway. Roark dodged the first and narrowly missed taking the second bolt in his eye.

Luckily, the ranged attack sparked an idea in Roark's mind. He stowed his spell tome and rapier, trading them out for his Bow of the Fleet-Fingered Hunter. Immediately, a black-leather quiver, bristling with arrows, bounced against his back. Roark slid a Superior Iron Arrow from the quiver with practiced ease, fitting it to the bowstring. He pulled the string taut, taking aim ...

Another bolt fired from beyond Zyra and the cleaver-wielding Thusr sang past Roark's head. This one stuck in Kaz's shoulder, just under his wooden pauldron. The mighty chef had his hooked swords in hand and was trying to shove his way to the front in spite of the overcrowded quarters. Kaz roared and knocked Roark aside, ruining Roark's shot, and threw himself into the battle.

Zyra must have heard Kaz coming, because she disappeared into a puff of inky smoke, allowing the rampaging chef to barrel past her and clash with the meat-slab Brute Thusr. The pair slammed together like boulders, their weapons sending up a spray of sparks in the gloom.

Roark took aim again, watching carefully for an opening. Wouldn't do to shoot Kaz in the back.

Just beyond the battling Thusrss, a flicker of white ringlets drew Roark's eye. Zyra. She spun with her dagger and long knife, paring off a handful of the Brute's red bar. As the Brute turned to swing his cleaver at her, Kaz darted in low and sliced him across the gut. And there, in that moment, the Brute's head and throat were exposed. Vulnerable. Roark took advantage of the opening, firing an arrow into the Brute's neck. The shot landed true, but the tough bastard's Health was still seven-eighths full.

A ululating battle cry echoed off the stone walls and a sinewy level 15 Dread Reaver flipped over Kaz and the Brute Thusr, landing on her feet less than a pace away from Roark. Creamy blue skin instead of Zyra's velvety midnight, but with the same spill of white hair. And instead of assassin's leathers, she wore inky-black scale mail, studded with fragments of yellowed bones and covered with glowing azure runes of power.

Roark promptly backpedaled toward the stairs, launching one arrow after another at her. The first and second landed, one in her breast and the other in her ribs. The third missed, clattering down the passageway, but the fourth slammed into her thigh. Still she sprinted at Roark, one arm raised, an ebony wand in hand. The tip glowed icy blue and the air around them crackled. With a muttered word, the wand flashed and an ice javelin shot his way.

Roark reacted on instinct, thrusting out his left hand, casting Infernal Shield. The new filigreed vial appeared once more in the right-hand corner of his vision, a trickle of the purple liquid inside draining away as the violet barrier shimmered around him. The ice javelin crashed into the shield and shattered with a sound like a wine bottle exploding in a fireplace. The Dread Reaver fired another and another from her ebony wand, each javelin splintering against the barrier, as she advanced on Roark.

Roark put his back to the stone wall and nocked another arrow, aiming it at her heart, ready to take her out the moment his shield dropped.

Then from overhead, Mac leapt down onto the sinewy Dread Reaver. She rolled and kicked the Elite Salamander off, but Mac scurried back to his feet and sunk his fangs into her leg. The Dread

Reaver's red bar flashed green. Poisoned by Mac's venom. The Dread Reaver cursed and fired an ice javelin at Mac. Suddenly, the salamander's body was covered in a blue-white glow and he slowed to a pitiful crawl.

Roark dropped the Infernal shield, the violet light winking out like a snuffed candle, and fired at the Dread Reaver. The arrow caught her in the gut, but only shaved off the barest sliver of her Health. Clearly, this line of attack simply wasn't working. He stowed the bow in his Inventory, quickly swapping it out for his spell book and his sleek rapier. He thrust the book forward, preparing to launch his last level 1 Fireball spell when Kaz's shout of dismay drew his attention. "Roark, look out!"

Somehow the Brute had managed to get around Kaz, and now the deadly Troll was heading for Roark. The creature broke into a lumbering run, and even though Kaz was hacking at the huge Thusr's back, the Brute wasn't paying him any mind. His beady eyes were locked on Roark, his lips pulled back in a determined grimace.

Damn it all!

Short on options, Roark triggered his only prewritten level 2 spell, *Stun*. The air compressed suddenly, then erupted outward, accompanied by a violent flash of light, which hurled the Dread Reaver into the wall. She crumpled, alive, but temporarily dazed. The Brute, unfortunately, managed to remain standing, though he blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to clear his vision, while he swayed drunkenly. Kaz rushed in from behind, furiously slashing his hooked swords at the enemy Thusr's hamstrings, frantically working to cripple the creature.

"We've got more company!" Zyra shouted, materializing in a flash of black smoke. She wasn't alone—a pair of Elite Reavers had come out to play. The three of them danced and flickered in and out of the shadows. But the Elite Reavers didn't seem as interested in taking Zyra out as they did in getting *past* her—which probably explained why she was still alive. She cut them off at every turn, catching them as soon as they stepped out of the smoke and darkness. But Roark knew she couldn't buy time forever ...

Fed up, one ran backward away from Zyra while the other kept her whirling, spinning, and fighting. The runner pulled a crossbow and aimed at Roark.

Not one of them seemed to care a whit about their own health so long as they managed to take him out. Which could only mean these were more friendly assassins, courtesy of Azibek. Dungeon Lord's business indeed.

Roark tore his eyes away from Zyra. There was nothing he could do for her at the moment, and the Dread Reaver his Stun spell had thrown into the wall was back on her feet. Roark launched his last Fireball spell at her at the same moment as she fired another ice javelin. He dodged her attack, only to come up face-to-face with the Brute Thusr.

“Noooo!” Kaz cried, still chopping at the Brute’s back. “Run, Roark!”

But the Brute brought down his cleaver in a vicious overhand swing. Roark wasn’t fast enough to dodge it completely; he managed to turn just enough to take the notched blade on his shoulder rather than across his face.

The purple vial in the corner of his eye was instantly replaced by his red Health vial. It dropped by a quarter while the spell book hovering above his left hand flickered and disappeared, banished back to his Inventory. A message flashed:

[Your left arm has been damaged! You cannot wield two-handed weapons, equip spell books, or cast Infernal spells until it is healed!

Duration: 45 seconds or until you drink a Healing potion.]

“Seven hells,” Roark coughed, scrambling back as he brought his rapier up.

An ice javelin lanced him through the back of the thigh, courtesy of the Dread Reaver. His Health vial flashed blue and another handful of red disappeared.

[You are suffering from frostbite! Movement speed reduced by 30% for the next 30 seconds.]

Almost before this notice had vanished, a crossbow bolt lodged itself in Roark's gut, followed quickly by a second in his chest. He tried to cast Infernal Shield again, but as he raised his left hand, another notice popped up, offering him a bleak reminder of his terrible situation.

[You cannot perform this action! Your left arm has been damaged! You cannot wield two-handed weapons, equip spell books, or cast Infernal spells until it is healed! Duration: 36 seconds or until you drink a Healing potion.]

With only one hand, he couldn't even reach into his Inventory for a Modest Health Potion—not while he tried to defend himself from the Brute's hacking blade with his rapier. And even that was futile with *Frostbite* slowing his accustomed speed and grace to a clumsy crawl. The Brute Thusr continued to hack and slice at him without pause, emptying Roark's red filigreed vial by the bucketful. From behind, the Dread Reaver fired her ice javelins, slowing him even further and stealing away his Health bit by bit.

Meanwhile, the archer Reaver beyond Zyra shot another pair of bolts. One pierced Zyra's bicep. The other struck home in Roark's kidney, slicing off another quarter of his Health.

Roark swung his rapier at the Brute Thusr, but the pain was making his arms and legs weak and his attacks ungainly and ineffectual. The Brute avoided it easily, then lunged back in, taking an upward swing at Roark's head, meaning to decapitate him. Roark just barely managed to duck, and the Brute's cleaver tore off Roark's ear instead. Pain lanced through his head, white and hot and angry.

In the corner of his vision, the filigreed Health vial flashed out a warning. *Peril is imminent*, it seemed to scream.

Roark couldn't access his spells. He couldn't hope to match any of his attackers at the slow slog he'd been relegated to. He was

badly outnumbered. And he was going to die if he didn't drink a Modest Health Potion. But in the time it would take to pull one from his Inventory, he would be dead as well ... His entire body was a battleground of throbbing, stabbing pain so intense he could barely lift the Slender Rapier to even the simplest of guards, and no matter what he did, he was going to die.

The Brute Thusr gave a guttural cry as Kaz's twin hooked swords scissored his massive head from his broad shoulders. It landed on the floor in front of Roark with a wet *plop*, spatters of Troll blood dotting Roark's leathers.

The split second of satisfaction Roark felt at the sight of the Brute's astonished expression disappeared a moment later when a crossbow bolt and an ice javelin simultaneously skewered him from opposite directions.

The last bit of red drained from his Health vial, and Roark von Graf died. Again.

CHAPTER II

RESPAWN



The driving music of war was the backdrop to Roark's journey through death. Though he was incorporeal—a very disconcerting sensation indeed—he could see the winged Infernali and Malaika battled high over the Hearth, the volcano Hearthworld was named for. They were brilliant creatures. The Malaika held themselves aloft with golden wings, surrounded by halos of brilliant opalescent light. The Infernali were equally impressive: a dark counterpoint to the Malaika, though swathed in shimmering purple. Seeing them battle, Roark couldn't help but think of Lowen, the Tyrant King's right-hand mage.

Somehow, the mage had followed him through the dimensions to this place. A thing Roark didn't understand—a thing that should've been possible! Impossible or not, though, Lowen had done it. He was here in Hearthworld somewhere, and bearing the image of the Malaika, no less. And if he was here, it would only be a matter of time before Marek Konig Ustar followed. Roark could almost see Lowen in his head, held aloft by the speckled brown-and-white wings of a *cana-hiri* falcon, his humanoid body wrapped in soft brown leathers crisscrossed with buckles and straps.

A stern reminder of just what was on the line and that he needed to move quickly before Marek arrived in Hearthworld and managed to consolidate power here. Which Marek *would* do. If there was one thing Marek Konig Ustar and his lackeys were good at, it was consolidating power.

Roark pushed thoughts of Lowen and Marek from his mind as the younger races—elves, rogs, and humans—joined the epic battle,

while the wizened olms took up residence in mountain caves, waiting for the war to end so they could return order to the chaos one way or another.

Roark watched it all with bitter detachment. There was no doubt those Reavers and the Thusr had been sent by Azibek the Cruel—they'd openly admitted as much. The question was how the bastard had known he and his honor guard would be traveling down to the lower floors so soon. Another Hellbender spying, invisible to the Troll eye? Or perhaps the Jotnar Exarch had simply thought far enough ahead to outpace Roark's plans. One didn't get to be Dungeon Lord by failing to guess his opponent's actions.

A nasty lesson, to be sure. Best he learn it now, though, while he only had one level to lose, rather than later when he was only one level away from evolution.

He had to stay one step ahead of Azibek. The weapons trainer afforded them a small leg up, but it wasn't enough. The Dread Reaver and Brute Thusr from the ambush had been level 15 and 13 respectively. And the pair of Elite Reavers couldn't have been greater than level 14. Which meant they'd likely come from either the third or fourth floor, but not the fifth. They were far too low-level for that. And if those early floors were already dead set against him, it could be problematic, to say the least.

If he couldn't work out an alliance, he'd have to formally challenge and kill the Overseers, which could be a dicey prospect. After all, the fastest way to turn the ruling class against you was to start taking out their fellow gentry. No, he would have to find a way to convince them peacefully, if possible. The question was, how? Any idiot understood that the demon you knew was better than the demon you didn't. Hells, Azibek could even be filling their heads with all sorts of propaganda against Roark. The only way to find out for sure was to venture down ...

The world before Roark's currently nonexistent eyes went black, and lines of golden text began to appear before him, screaming into the darkness.

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A single eerie minor note wafted along as if carried by an unfelt breeze, slowly swelling into a haunting melody as the scent of smoke and molten earth curled in Roark's nonexistent nostrils.

HEARTHWORLD, the final line of golden text proclaimed somberly.

As the text faded away, a bustling marketplace appeared below him. It wasn't Averi City's bazaar, but one nearly identical to it—filled with vendors under flamboyant canopies, their wooden stalls showcasing weapons, armor, jewelry, gemstones, food, and drinks. Heroes of every shape, size, and color combination wandered through the stands wearing a mishmash of armor, robes, and helms of varied quality and infernal or divine alignment, chatting or negotiating with the vendors and one another.

Roark readied himself. Last time, this scene had come just before resurrection.

The golden text returned, stretching over the heads of the heroes below.

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Roark didn't even try to understand the foreign words floating before him, just brushed them aside. Surprisingly, they went.

A feeling as if he were liquifying trickled through his muscles and bones. He had felt it before the first time he'd died, but it was still strange. As if he were being gently dissolved bit by bit for reconstitution elsewhere. The marketplace vanished around him in a swirl, leaving nothing but blackness behind.

From the blackness came one bloodred word: *Respawning* ...

Roark opened his eyes to find himself in the throne room in the midst of a battle he hadn't started, wearing nothing but a threadbare loincloth.

Weapons rang against one another or thudded into flesh. Shouting and the grunts of the injured filled in what earspace the clang of metal on metal didn't, and the room around Roark was alive with shifting and whirling bodies. Nameplates floated in the air

overhead like tiny personal rain clouds. Kaz and seven first-floor Thursrs were facing down a single olm in shining scale mail—[BrokeBoi69]—a heavily muscled rog with a flowing topknot—[Skeeter3.0]—and a pale elf with golden hair known as [HornyD_McElvenwood], each one between level 12 and 15. Zyra and Mac were nowhere to be seen, but the familiar thorny silhouette of a level 22 High Combat Cleric had taken their place.

[PwnrBwner_OG]

Somehow the jackass had managed to get his gear back.

Roark reached for his Slender Rapier only to find it missing. Frantically, he pulled up his mystic grimoire, searching his Inventory.

No rapier, no dagger, no leather armor. No wand or weapons. No potions. Nothing but the World Stone Pendant and his soulbound Initiate's Spell Book. And, of course, the dirty loincloth doing a lackluster job of preserving his modesty.

Hastily, he glanced at his character page, noting that he had dropped back down to level 8, though his Health and Infernal Magick had returned in full when he respawned. The Attribute Points he'd invested at level 9 were also absent. Still, it could've been worse. He could have been naked and with no soul-bound items.

“Roark is back!” Kaz crowed ecstatically. “Finally!”

PwnrBwner_OG’s head whipped around as if someone had slapped him. When his gaze settled on Roark, the High Combat Cleric aimed his Mace of Thorn Tethers at Roark’s chest.

“O-ho-ho.” PwnrBwner_OG’s voice grated down Roark’s spinal column like claws on ice. “Just in time for me to wipe you off the map, you cheating, modding, taint-wrinkle.”

He slammed the head of the mace on the floor and thorny whips erupted from the stone, surging at Roark’s feet.

Roark leapt away, throwing himself into a roll and coming up to the dais. He grabbed his spell book as he jumped up onto the platform; the familiar numb tingling crept down his left hand as the book levitated open over his palm. The brambles slapped and lashed toward him, hitting nothing more than the steps. Apparently he was outside their reach, since none managed to hit him.

Across the room, the High Combat Cleric was already shouting at whatever forces passed for divinity in Hearthworld. The thorn tethers had merely been a warm-up, it seemed.

Quickly, Roark scribbled out a simple Rebound Spell in one of his empty level 2 spell slots. His neat, precise letters filled the page, then snapped into place as the magick of this world altered his wording to fit its arbitrary rules.

[45% of all damage done to target will rebound on the opponent for the next 30 seconds.]

PwnrBwner_OG finished his chant, ending on a shout that shook the throne room like an earthquake. A blast of raw electrical power surged forward and blew Roark off his feet, slamming him into the wall between two of the glowing stained-glass windows. The impact knocked the air from his lungs, and the sizzling shock that rolled through his lean muscles stole away a handful of his Health, but he was happy to see PwnrBwner_OG across the room struggling to regain his feet as well. The bit of Health the High Combat Cleric had lost was nearly invisible to the naked eye, but Roark knew the spell had taken it.

Roark scribbled furiously, inscribing his next two spells while PwnrBwner_OG recovered.

“You think you’re so clever, huh?” the High Combat Cleric snarled, advancing with his mace raised. He battered the ground again, and again the thorny whips chased Roark to the edge of their reach. “Well, I know what you’ve been doing, writing in your own spells and shit. You ain’t no mob, you’re a player. A dirty, griefing player. That’s right, I got you figured out.”

Roark snorted, finishing the second spell. “I seriously doubt that, mate.”

He cast Spectral Hands at PwnrBwner_OG’s feet.

[A field of spectral hands erupts from the floor, grabbing and holding any enemy for 30 sec – (1 sec x opponent’s character level), in

[exchange for 1 HP x caster's character level.]

Ghostly blue hands, with overlong spindly fingers, reached up from the stone floor below, grasping and clutching at the cleric's Thorny Armor Boots. The red in Roark's filigreed vial dipped a notch as the spell took its required Health.

PwnrBwner_OG immediately began hammering the ethereal hands with his mace, but they didn't dissipate or release him—and wouldn't for another seven seconds and counting.

Roark cast the second spell, a modified version of the stone lance he had last carved as a blood cantrip into his arm.

In his spell book, he'd written: *A stone lance shoots from my palm, through the heart of my target.*

And the book had replied with

[Congratulations, you have inscribed Stone Lance in the Initiate's Spell Book!

Stone Lance can be cast (1) time per inscription!

Base Damage: 50 HP to target, +50% chance of Critical Hit.

Critical Hit deals 2x damage to target.

*Cooldown period between casting Stone Lance and re-inscription:
(2) hours!]*

The lance tore from Roark's palm, dragging a shout of pain from his throat as it went. PwnrBwner_OG twisted away at the last second, the lance plunging through his shoulder instead of his chest. Roark cursed. He'd missed the heart by a long shot, but the red bar over the cleric's head dipped down to three-quarters full nevertheless.

“Little bitch!” PwnrBwner_OG snarled, snapping the protruding end of the lance off with his rose mace. The ghostly hands grasping at his ankles dissipated, and he smirked at Roark. “Now you’re in big, big trouble.”

The High Combat Cleric raised his mace to the sky with his undamaged arm and shouted again in that undulating language

Roark couldn't understand.

Thinking back on their last face-to-face battle, Roark started inscribing a counter to the spell he guessed PwnrBwner was casting.

Sure enough, as the cleric gave a final shout, lightning forked across the throne room ceiling and thunder boomed. Rain poured in sheets from nowhere, blistering Roark's leathery white skin.

Roark cast his counterspell, which occupied his only level 3 spell slot.

[Rain heals all Infernal creatures 10HP per second.]

With every stinging raindrop that fell, a surge of red poured back into his filigreed Health bar. And it didn't work for just him, but for all of his troops within the throne room. Trolls had a naturally high Regeneration rate, but nothing that could come close to this.

Roark couldn't help but grin smugly.

PwnrBwner, however, didn't take it quite so well. Nearly shaking with fury, the High Combat Cleric roared and sprinted across the floor, swinging his rose mace at Roark's head. Roark whirled away and inscribed another Stone Lance into one of his open spell slots. PwnrBwner_OG followed, swinging wildly. Roark dodged and ducked, forcing himself not to pull his body out of line or take three steps away when one would suffice. What he wouldn't give for his rapier. The cleric was unhinged, his attacks insane with anger. Sloppy. Any swordsman worth his blade could exploit mindless fury and extract a steep price paid in blood.

Proving his point to himself, Roark sidestepped a vicious swipe—still close enough to feel the wind of the rose mace—then opened his hand and fired off the second Stone Lance at PwnrBwner_OG. This one lodged in the High Combat Cleric's side and dropped his red bar down to less than half.

It also made him even angrier. He screamed at the sky, his face red, and leapt after Roark again, sending raw purple energy streaking through Roark's body. The electricity seared away several

points of his Health and knocked him off his feet, but the rain continued to pour, bringing them right back to him.

Roark hit the ground and rolled, narrowly missing a blow from the mace that cracked one of the flagstones.

“There’s too many of them and they’re healing like crazy!” came a cry from behind them. “Fall back! Retreat!”

This stopped PwnrBwner_OG mid-swing. “Da fuck?”

Not far away, BrokeBoi69 stumbled backward toward the portcullis, his paddlelike tail whipping behind him as he threw shurikens into the crowd of Thusrss advancing on him as he went.

“I paid your sorry asses to kill this bag-rash, not run away like little girls!” PwnrBwner_OG yelled, spittle flying from his lips.

“Screw it, dude,” the elf, HornyD_McElvenwood, said, laying down a wall of fire to back off Kaz and the pair of level 5 Thusrss harrying her. “We just wanted to see what was up with these freaks. A couple hunnies in gold and a merc tag ain’t worth dying down here.” She turned and ran for the exit.

The rain cut out sharply.

“No!” PwnrBwner_OG slammed his mace into the floor. Thorn tethers tripped the olm and anchored the elf to the spot. “No one’s going anywhere until the Griefer is dead! That was the deal!”

To prove his point, the High Combat Cleric sprinted past Roark, past the olm, the rog, and the elf, and kicked the portcullis lever with the flat of his heavy boot. The pitted iron grate fell with a metallic clang that Roark felt in his feet.

“What the hell, man?” Skeeter3.0 snapped. “I just got this shield and you’re gonna make me lose it down here?!”

“Yeah, assface, what’s your problem?” HornyD_McElvenwood yelled, a hint of panic in the words.

“My problem is I paid a buttload of money to a buttload of losers who won’t even kill one freaking Troll!” PwnrBwner_OG spat. “You wanna be cowards? Then die like cowards!”

With that, he shot a bolt of lightning at HornyD_McElvenwood. The crackling purple leapt from the pale elf to BrokeBoi69 behind her. The thorn tethers kept them from being thrown off their feet, but the elf dropped dead in the tangle of thorns.

“Aw, what?” Skeeter3.0 yelled. “You dick! You killed Randy!”

“You got a problem with it?!”

Kaz caught Roark’s eye as this drama unfolded. Roark felt a corner of his lips turn up and he shrugged. He was certainly interested to see who the psychotic cleric would kill next. But they also needed the Experience grieving these heroes would bring them, and standing around watching PwnrBwner_OG murder his own kind—while entertaining—wouldn’t result in levels for anyone.

Roark jerked his head at Kaz, motioning for his friend to flank the heroes. Kaz crept around, and the other Thursrs in the throne room followed suit. As they did, Roark inscribed his final level 2 spell slot.

The olm saw what was happening, and his panicked shouting attracted the rog’s and PwnrBwner’s attention.

“Back the fuck off,” PwnrBwner_OG snarled, spinning around to point his mace at the Thursrs surrounding him. He couldn’t keep them all in his sights, though—they were already too spread out. So he aimed the thorny head of the rose mace at Roark. “Or I’ll kill the Griefer.”

“Better men than you have tried, mate,” Roark said, casting his spell at Kaz’s feet.

[Infernal chimeras within a fifteen-foot area of effect gain Strength equal to 2x character level for 30 seconds.]

As the heroes were surrounded, two of them trapped in brambles, and the third now hated by his companions, it took far less than thirty seconds for the Thursrs and Roark to finish the three of them off. Roark stood over PwnrBwner_OG, staring down with a lopsided smile on his face as the High Combat Cleric struggled uselessly to reach a Health potion at his belt. “Better luck next time, mate,” he said as he dropped to one knee and drove his black-tipped claws into PwnrBwner’s exposed throat. The man died with a gurgle, eyes going hazy, as a torrent of Experience filled Roark.

Not enough to level up, but not too far off either.

And he wasn't the only one who'd gained a nice bit of Experience. Two ascending chimes rang through the throne room—one following right on the heels of the other—as golden light enveloped a level 5 female Thusr named Tezzi and ... Kaz. Roark watched, grinning, as the mighty chef lifted off the ground for a moment, golden light quickly transforming into a halo of indigo power, which spit out a crackling burst of blue-white lightning. Only one thing that could mean.

Evolution ...

CHAPTER 12

MEMENTO MORI



The light faded, guttered, and then died, revealing the new and improved level 8 Kaz—the first Elite Thusr on the floor. He'd grown by at least a hand, maybe two, and was now a few inches taller than Roark. He was also *much* wider across the shoulders and chest. His leather flesh had darkened a shade, going from light blue to deep navy, while the coarse white hair running along his arms and legs had turned nearly black. Kaz lifted huge, powerful hands, staring at his banana-sized digits in wonder.

Roark took a moment to pull up Kaz's character page within the *Followers* section, quickly examining the changes before closing his grimoire.



Elite Thusr Overview	
Name:	Kazko
Level:	8
Type:	Elite Thusr
Current Infernali Points:	0
Next Level:	5760

Attributes:	
Health:	152
HP Regen / 5 Sec:	10
Weapon Damage:	55
Attack Damage:	117
Base Armor:	62
Armor Rating:	154
Movement Rate:	Speed of Opponent
Critical Hit Chance:	8%
Critical Hit Damage:	(+) 100%

Special Skills:	
Rapid-Regen	
60% Resistance against normal weapons	
Stunning Blow; 12.5% Chance / Hit	
Bladed Weapons (Melee Skill) Lv. 2	
Cooking (Trade Skill) Lv. 7	
Cartography (Trade Skill) Lv. 1	



Impressive. Kaz's Health had shot through the ceiling, his natural Regeneration had also increased, and his attack damage was ... *formidable*, to say the least. Perhaps most impressive of all was his increased movement rate and the addition of the Stunning Blow ability to his special skills repertoire. It seemed evolutions weren't just for show—there were some very tangible benefits.

"Kaz has evolved *again*," the newly minted Elite Thusr whispered, his voice now deeper. Almost primal. "Kaz never thought ..." He trailed off, then shot a look a Roark, a goofy grin stretching across his broad face.

Oh, bloody hells, Roark knew *exactly* what was coming next. In the span of an eyeblink, the Elite Thusr closed the distance between them, throwing tree-trunk arms around Roark and pulling him into a deathly tight squeeze. Had Roark been a Changeling, Kaz's display of affection might have been enough to do him in.

“That’s enough, you ox. Put me down.”

Kaz gave him one more powerful hug, Roark’s feet clean off the floor now, then reluctantly complied. “It’s just ... Roark gave Kaz this chance. To evolve. To become powerful. To win. To cook. It is all because of Roark.”

“Nonsense,” Roark replied as he slipped back a step—Kaz wasn’t the best with the notion of personal space. “I may have helped some, but you’re the one who did the work. You took the risk and trusted me enough to throw your lot in with mine.” He grinned and shook his head. “You should be proud of *you*, Kaz. You accomplished this, not me. Now, let’s go see what new treasures we’ve won.”

Kaz and the other Thusrss promptly helped Roark loot the heroes’ corpses and mark their position and time until respawn.

From the mercenaries PwnrBwner_OG had hired, they turned up a handful of gold, a Health potion, a Gnarled Birch Staff with a +1 boost to Intelligence, and a single-use scroll of Summon Venomous Manticore.



Summon Venomous Manticore

Summons one level 8 Venomous Manticore.

Manticore will attack any target the summoner is attacking.

Duration: 60 seconds

Uses: 1



This being the mercenaries’ first death in the Cruel Citadel, the treasure they left behind was scanty. As Roark had learned, in Hearthworld, two was the optimal number of deaths for maximum looting. Any after that would leave behind few or no items at all, though it would continue to award the same amount of Experience. The High Combat Cleric, however, had left behind some choice loot indeed. A thrill ran through Roark as he held the Unique Rose Mace

of Thorn Tethers to the dim light of the nearest Infernal stained-glass window, prompting a page of description to open.



Unique Rose Mace of Thorn Tethers

One-Handed Damage:

Durability: 102/125

Level Requirement: 16

Intelligence Requirement: 100

Magick Requirement: 6,180

Mace Class Weapon – Medium Attack Speed

Casts Tethers of Thorn over 15-foot area, entangling targets for up to 30 seconds

Warning: Tethers of Thorn does not discriminate between friend and foe! Anyone in area of effect will be entangled!

+65% chance of successfully calling down *Obliterating Lightning of Rajthorne the Mighty* + 1% x character level

+45% chance of successfully calling down *Purifying Rain of Rajthorne the Mighty* + 1% x character level



Roark dismissed the page with a thought. It was a handsome weapon—for a glorified club—but the requirements were far out of his reach for the time being. The added enchantments, however, were incredibly enticing. The ability to cast ensnaring thorny brambles, lightning, and that deadly rain without taking the time to write a single word could drastically alter his chances against the lower-floor Overseers. He needed to raise his Enchanting level high enough so that he could learn the mace's enchantment and apply it to new weapons.

But there was business to be about first. Most important for the time being, heroes to funnel down to Wurgfozz. He opened his mystic grimoire to the *Quests* page and checked the timer—only 9 hours 37 minutes and 5 seconds before the quest lapsed and his hard work was undone.

A loud chirp drew Roark's attention back to the throne room. He shut the grimoire to find Mac barreling across the floor toward him, feet slapping on the stone. Roark stepped gracefully aside just before the bloodthirsty galoot knocked him over. Excited, Mac took this as an invitation to play. He bounded around Roark in a circle, chirping gleefully, while his tail smacked the floor behind him.

Roark chuckled and crouched down, wrestling and growling playfully with the silly beast. He got his arms around Mac's neck and shoulders, but the Elite Salamander shoved with his powerful hind legs and knocked the two of them over backward.

"Somebody's happy you're back," Zyra said, stepping out of the shadows of the staircase. "He wouldn't stop fretting while you were in respawn. Followed me the whole time. I think he thought I was going to wherever you were."

Roark knocked Mac's nuzzling head lightheartedly aside and shoved the Elite Salamander off his chest so he could sit up. The creature had the damnedest way of making him forget how serious their situation was. As if Mac thought he were still much smaller, he climbed into Roark's lap and lay down, settling in for a nap.

"Out of curiosity, where were you going?" Roark asked, absently scratching behind the bulbous slate-colored head hanging over his long legs.

"Downstairs." Zyra perched on the arm of the twisted obsidian throne. Though she looked nonchalant, Roark doubted the hooded Reaver would ever sit fully in the seat without winning the Overseer position for herself. The throne taboo likely ran far deeper for Trolls than the one against looting heroes. "And I brought back good news and bad news. After you died, Kaz here killed most of your attackers in a fury—"

"Kaz will never allow a Troll to lay a hand on Roark," the headdress-wearing Thusrer vowed, crossing the room to join them. "Not without paying the price for their crime."

"Congratulations on the evolution, by the way," Zyra said, hood tracking from Kaz's head to his feet. "And as for making them pay, you certainly did that. Too bad mercing other Trolls doesn't give you experience or you'd probably be a Brute by now." Yes, that was,

indeed, the rub. Every battle with the lower-level mobs was an exercise in utter futility.

“Hang on,” Roark said, pointing one claw-tipped finger at the hooded Reaver. “Before we move on, you said *most* of the attackers.”

“I managed to get one away from Kaz alive—an Elite Reaver—and drag her up to Wurgfozz. Applying his special brand of persuasive questioning, old Wurgy got our assassin to talk.”

Roark leaned over Mac’s sleeping form. “Well?”

“Apparently, Azibek’s telling everyone that you’re destroying the Infernal balance of the citadel.” Though he couldn’t see Zyra’s face for the hood, Roark could hear the scorn in her voice. “Destroying the natural order by making profane alliances with outsiders, hogging all the heroes for the first floor so the rest of the Trolls down below never get to level up. Whatever he can twist to slander, he’s twisting.”

“If that’s it, then it’s a bit disappointing,” Roark admitted. “I was expecting something a little more elegant than *mudslinging*.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I not mention that slander was the good news?” Zyra crossed her arms and raised one hand in a courtly gesture more suited to discussing some fop’s new light-o’-love than murderous despots. “Let’s see if I can rectify that oversight with the bad news: He’s also sent out a word-of-mouth quest. Every resident of the citadel who manages to kill you gains 1,000 Experience, Azibek’s Lingering Blessing, and 1,000 gold.”

As soon as she finished speaking, a weathered page full of text appeared in Roark’s vision.



Azibek the Cruel, Dungeon Lord, has issued an open quest to all residents of the Cruel Citadel.

Objective: Strike a killing blow that sends Roark the Griefer to respawn.

Reward: 1,000 Experience, 1,000 gold, and Azibek the Cruel's Lingering Blessing

Restrictions: Must be a resident of the Cruel Citadel to accept *Memento Mori*.

Note: *Memento Mori* may be completed as many times as desired. If a single resident kills Roark the Griefer six times, that resident will receive an additional bonus of 6,666 Experience, 6,666 gold, and Azibek the Cruel's Eternal Blessing.

"The best way to remind a soul of his mortality is over and over again."



Roark dismissed the notice to find that Kaz's eyes had lost focus and his mouth was twisted as if he'd bitten into a rotten apple.

"This has appeared in Kaz's active quests," Kaz growled.

"It showed up in mine when I first heard about it, too," Zyra said with a solemn nod. "That's why it's called a 'word of mouth' quest."

Roark glanced around the throne room, curious how many of the other Thusrss had overheard. At least four of them had stopped sorting through the looted items while their eyes roved over unseen words, two of them moving their mouths as they read silently. Which meant it wouldn't be long before every Troll on this floor knew about the bounty on his head.

Roark scowled. "I got the notice, too."

Zyra's hood cocked slightly to the right. "Interesting. I suppose when Azibek said any resident of the citadel, he meant *any*."

Kaz grunted in frustration. "It won't go away! Kaz cannot reject it!"

"I couldn't either, big guy," Zyra said with a shake of her hooded head. "Just ignore it."

"Kaz can't!" The angry Elite Thusrslammed one melon-sized fist into the closed portcullis, denting several squares of the rusty iron grate. "Kaz hates unresolved quests!"

"It's a clever gambit," Roark admitted grudgingly. "Azibek's set it up to work around the lack of reward for killing other Trolls. Make it

worth the risk of dying. I'm half-tempted to kill myself six times to see how many evolutions I get out of 6,666 Experience points."

"So, what do you want to do about it?" Zyra asked.

Roark understood her desire to jump into action. He'd seen resistance fighters flip allegiances over smaller purses than what Azibek was offering. He trusted Kaz and Zyra with his life, but the Trolls of the first floor had become his Vassals because he offered a smarter way to level and protection from the backstabbing that was common in the citadel. But would they keep following him now that the Dungeon Lord was dangling the potential for a relatively easy two or three levels in front of them? This would certainly make his attempts to strike a bargain with the lower-floor Overseers more difficult.

"For the moment, there's nothing we can do." Roark pushed Mac off his legs—struggling a little to budge the three-hundred-pound salamander until Mac stirred back to wakefulness and helped—then stood, dusting himself off. The feel of nothing but a threadbare loincloth under his palms reminded him that he needed to retrieve his weapons and armor from the third-floor bottleneck as soon as possible. He needed every advantage he could get against the flood of would-be assassins who were likely to come out of the woodwork eager for his head. Though, sadly, that might need to wait.

"Alliances are what's going to build a barricade between us and Azibek's forces," he finally said. "We have to cement our partnership with the second floor before they decide to turn coat—that needs to be our immediate focus for the time being. After that, perhaps we'll be able to bring the third over to our side, then start building relations with the fourth floor."

"Well, no matter what we decide to do, I want a guard on you at all times." Zyra glanced in the direction of the staircase down to the second floor. "And one on that door whenever you're in the throne room. Me, Mac, or Kaz. Somebody we can trust not to stick a knife in your back. And you inspect everything before you touch it for contact poison."

Roark nodded. "Speaking of poisons, did you ever replenish your supply?"

“I traded some things while I was down-level.” She flexed her hand open with a flourish so that he could see the jagged row of stickdeath needles across her palm, then fiddled with her leather wrappings to stow them safely. “I’m stocked again. Should be good for a few rounds of griefing … or anything else … before I run out again.”

“Kaz, would you mind taking the first watch?” Roark asked. “I need to concentrate on the Overseer’s Grimoire for a while.”

“Kaz will not let so much as a smell slip past him,” the Thusrer growled. He pulled out his twin hooked swords—they had grown with him to the size of shepherd’s crooks—and settled himself in the doorway to the second floor, facing the shadowy landing with his feet planted wide apart.

Roark headed for the twisted obsidian throne. When Mac saw where he was going, the beast padded along beside him.

“I do need you to let Zyra pass, mate,” Roark told Kaz as he sat down. Almost without thinking about it, he moved forward so Mac could curl his too-thick body around his back. “She’s got an important job downstairs.”

The Reaver’s hood cocked slightly, at an inquisitive angle. “And what would that be?”

Roark opened the Overseer’s Grimoire to the *Floor Design* page and began subtracting traps, keeping a close eye on his total points.

“I need you to tell Wurgfozz his playthings will be on the way shortly.”

CHAPTER 13

CHANGES



With only 100 points to play with to design the first floor, Roark had to get creative ... and sacrificial.

In one fell swoop, he scrapped all the traps and pitfalls in favor of keeping the next group of heroes alive and well until they reached Wurgfozz in the second-floor throne room. Roark hated to see the traps go, as they did prove effective in winnowing down the heroes' Health to make them easier kills for the Changelings and lower-level Reaver Bats and Stone Salamanders. He promised himself he would bring a few of the best back tomorrow—the spring-loaded spiked grate and the spears that stabbed out of the walls, definitely. And that chest that spewed a cloud of deadly plague? Without question, since that was among his favorites.

But for now, the traps needed to go, though it would endanger the floor's residents—especially with the ever-stronger heroes tromping through these days. To offset that, he would keep the lowest-level first-floor creatures working together in large groups or close at hand to some heavy-duty Thursrs. There was no task so formidable or daunting that it couldn't be overcome with effective planning, thoughtful logistics, and good strategy.

With the traps gone, the counter beneath the tiny depiction of the first floor's layout—complete with every room, corridor, and furnishing—rolled back up to 29/100. Good, but not good enough for all that he needed. Griff's new training room alone would cost him ten of those points, and there was still a private chamber for the weapons trainer to consider. Expensive, that extra little space, but

Griff's value to the creatures of this floor was incalculable. An edge no other floor had. He would pay almost anything to keep the man happy, and hopefully, in time, he would be able to fully earn the man's trust. Something Roark hoped would lead to the addition of even more Skill Trainers from topside.

Somewhere on the edges of his concentration, Roark felt Mac twitch, the slumbering Elite Salamander's sticky feet kicking a few times around Roark's sides. Then with a sleepy chirp, Mac burrowed his bulbous, velvety head more securely against Roark's back and fell still once more.

Roark studied the corridors with a merciless eye, straightening one of the winding passages to save the space and points the twists and turns had taken up, then subtracting the entirety of a dead end where a small group of Trolls usually lay in wait to ambush pursuing heroes. That done, he closed off the corridor leading into the great hall from the antechamber. It would still be accessible from the opposite direction, but the change would force incoming heroes to take the only door out of the antechamber, down the corridor toward the library and smithy.

The dead end and great hall corridor could be returned tomorrow. After the twenty-four-hour waiting period for Floor Design changes was over and they didn't have promises to keep and vital alliances to cement.

Roark couldn't bring himself to touch Kaz's kitchen—not even for a single day—and ten points apiece or not, he would part with the smithy or library when someone pried them from his cold, dead fist. His modifications so far had brought the Floor Design counter up to *41/100*. Not ideal, but that would have to be enough.

Running through the list of options and sub-options, Roark selected a training room, placing it down the corridor from the kitchens. It was a plain, functional room, the walls made of gray stone, completely unadorned save for a few flickering torches mounted in wrought iron wall scones. This he populated with straw-stuffed dummies, freestanding archery and throwing knife targets, and a few standing weapon racks. The rest he left as a wide-open

space perfect for learning or practicing new maneuvers alone or as a small group.

Off the training room, Roark added humble living quarters for Griff. The accommodations were sparse—little more than a bed, a chest of drawers, and a few small shelves on the walls—but it was the only bedchamber available on the first floor. As far as Roark knew Trolls never slept, so it was probably lucky that there were any living quarters in the citadel's layout options at all. He went through the furnishing options—which cost nothing extra—selecting the finest feathered mattress available, then choosing dark wood, all polished to a dull glow.

Certainly nicer than many an inn he'd stayed in during his time with the Resistance.

With a bitter smile, he thought back to the little room he'd shared with the Danella, the golden-haired thief who'd taught him the art of the cheap shot and the backstab and the pocketful of pepper-laced sand ... and other more enjoyable pursuits. That had been early on, when he'd been little more than a boy playing at being a man. He could still see the room with perfect clarity, its flattened, defeated goose-down mattress and creaky floorboards. A small washstand in the corner with a chipped porcelain bowl and a steel pitcher of warm water. And as always in the memory, Danella sprawled across the bed, hair partially obscuring her face as she smiled. All coltish legs and creamy skin covered with more scars than a young woman her age ever should've had.

Unfortunately, the price of reliving those pleasant memories was remembering the final one in the same level of perfect detail: Danella's face bloated and black, her arms slack as she dangled and swayed gracelessly from the bough of a tree, her blue eyes and clever tongue already pecked out by the crows. Her final lesson to him, one paid in blood and heartache: *everything can be taken*.

Ruthlessly, Roark pushed the past away and returned his focus to the Overseer's Grimoire. With Griff's needs taken care of, he turned back to the newly straightened corridor leading to the library and smithy. Just before the smithy, he added a secret passage connecting the hallway directly to the throne room. A little niche

appeared on the map at the entrance, with a suit of armor holding a polearm standing there as if the nook had been built to showcase it.

That was the last of the points, and the counter sat at zero once more. Roark looked over the changes to the layout a final time. Satisfied, he shifted his focus to the bottom of the page to accept them.

[*You have changed the floor layout of the Cruel Citadel Level 1! Changes will take place immediately, but no further changes can be made for (24) hours. Are you sure you wish to proceed?*]
[*Alter the Cruel Citadel Level 1? Yes/No*]

Roark selected Yes, accepting the changes to the floor, then he turned to the grimoire page marked with the ribbon *Troop Management*. There, near the center of the page, was the roster showing the status of all the Infernal chimeras native to the first floor.



Level One Overseer Roster			
Type:	Level:	Number:	Status:
Changeling	1	2	Respawn
Changeling	2	3	Alive
Changeling	3	7	Alive
Thursr	4	4	Alive
Thursr	5	3	Alive
Thursr	6	1	Alive
Thursr	7	1	Alive
Elite Thursr (Kazko)	8	1	Alive
Reaver	6	1	Respawn
Reaver (Zyra)	7	1	Alive
Stone Salamander	1	1	Respawn
Stone Salamander	1	2	Alive
Stone Salamander	4	1	Alive
Elite Stone Salamander (Mac)	7	1	Alive
Elite Salamander	6	5	Alive
Elite Salamander	7	1	Alive
Reaver Bat	1	2	Respawn
Reaver Bat	3	2	Alive
Reaver Bat	5	1	Alive
Elite Reaver Bat	6	1	Respawn
Elite Reaver Bat	6	5	Alive
Weapons Master (Griff)	13	1	Alive



Interestingly, Griff had been added to the list as well, but when Roark tried to select the grizzled old trainer's character sheet, he couldn't. Either Griff didn't have one or it wasn't yet accessible to Roark. Making a mental note to ask the trainer about that later, he turned to the contact option beneath the roster. From there, he could speak to any of the first-floor natives, singly or en masse, via some form of telepathy.

Roark chose the mass-contact option, but unticked Zyra's name. She was already where she needed to be for now.

"Everyone meet in the great hall immediately to go over the plan for our next band of heroes," he sent. "This round's going to be ... unconventional."

Then he closed out of the Overseer's Grimoire and stood, stretching the stiffness out of his neck and back. On the throne, Mac woke and followed suit, paddlelike tail shaking and fat belly curving as his back arched.

Kaz still stood in the doorway to the second floor, but was looking over his shoulder at Roark uncertainly.

"Should Kaz accompany Roark to the great hall or continue to guard the staircase against assassins?"

"Actually, mate, I have to ask you to move down to the third floor temporarily," Roark said. "Right at the bottom of the stairs where I died."

The mighty chef chewed his lip, his heavy brow furrowed with worry.

"But will Roark be safe here without Kaz?"

Roark nodded. "If no assassins can get through you down there, then they can't make it up here to assassinate me." And he wouldn't have to worry about the softhearted Thusr leaping to his rescue and getting himself killed or killing the heroes meant for Wurgfozz if the plan went awry. But Roark kept that reason to himself.

"Well," Kaz said reluctantly. "Okay."

As Kaz headed downstairs, Roark left the throne room and traveled through the torchlit stone corridors to the great hall, the sticky sound of Mac's feet slapping the ceiling above him.

All of the first-floor Trolls, bats, and salamanders were already in the great hall, milling around, telling stories of their latest turn griefing or their experience with evolution, and drinking ale and snacking on bread and other tidbits from Kaz's kitchen. Griff was at the far end of the long, rough-hewn table, one foot up on a chair, one elbow propped on that knee while he talked animatedly to a small gathering of enthralled Changelings and Thursrs.

Roark went to the head of the chamber—an anticipatory hush fell as he passed through the throng. The last muted murmur died as he turned to face them. For a moment, the memory of his first attempt at gathering all the creatures of the first floor flashed through his mind. He'd been a lowly Changeling then, so short he'd had to climb up on a table just so they could see him. No such problem now. Though whipcord lean, his Jotnar form towered over the largest of the Thursrs by more than a foot.

“By now most of you have heard that the Dungeon Lord sent a group of assassins to take me out,” he said, raising his voice so that it carried through the chamber. “You’ve probably also heard that it worked. Moreover, I’m sure most of you are aware that Azibek has put a steep price on my head.”

A chorus of angry grumbling erupted at this. Roark let them get the majority of it out of their systems, then raised his hands. They fell silent again, though he could see the outrage glinting in many an eye.

“What that means is simple. The time for peaceful negotiations with Azibek and his ilk has passed. It is time for hostility. For war. It will be ugly. Nasty. But necessary. And I won’t lie to you, Azibek still has a significant advantage over us, but even now we are working to undercut him.” Roark paused, folding his claw-tipped hands behind his back as he surveyed the room. “Toward that end, we’ve made an alliance with the Trolls of the second floor,” he finally continued. “That’s where the next round of griefing comes in. In short, there won’t be one.”

This time the chorus was a round of livid shouting. Roark had to shout to be heard over them.

“You’ll notice there’s no door into the antechamber anymore.” He paused a moment, giving them time to glance at the place where the corridor had been earlier, and a few pairs of eyes suddenly opened wide with surprise. “That’s to herd the heroes the right way. We’re funneling the next band down to the second floor as a show of good faith for the new alliance. When that’s over with, we’ll go back to our regular grieving habits. But until those heroes are safe in Wurgfozz’s oversized hands, I need the lot of you to stay here, in the great hall. Understand?”

A dull roar rumbled through the crowd, most of it irritable mumbling and grumbling. The grizzled weapons trainer seemed to be the only one holding his peace. Still leaning one elbow on the leg propped up on the chair, Griff was watching Roark with a look of bemused fascination in his one eye and scratching his stubbled chin.

“I know this is difficult, but you’ve trusted me so far, and look at the reward all of us have reaped. Power! Evolution! Food!” He offered them a slight smile while thinking of Kaz. “I’m asking for you to trust me once more. Together, we will bring Azibek to his knees and the Cruel Citadel will rise, better and stronger than it has ever been before.”

One at a time, and then in a wave, the Trolls began to affirm that they understood what Roark was asking of them. That they believed him. Trusted him.

“Good.” Roark clapped his hands together. “Now, I’ll also need a pair of volunteers for a dangerous mission. No one lower than their first evolution. This is most likely a suicide mission, and I don’t want anyone losing levels if they get killed.”

CHAPTER 14

HEROIC PURSUIT



Less than an hour later, when the next group of heroes descended the crumbling staircase into the first floor of the Cruel Citadel, they found the antechamber deserted, as planned. Roark watched them from the twisted obsidian throne. Though none of the names stood out as heroes they had grieved before, the four invaders crept through the halls warily, as if they had heard all about the numerous traps and ambushes implemented in this place. Their leader seemed to be a level 15 Necro Knight by the name of [The_Mustard_Knight]. None of the others were below level 12.

Looking at their levels and watching them creep forward, something Kaz had said what felt like eons ago prickled at the back of Roark's mind: *"Griefing can lead to dire consequences. Higher-level heroes might later come and grind the griefer into dust, wiping out him and anyone with him."*

Roark had paid no mind at the time, only considering the consequences of his actions when PwnrBwner_OG led the guild raid against him, trying to obliterate Roark completely. With the insane High Combat Cleric soundly thrashed, Roark had dismissed the problem as far less dire than Kaz had made it out to be. Now, however, he was beginning to think he saw the truth behind Kaz's fears. It would not be the sudden grinding of a runaway boulder that would succeed in crushing the Trolls of the Cruel Citadel, but the slow, steady grinding of a gristmill. A gristmill that gained strength and power the more the rumor mill turned and called attention to the beatings heroes were taking in these twisted halls.

In the corridor outside the library, the heroes encountered the pair of newly evolved Thusrss, [Frig] and [Flatulina]. The Thusrss fought valiantly—Roark had told them to hold nothing back; if this plan was to work, there could be nothing in their actions to spark the heroes' suspicions—but soon the higher levels got the better of them, and Flatulina was decapitated by The_Mustard_Knight's longsword.

Roark winced. Flatulina had just reached level 4 and evolved into a Thusr, so she wasn't losing any experience or accrued levels, but having her head hacked off couldn't have been a very pleasant way to die.

As if the death of his comrade had forced Frig to see that he was outnumbered, the remaining Thusr wheeled about and sprinted away, chunky legs pumping as he flew down the corridor toward the smithy. The_Mustard_Knight and his party followed cautiously, keeping a line of sight on Frig while taking care not to blunder headlong into a trap. Yes, it seemed word had spread about just how deadly the citadel could be to the unwary.

Just before he reached the smithy, Frig slid to a stop before a niche showcasing a rusty suit of armor. He grabbed its polearm and levered the weapon forward. The grating of stone on stone echoed down the hallway as the suit of armor and the walls of the niche surrounding it rumbled to the side, revealing a secret passageway, just barely wide enough to fit the burly Thusr.

Frig disappeared into the passage just as the heroes caught sight of him, conveniently forgetting to close the wall behind him.

The_Mustard_Knight stopped just outside the passage, beckoning forward an azure-skinned elf in black leather armor crossed with straps and buckles. The dark elf crept forward into the passage, glaring into the shadow.

From his end of the passageway, Roark saw the flash of blue light as the dark elf cast a detect traps spell.

"We're good," the dark elf called back, voice echoing down the passage into the throne room. "No mechanisms or pitfalls."

"You sure, Joey?" The_Mustard_Knight asked, his voice oddly high-pitched. "I've heard this place is supposed to be loaded with

traps. Weird ones, too. Seriously, brosif, I'm gonna be pissed if I get impaled by a bunch of spikes again."

"Dude, that was one time. One," came Joey's reply as he thrust a single finger into the air. "I've said sorry like a gajillion times—just let it go. And I'm telling you. There's nothing here, man. It's clean."

"Fine," The_Mustard_Knight grunted, "but you're totally going in there first."

As the heroes tentatively set off down the passage, creeping along in single file, Frig sprinted into the throne room and skidded to a stop in front of the dais. He bent over, hands on his knees, as he wheezed in great lungfuls of air.

"Good work," Roark said. "Wait for my signal, then go shut the passage behind them."

Frig saluted him.

"Yes, sir ..." More wheezing. "Lord Overseer."

Roark scowled, certain Zyra was responsible for getting that started again, then he turned back to the magical remote viewing of the heroes that the Overseer's Grimoire allowed him.

The heroes followed the dark elf into the passage. As they rounded the bend, the entrance to the tunnel disappeared, stranding the heroes in utter darkness—save for the soft glow that came from the runes worked into their gear. Roark signaled Frig, and the Thusrsl slipped out through the portcullis, making his way back down the corridor the long way, to the niche where the suit of armor resided.

Roark made certain Frig got the exit closed before shutting the Overseer's Grimoire and standing. Then he pulled the Superior Rapier he'd forged less than ten minutes before. It was no Slender Rapier of the Falcon, with its movement-speed boosts, but it was a fine weapon nonetheless. Along with a set of leather armor he'd stitched together, the rapier would do nicely until he could collect his belongings from the third floor.

The dark elf appeared at the end of the tunnel first. When he saw Roark, he leapt backward, eyes wide.

"We got a boss room," he shouted over his shoulder. "You're up."

Calmly, Roark raised his rapier and free hand in a clear invitation to attack.

The_Mustard_Knight and a musclebound rog sprinted from the passageway with their longsword and katana aloft, both bellowing discordant, wordless war cries.

As they closed with him, nearly inside his measure, a level 12 Mind Mage wearing deep purple robes cast a spell from the relative safety of the tunnel.

Instinctively, Roark threw up his Infernal Shield. That filigreed purple vial appeared in the right of his vision, a spoonful of the purple draining away as the violet shield erupted around him. The spell bounced off.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted Paralysis Spell!!]

“Yep, definitely a boss,” The_Mustard_Knight yelled, circling to the right. “He’ll have a weakness. Probably a cooldown period. Wait for his ward to wear off, then hit him with everything you got.”

Roark felt vaguely insulted, but reminded himself that as long as they were underestimating him, they wouldn’t be analyzing his next moves as closely as they should.

The rog closed with Roark in a flash, slapping his gleaming katana disinterestedly at Roark’s shield. Roark dropped the Infernal spell suddenly, the glimmering barrier disappearing, and lunged *pie’ fermo* at the green-skinned warrior.

The rog squawked in surprise, dancing back a few paces, and just managed to bring up his katana in time to deflect the slash. Roark took a quick series of pressing steps forward, attacking *dalla spalla mandritto* and *riverso*—large, diagonal slashes that would lay an opponent open from shoulder to hip if they connected, but which also left Roark open to a well-timed assault. Despite his relatively high level, however, the rog didn’t seem to have the skill or wherewithal to exploit the weakness. Instead, he backpedaled, parrying the slashes but clearly too startled to mount a counterattack. His yellow eyes were frantic and wide as he tried to stay ahead of Roark’s vicious, calculated cuts.

From behind, The_Mustard_Knight's longsword slammed into Roark's shoulder blade, knocking him forward a step and leaving a gaping gash aching in the open air. A bit of the red in his filigreed Health vial drained away.

Roark stumbled, careful to let the momentum carry him toward the door in the corner of the throne room. Oblivious to anything out of the ordinary, the rog recovered his composure and proceeded to herd Roark toward the corner.

The_Mustard_Knight followed hard on their heels, and Roark soon found himself blocking attacks from a longsword and katana at the same time, dancing through an ever more intricate series of parries. If they noticed the door, they paid it no immediate mind, either thinking that he couldn't or wouldn't retreat to the next floor.

They were wrong on both counts.

His rapier connected with the blade of the katana, *trovar di spada*, though the katana's higher position gave the rog the advantage. With a flick of his wrist, Roark executed the tight circle Griff had demonstrated for him, not only throwing off the katana, but slashing open the rog's forearm with a spiraling cut at the same time. A second after Roark's *stramazzone* counter was complete, The_Mustard_Knight's longsword sliced into the meat of Roark's bicep. Blood oozed up and began to trickle down his pale white arm. His Health vial emptied another few notches.

From the corner of Roark's eye, he saw the mage cast another spell. Roark threw up his left hand once more, the Infernal Shield flickering to life and licking away at the Infernal magick in his purple vial. The spell bounced off in a shower of bright sparks.

[Roark the Griefer resisted Stun Spell!]

Over The_Mustard_Knight's shoulder, Roark saw the dark elf slipping toward the corner, trying to flank him, a pair of wickedly curved daggers drawn and ready. It was time.

Roark dropped the violet barrier again and turned on his heel, racing down the shadowy, torchlit staircase. His long legs skipped

two and three steps at a time as he ran. A cacophony of shouting and clanking armor followed behind him. He leapt down the final four stairs all at once, landing at the bottom in the gloomy torture chamber that was the second floor. Without a backward glance, Roark sprinted for the door to the next room.

He should've kept his shield up or written a rebound spell for the chase portion of the plan. Roark realized this the moment he felt a burning fist smack him in the center of his spine.

[You have been Slowed! Movement speed reduced by 45% for 30 seconds.]

“Yeah, nailed him!”

“Nice shot, Doc!”

Indigo lights circled his head and chest, speeding up faster and faster as his own movement slowed to a crawl. It felt as if he were slogging through chest-deep sucking mud. The long muscles in his arms and legs strained as he fought to speed up, but he couldn't coax anything resembling haste from them. A newborn foal that had just slopped onto the wet grass could've run him down at this speed.

Roark could hear the heroes gaining on him as he edged around a cage and its grinning skeletal occupant. If they noticed that this floor was as abandoned as the one above, none of the heroes mentioned it. They caught up to him as he was passing the breaking cradle. Longsword, katana, and now dual daggers were ripping at his flesh like a pack of dogs tearing apart a bear. Red drained from his Health vial in a steady stream. Only his increased Health Regeneration rate as a Jotnar kept him alive—and even that was a near thing.

These heroes were far more powerful than he'd originally anticipated ... If Roark didn't do something differently, they were going to kill him before he made it to the throne room.

Mentally, Roark scrambled, cogs clanking away inside his skull as he desperately tried to figure out a way to stay alive long enough to see this gambit through.

He veered left and leapt over an open pit of coals, moving slowly enough that he could look down at the glowing branding iron stuck deep in the bed of embers. The pit touched off a spark of memory in his mind. It looked so like the one in the first-floor torture chamber. The pit of coals where he'd found ...

Neveret's Last Laugh! He dug into his Inventory and ripped out the glittering black lava glass and metal mask.

It would block at least some of the damage from their weapons, but he wouldn't be able to see where he was going. Worth the trade off? A glance at his Health decided it—the red in the filigreed vial was well below half and dropping with every fresh attack.

Roark took one final look ahead, committing the layout of the room to hasty memory: The doorway to the second room was five long paces away. The only way he could miss it was if he stumbled and went severely off track. Which was a possibility, considering that the mask contained no eyeholes.

With trembling hands, he fitted Neveret's Last Laugh onto his face, rendering himself temporarily blind. Immediately, the bright lines of pain each blow dealt faded, and thin white text appeared in the darkness.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted stabbing damage from Superior Longsword.]

One pace.

The mask extracted its price of one Health per character level for the first second worn. Roark grimaced behind the nonexistent mouth of the mask. Neveret's Last Laugh was deflecting 100% of the damage from all non-magical weapons, but with so little red left in his vial and so far to go, 8 Health felt like a steep price to pay. But then he noticed his naturally High Regeneration rate was combating the toll. As a level 8 Jotnar, he regenerated 6 Health per second, which meant that per second, Neveret's Last Laugh extracted a measly 2 HP—practically a steal, considering the circumstances.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

Two paces.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

The dark elf's dual daggers still cut little bits of his life away, but without the assistance of the larger blades, they were nowhere near as effective.

Three paces. Another 8 Health drained away.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

Four paces. Roark braced himself to slam into the stone wall.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Superior Longsword.]

Five paces! He must be inside the second room, an open space studded with lava pits and roasting cages.

For a split second, he lifted the mask away from his face to check his surroundings. Orange light from the molten lava illuminated the doors on the far wall. The last one was his target. He slapped the mask back down, and not a moment too soon.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

[Roark the Griefer has resisted stabbing damage from Superior Longsword.]

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Superior Longsword.]

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

Neveret's Last Laugh continued to extract its price for protection, and the Slow Spell continued to make Roark's progress a damned faraway fantasy.

Beneath the mask, Roark managed a wry smirk. If he had to find a golden lining to all this, it was that at least the heroes were committed to following him. He'd barely had to do anything to get them this far. As long as losing nearly three-quarters of his Health counted as barely doing anything.

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Folded Steel Katana.]

[Roark the Griefer has resisted slashing damage from Superior Longsword.]

Roark stumbled. At first, he thought he'd tripped over something without feeling it. But then he realized his arms and legs were pumping freely again. It was like being held under water as the oxygen drained away and your lungs fought for air, then suddenly being released and gasping down lungfuls of fresh, sweet, delicious air. The Slow Spell had ended. Roark laughed—a full-bellied thing that rose from his center—and ripped off the mask. Suddenly, his long legs ate up the stone floor, leaving the surprised heroes dashing like mad to catch up.

Quickly, before the mage could cast another bloody Slow Spell, Roark held out his left hand and conjured an Infernal Shield to protect his back. He shot through the door on the end, then down the twisting meat-hook-adorned corridor usually crawling with Reavers hungry for a kill.

The heroes were catching him again, nearly breathing down his neck as he burst into the lava-lit throne room. But it hardly mattered, as the moment they stepped over the threshold was the moment four Elite Reavers hit the party with Paralysis Spells from every direction.

The heroes stopped dead in their tracks, bodies immobilized, expressions ranging from shock to rage frozen on their faces.

Roark slowed to a halt and came face-to-face with the obese, spike-studded Wurgfozz. The Thusr Behemoth's eyes glittered greedily.

"Your show of good faith, as promised," Roark panted, sweeping a hand toward the paralyzed heroes. His black hair had fallen into his face from the chase, and he quickly swept it aside with one sweat-slick hand.

"It's quite the wonderful change of pace to work with a Troll of his word," Wurgfozz said in his high-pitched purr. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Griefer ... Or should I say it's about to be a pleasure?"

[Congratulations! You have delivered (1) group of heroes to Wurgfozz the Sadistic within the allotted time limit! Your alliance with the Trolls of the Second Floor is now Secure!

To Maintain the Alliance: Allow second-floor Trolls access to first-floor kitchens, trainers, and strategies; allow Wurgfozz the Sadistic to continue ruling the Second Floor as Overseer.

To Break the Alliance: Challenge Wurgfozz the Sadistic for the position of Second-Floor Overseer.]

As soon as Roark closed this page, more text appeared.

[Congratulations! Your Troll Leadership skill has increased to Level 2! Trolls who were Receptive to your Leadership will become Supportive of your Leadership when spoken to face-to-face!]

With a thought, Roark dismissed the notice, took two long strides, and slumped into a stained aquatic torture chair. Every scrape, cut, and bruise he'd been trying to ignore flared up immediately, sending his vision swimming for a moment. The second-floor trolls who were hard at work attaching the party of motionless heroes to various devices of torture blurred into meaningless orange-tinged shapes.

Then a leather-wrapped hand materialized to his right holding out a bright red Modest Health Potion.

“Drink up,” Zyra’s voice said from somewhere out past the heavens. “We’re too close to enemy territory for you to be wandering around without full Health.”

CHAPTER 15

RESERVATIONS



It took two Modest Health Potions to heal Roark's cuts and bruises and return his filigreed Health vial to full—and that was only *with* his hearty Health Regen rate. He drank off the last as he and Zyra headed down the staircase to the third floor. The screams of tortured heroes echoed off the walls behind them. At the bottom of the stairs, in the bottleneck where Roark had died, stood a familiar figure in an antlered headdress and clacking, wooden O-Rogiri armor.

A surreal feeling swirled in Roark's mind as he looked down at the dead body that was supposed to be him. No, not *supposed* to be him—*was* him. Yet it was like looking at a total stranger.

True, the long, leanly muscled corpse was a sight closer to reality than the lumpy blue Changeling body had been, but it still didn't look like the reflection he'd seen in every looking glass and bottle and puddle his whole life. The nose was sharper, without the slight crook that marked him as a descendant of the bands of Lyuko travelers who wandered Traisbin's roads. The skin was ghostly pale instead of his accustomed darkly tanned olive. The curtain of dark, shaggy hair could've been his a few days before he realized he needed to crop it back again, but the serrated teeth, black razor-sharp claws, and pale staring eyes couldn't have been further from what he was used to. Not to mention the extra foot and a half of height.

The body was supposed to be him, but it wasn't, and looking down at it in that moment, Roark felt every bit the misplaced interdimensional traveler he was.

As he and Zyra approached, Kaz raised a hooked sword in greeting, though the Thusr looked uncharacteristically grim.

Zyra picked up on the change as well.

“Everything all right, big guy?” she asked.

Kaz shifted from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable about something.

“Kaz believes he mentioned some reservations earlier,” the Thusr began hesitantly, shooting glances at Roark and Zyra in turns. “About the deal.” He paused and dropped his gravelly voice. “The one Roark made with Wurgfozz …” He frowned and fidgeted as if not sure how to continue, but a ragged scream echoing down the staircase—clearly from the heroes currently committed to Wurgfozz’s tender mercy—seemed to goad him into speaking. “It’s not a very nice deal, Roark. To give them to Wurgfozz to torture them … It seems wrong. Bad.”

“So?” Zyra shrugged one bare shoulder. “They’re just heroes. They would slaughter the whole lot of us without a pause, Kaz. They are *invaders*. This isn’t their home. It isn’t even their realm. So, if they’d simply chosen to leave us in peace, they wouldn’t be in this mess.” She shrugged again. “In my eyes, their fate is on their own heads.”

“What Zyra says is not wrong …” Kaz replied slowly. “Still, it *feels* bad. Wurgfozz, he will not allow them to die for such a long time,” he argued, voice heavy with concern. “Wurgfozz will torment them. To Kaz, it seems different from defending ourselves. And if they come back, he will do it again. Like grieving, but horrible. Painful.”

“That’s *if* they’re stupid enough to come back,” Zyra said, folding her arms across her chest. She, at least, was clearly unconcerned with the deal they had cut. “And that’s assuming they make it past us—*which they won’t*.”

Kaz turned back to Roark, his huge black eyes pleading. “Roark understands, doesn’t he? He sees that this is wrong? That defending the citadel is not the same thing as this bargain we have made?”

Roark raked a razor-clawed hand across the back of his neck, then bent to the corpse and began transferring items as if it couldn’t wait.

But the task was nothing more than a play for time. In truth, he thought Kaz might be right. Though the heroes could hardly be considered innocent bystanders, they weren't a part of the conflict between himself and Azibek. To use them as a means to an end—and in such an agonizing, grisly way—was something the Tyrant King would do. How many people had Marek tortured? Whether for loyalty, information, or to make an example of those who would oppose him, Marek Konig Ustar had often used pain and torment as a tool to get what he wanted.

“Roark?” Kaz prompted.

But Kaz's voice just barely registered in the back of Roark's mind. He had *needed* to secure that alliance with the second floor. He couldn't hope to withstand Azibek's attacks without it, let alone unseat the despot. Yes, Roark could've challenged Wurgfozz outright, but if he had done that and won, the rest of the citadel's Overseers would feel like he was declaring war on them personally, and the potential for any peaceful negotiations would have flown out the window.

Roark stood and put on his usual leathers and Slender Rapier. Their comforting weight did nothing to drive out the turmoil of Kaz's concerns. Hard decisions had to be made in war—Roark knew that firsthand—and sometimes a few people had to be sacrificed to save many. But *sacrifice* and *torture* were on nearly opposite ends of that spectrum. Somehow, he had ended up on the same bloody end as Marek. Roark grimaced. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Try as he might, though, Roark couldn't see another way he could have gained Wurgfozz's allegiance. There was no simple solution available to him, other than morally dubious ones.

“Roark?” Kaz said again.

Roark watched as his emptied corpse dissolved in an unfelt breeze—ash scattered to the wind.

“Give me some time to think on it, Kaz,” he said. “I ...” He faltered. “There may be something we can do. I just need time to work it out. For now, we need to continue down to the Overseer on this floor. The sooner we have her on our side”—or *out of the way*, he thought but didn't say aloud—“the better.”

“You can’t go to Grozka like this,” Zyra said.

“Grozka?” Roark asked.

“The third-floor Overseer,” the hooded Reaver said. “I may have been a creature of the second floor, but everyone knows about her. And Grozka? She’ll eat you alive. The Trolls down there respect might. Strength and power. Not”—she waved a leather-wrapped hand at Roark’s tall form—“whatever this is supposed to be.”

“*This is a Jotnar,*” Roark said, a touch of insult creeping into his voice. “And if I remember right, the third-floor Overseer’s a Thusr.”

“A level 26 Thusr *Knight*,” Zyra emphasized. “A level 8 like you won’t even make a full meal for her, Griefer, Jotnar or no. You had a chance before—cleverness is a form of strength, after all—but now that Azibek has put a bounty on your head *and* managed to assassinate you once? She’ll never take you seriously. Chances are, she’ll just kill you on sight and collect Azibek’s reward.”

“Do you think there’s no diplomatic solution to be had at this point?” he asked, a flutter of worry mounting in his gut. Even with the second floor behind him, there was no way he could hope to successfully wage war against the rest of the Dungeon. Either he needed more allies, or he needed to personally capture more floors, which would be a painful and slow slog.

“I didn’t say that,” Zyra finally responded, though there was a hint of hesitation in her voice. “I think it might be possible to sway her, but if you want that chance you’ll have to show up armed to the teeth and ready to kill. And level 8 just won’t cut it, not anymore. You’ll need to be at your Elite evolution—bare minimum. And even then, there is risk.” She planted her hands on her hips and edged into the middle of the hallway, as though to personally prevent him from passing should he be stupid enough not to heed her advice.

Roark considered this. One thing he’d learned in his time with the Rebellion back in Traisbin was never to discount the advice of a local. Zyra knew the lower levels better than he or Kaz did, and she was certainly no fool. He would have to take her at her word.

“All right,” he finally said. Then he frowned, lips pursed into a thin line as he thought. “We’ll return upstairs and grieve until we’ve each obtained our Elites and Kaz has unlocked his Brute evolution.” He

ran a hand over his chin. Lowen was out there somewhere as well, he reminded himself, and Azibek would no doubt be employing new schemes. So he couldn't dally, but neither could he be *too* hasty, since that would eat through even more time he didn't have should he die. If they all reached their next respective evolutions, then even if they perished, they would forfeit nothing more than a few hours of time during respawn. "Yes, a bit of griefing. And I have some crafting I'd like to do while we're there."

This satisfied the hooded Reaver. She whisked past him and led the way back upstairs; Roark and Kaz followed behind her.

The three of them fell broodingly silent as they passed through the second-floor throne room. Wurgfozz was just getting warmed up, it seemed, but one of the heroes—The_Mustard_Knight—was blubbering something frantic about logging out.

"No, stay and play awhile," the spike-studded Thusr^r Behemoth purred in his high-pitched voice.

Roark didn't turn his head away as they passed. This bloody tableau was of his making, and so whatever disturbing bits of savagery it channeled into the nightmare vault were his burden to bear. He only hoped it wouldn't plague Kaz overmuch. He glanced at Zyra, trying to gauge her reaction. The hooded Reaver watched the Overseer move in on the heroes as if she wanted to grab a snack and pull up an aquatic torture seat. She wouldn't have any problems sleeping ... if, that was, Trolls ever slept.

Mac met them at the bottom of the staircase to the first floor. Or rather, the arched ceiling at the bottom of the stairs. The Elite Salamander dropped down next to Roark with a heavy, wet smack, and accompanied them up.

When their little quartet finally made it back to the throne room, Roark broke the silence.

"I know this is hard, and that the choices we have to make are no easy thing. Still, I'm proud of you both and of the work we're doing here." Zyra sort of stooped in on herself as he spoke, looking extremely uncomfortable with the praise. "We may make a few mistakes along the way, but we will learn from them. We'll do better. And ultimately, we *will* take down Azibek. But to do that we need to

put the time in now. Put in the effort. We all level up, we all evolve, and then we prepare to hit like a battering ram at anything standing in our way.”

“But what if Roark challenges the third-floor Overseer and loses?” Kaz shot back, his wide eyes brimming with concern. “Then, even if you are Evolved, it won’t matter. Roark will die forever-death.”

Roark forced a confident smile. He’d been hoping Kaz wouldn’t think of that.

“With my Elite evolution and bag of dirty, underhanded tricks, I don’t intend to die,” he replied. “Besides, I don’t plan to challenge her—not if I can help it. Always diplomacy first. Now, for the time being,” he said smoothly, deflecting Kaz away from any uncomfortable follow-up questions, “I want you two with the grieving patrols.” Roark eyed the slick-bellied Salamander waddling along next to him.

Briefly, he considered sending the creature out into the rotation as well, then decided against it. Having one loyal companion near at hand was the smart choice, especially considering the heavy bounty Roark had hanging over his head.

“I’ll join you in a bit,” he continued. “I want to look into enchanting first. See if I can’t come up with a cheap shot the Overseer down there won’t see coming.”

Kaz’s troubled frown didn’t dissipate, but he followed Zyra out through the portcullis all the same.

CHAPTER 16

BLESSINGS AND CURSES



Roark turned to Macaroni. "Accompany me to the forge?"

The Elite Salamander chirruped what Roark took to be an affirmative, then blinked his strange, out-of-sync eyes and waddled after Roark through the secret passage. At the opposite end, Roark felt around beside the door until he found a slender length of chain and pulled it. The niche and suit of armor slid aside, allowing them to pass.

They rounded the corner and entered the smithy, the air there hellish and dry. Roark immediately stripped off his leathers as sweat soaked his skin. Mac—cold-blooded little beast that he was—curled up beside the glowing forge and immediately fell asleep, fat black tongue lolling from his mouth.

In the far corner by the tanning rack stood a spindly-legged Enchanting table inlaid with glowing blue and green sigils, which hummed with arcane energy. The spidery thing looked as if it belonged in an academy or laboratory, not a smithy, but Roark was glad to have it here. He wanted to level up his Enchanting a few times before he tried out enchanting his own weapons and armor, and walking the corridors from smithy to laboratory would've only slowed the process to an unbearable crawl. Not to mention, he couldn't really afford the points to add the extra room.

Roark pulled out PwnrBwner_OG's rose mace and held it up, turning it this way and that, examining the weapon from every angle. A beautiful thing really, even if it was a glorified club. He smiled despite the heartache he felt, excited to lose himself in the world of

Enchantment. Anything to take his mind away from the doubts he had about his morally ambiguous alliance with Wurgfozz.

Gently, he laid the rose mace on the Enchanting table, just as the Trade Skill book had instructed, then pressed his palms flat against the blue sigil that looked like a curl of smoke and the green sigil that looked like an eye. Immediately, a notice appeared.

[*Would you like to*
- *add an Enchantment to this item?*
- *destroy this item to learn its Enchantment?*
- *destroy this item to obtain its gemstones?*]

Roark selected the second option, eagerness squirming in his chest.

[*You cannot destroy Unique Rose Mace of Thorns to learn its Enchantment at this time! To destroy Unique items, your Enchanting must be level 6 or above!*]

Very well. He tried the first option instead.

[*You cannot add an Enchantment to Unique Rose Mace of Thorns at this time! To add Enchantments to an already Enchanted item, your Enchanting must be level 4 or above!*]

Well, he'd expected some sort of resistance, Roark told himself. Hearthworld never seemed eager to let him do things the easy way.

He returned the rose mace to his Inventory, then went to the storage chest by the quenching trough and pulled out the small stash of magical items they'd been saving from the looted heroes. Among them were a Stiletto, a Kukri, an Oak Staff, a Gnarled Birch Staff, and one set of Iron Gauntlets of Minor Endurance. There was also a Divine Tower Shield that Roark had saved out of curiosity—it carried a heavy penalty to any Infernal creature who might try to use it.

Roark ran these through the table one at a time. Thankfully these were all of lower quality than the Unique Mace. Magick, though of an inferior nature. He destroyed each one for its Enchantment with the sound of breaking glass and a flash of golden light. One by one, their magical properties appeared in his mystical grimoire under his Enchanting skills—Increase Movement Speed, Increase Backstab Multiplier, Increase Magick, Increase Intelligence, and Increase Constitution.

The process was all simple and routine until he reached the Divine Tower Shield. He selected the option to destroy the shield as he'd done with the other items, but this time the sound of breaking glass wasn't accompanied by a new Enchantment in his mystic grimoire. Instead there was a flash of violet light quickly followed by a new magical message:

[You have unlocked the Enchanting Specialty Cursed! Cursed items bring doom and gloom onto their wielder and are often detrimental to the health. To Curse an item, use an Enchanting table and quill to inscribe an item with a malicious enchantment. Only one curse may be inscribed per item.]

Note: Enchanting Specialty Cursed! can only be accessed by an Enchanter with the simultaneous Trade Skill Calligraphy.

Warning: Players can only have (1) Enchanting Specialty, are you sure you would like to add Cursed!? Yes/No?]

A thrill of excitement hummed through Roark's veins. This seemed tremendously promising. He briefly wondered why he hadn't run across more cursed items, but then it dawned on him: Chimeras weren't allowed to have Trade Skills, and what hero would want to curse an item? Cursing the item would no doubt decrease the gold value, plus it would wreak devastation and ruin on the wielder. Perhaps the skill could be used to thwart a rival, but even that was a stretch—especially since it was a Specialty Skill, which would prevent a hero from unlocking another Enchanting-based Specialty and require that the hero already know the Calligraphy Trade Skill.

As a Dungeon Overseer, however, this ability seemed almost custom-tailored for his use. He accepted at once.

Next, he grabbed a Quality Iron Dagger from the storage chest and placed it on the Enchanting table. After searching out the quill and inkpot in his Inventory, Roark rested his hands on the glowing blue sigil depicting a pen and the glowing green one depicting a skull.

[Would you like to Curse this item? Yes/No?

Note: For every item you inscribe with a Curse, Cursed! will extract a share of your Health equal to your Enchanting level x your character level.]

Not so different from a blood cantrip, then. Life energy in exchange for raw power. “Lucky I’m only a level 1 Enchanter,” Roark mumbled to himself and selected Yes.

A bit of parchment appeared beneath a slowly rotating depiction of the dagger, waiting for him to write the inscription. He racked his brains for something truly nasty.

[The larvae pox infests anyone who wields this Quality Iron Dagger.]

Interestingly, the letters didn’t appear on the weapon as he’d originally anticipated.

Instead, as he wrote, the letters blurred and morphed, transforming into a strange set of runic sigils, which appeared etched into the blade of the dagger. As the curse took, those runes flared with unnatural life, glowing blue-green against the gleaming metal. As he finished the inscription, they flared brighter, then disappeared —unlike normal enchanted weapons, which kept their runic markers plain and visible to the naked eye. He shuddered and shivered as though someone had just dumped ice water down his tunic; a moment later, 8 points of his Health vial drained away in service to the Curse.

An unpleasant sensation, even if the damage was minimal.

Roark shook it off and beelined back to the storage chest. This time, he grabbed an armload of unenchanted weaponry and armor before sprinting back to the Enchanting table. Hundreds of possible Curses whirled through his head like debris in a tornado. Should he try the one where a looted corpse in possession of the item would explode and kill the looter or the one where someone equipping it after the previous owner's death would immediately be swarmed by flesh-eating beetles first?

He chortled to himself in absolute glee, no different from a young child on Saint Oromo's Morn. So many choices, but where to start? Hells, he didn't really have to choose—there were more than enough items to go around. He set to work, churning through item after item. Another dagger. A dented buckler. A signet ring with a ruby the size of his knuckle ... Each one imbued with a different spell, a different curse.

Twenty minutes later, Roark lay across the tabletop, face pressed to the humming arcane inlay as he tried to hold back the vomit threatening to erupt from his throat. He'd overdone it a bit in his excitement. Now his filigreed Health vial was flashing out a panicked warning. His skull felt as if its inside was lined with broken glass, and his stomach felt as rancid as the midden heap outside of Korvo. Someone far away was groaning in pain. With a start that only made him feel worse, Roark realized that someone was him.

Enchanter's Sickness, this was called.

He'd read about it in the Enchanting Trade Skill tome. With shaking hands, Roark fumbled in his Inventory for a Modest Health Potion before remembering he'd used them all. It'd been an eventful day. He needed to stock up again. No, scratch that—he needed to find an Alchemy Trade Skill book so Zyra could start brewing potions for the Dungeon. That would set things to rights. For now, the only thing he could do was lie in pain until his Health regenerated naturally.

It was a bloody awful way to learn this lesson, but several eternities later, the red in his Health vial crept up past the quarter mark and Roark was able to stand without emptying his stomach or passing out from the stabbing pain in his head.

The good news was he'd raised his Enchanting to level 3, and so far, each one of his Curses had taken with only minor alterations. He returned to the storage chest—much slower this time—and retrieved the small collection of gemstones they'd collected from grieved heroes. These gems were far rarer even than the magically enchanted items, and far more valuable. Using these, he applied the regular Enchantments he'd learned earlier to several of the remaining weapons and armor he hadn't gotten around to cursing.

[Congratulations, you have leveled up your Enchanting Trade Skill to Level 4! You may now Enchant previously Enchanted weapons with a secondary Enchantment or increase an existing Enchantment!]

Finally, the breakthrough he'd been waiting for.

Roark managed a weak smile, then pulled his Slender Rapier of the Falcon free from the sheath at his belt and carefully, almost reverently, laid it on the Enchanting table. The weapon was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship—the blade slender and tapered, perfectly balanced and gleaming. The weapon had a wide crosspiece and a sweeping hilt with a strong, but intricately wrought basket guard, all the better to protect the hand. An intricate, leather-wrapped handle ended at a fat pommel, which was engraved with a single, pale-gold rune.

The rapier was a gentleman's weapon, through and through. One that had served him admirably so far.

The other, basic enchantments had been easy things. But *altering* a previously enchanted weapon was a different matter entirely. No simple inscription and binding could be made here, since the weapon was already magically imbued and scripted. First, he needed to find the perfect gemstone—one that would complement the current magical binding when combined with the right rune. The stones came in different grades—so far, he'd found Blemished (Tier 1), Scuffed (Tier 2), Chipped (Tier 3), and Flawed (Tier 4), though he knew from his Enchanting tome that there were more refined stones out there.

He'd used the lesser quality gemstones on the practice gear, and now all that remained were the finer quality stones, all Flawed. But even that wasn't the end of the story. There were also a variety of different stone *types*, eight total—lapis lazuli, ruby, jade, amethyst, diamond, opal, topaz, and pearl—which could be used to enhance different elements, skills, and abilities depending on what sort of item they were set into. Roark selected a Flawed Lapis, then held it up, examining the stone in the flickering light of the forge.

The lapis was a beautiful blue, shot through with gold flecks, and easily the size of his thumbnail. Though Roark knew it was an "imperfect" stone, he couldn't help but feel a subtle flash of greed.

Once upon a time he'd been a noble—one from a wealthy family no less—but that had all changed on the *Bloederige Noct*, the Night of Blood. The night his family had perished at the hands of Marek and his men. Roark had lived rough more often than not during the years that followed, and a single stone such as this could've kept him neck deep in fine wine for a month. More than once he'd dreamed about laying hand on a treasure like this—especially on the long nights before he met Danella. Nights spent curled up in an alley beneath a too-thin blanket, his stomach howling with hunger.

He set the lapis onto the enchanter's table, then hunched forward and set about the task at hand. First, he picked up a small engraver's awl with a wooden bulb-shaped handle attached to a needle of deadly steel, the tip filed to a wickedly sharp point. Carefully, he worked a ring of intricate lettering around the edge of the stone—the containment script—before ever so carefully etching the rune *Rorne* into the very center, big and bold. Rorne was nothing more than a line bisected by a triangle, but the sigil—when combined with lapis, then inset into a weapon—could drastically increase Offensive Movement Rate.

But even that was only the beginning of the process.

With the rune crafted, it was time to prepare the weapon for outfitting and gem-binding. Currently, the rapier was powered by a single, pale-gold rune, *Sikea*, which was painstakingly worked into the pommel—though only on one side. The simple inscription, which had been cast during the weapon's forging, offered a +10% Attack

Speed Bonus. Roark flipped over the blade and pulled out a large-grade chisel and a small double-sided hammer, one face metal, the other made from a hard rubber. Roark carefully pounded out a circular divot, directly in the center of the steel pommel, which would shortly house the stone.

The work was tedious and exacting, yet Roark enjoyed every minute of it. It was straightforward, honest work. Just him, the metal, and the gem—no morals to consider, no feelings to hurt, no hard choices to make.

Once the divot was perfectly carved, he switched back to the needle-fine etching awl and carved a rune into the bottom of the hole: *Yasuc*, a symbol shaped a bit like a lightning bolt, which was, perhaps, the most important rune he'd learned from the Enchanting tome. *Yasuc* alchemically forged the gemstones to the item at hand, forging the two into one—a single inseparable whole, bound until destruction. With the *Yasuc* symbol done, Roark plucked up the worked lapis and carefully set it into place, pressing down firmly until there was a flare of amber light.

Perfect.

The gem fit seamlessly into the pommel, and now glowed with a soft blue light. Satisfied, Roark picked up the weapon, giving it a few playful swipes, before pulling up the description:



Slender Rapier of the Diving Falcon (Superior)

One-Handed Damage: 20 - 29

Durability: 50 of 50

Level Requirement: 5

Strength Requirement: 12

Blade Class Weapon - Fast Attack Speed

+10% Attack Speed

+15% Increase Movement Speed (Enchanted)



He grinned and closed out of the screen.

His leather armor came next. Once more he went through the labor-intensive process, this time picking a Flawed Diamond and pairing it with the *Grist* rune—which granted him a 15% Increased Constitution Enchantment, raising his Constitution by three points when he equipped his armor. He was running low on quality stones, but a final Flawed Amethyst, inscribed with the *Valgerik* Rune and bound to a golden signet ring, increased his Experience gain by 7% for every kill.

By the time Roark was finished with those, his Health was topping out once again. And best of all, he'd managed to hit level 9 once more, regaining the ground Azibek's assassins had cost him in their dirty maneuver. He'd lost the ten Stat points he'd invested at Respawn, so he went back through and once more divvied them up. Then, with that done, he woke Mac, equipped his Slender Rapier of the Diving Falcon, his Quality Leather Armor of Minor Endurance, and his Signet Ring of the Initiate, and left the smithy to find Kaz and Zyra. It was time to grief out some levels—only three more until he hit his Elite Form. Time to get his hands dirty ...

CHAPTER 17

GRIND TIME



Scott Bayani in the form of PwnrBwner_OG re-upped his Shield of Blades spell as the Ghoul Hounds charged him. The lavender sphere of razors sliced into the rotting mutts' flesh, releasing toxic green mist into the air from the wounds. At least it would be toxic if he were some low-level blart. At level 25 and climbing, his Con was too high to take poisoned gas damage from anything less than the toughest bosses.

"I should be smelling roasted dog," he snapped, smacking the closest Hound with his Crystal Mace. Its rotten head crunched like a potato chip as it died. "Where's that Resonating Light, Kellie?"

"On it," Kellie said, shooting a blue flare from her Elemental Warlock, [KellieTheDeathless]'s staff at the Hounds between him and her. The air vibrated with the power of the Divine spell and the Hounds screeched as their Infernal carcasses went up in smoke. "Jeez."

"Yeah, light it up!" Mike the Boarkiller whooped, chopping a Hound in half at the shoulder with his massive oversized meat cleaver of an axe. "*Bar-bee-que!*"

"Guys..." Kevin, better known as Dude_Farkowitz, had gotten cut off from the group and now he was facing down a crowd of Ghoul Menaces with nothing but his lowbie alt and a crappy enchanted longsword.

"I told you losers not to get separated," Scott said, scowling as he threw a Lightning Lance at another Hound. The thing's head exploded in a shower of gore, and the spell triggered the Lightning Chain ability he'd added after his last level, arcing to two more of the

rotting dogs. The second one fried, dropping more than two-thirds of its HP, and the third dropped to the ground seizing and dazed. With a few vicious swings of his mace, Scott finished them off. "That's exactly what the Trolls are going to try to do to us. Separate us. Cut the weak ones off from the herd and take them out."

"Ouch! Guys!" Kevin yelled, his voice cracking. The Ghoul Menaces were all up in his business, scratching and clawing at him with their poisonous talons. And because Kevin hadn't listened to Scott when he told him to bring his main, Kevin was low enough that the poisoned mist affected him.

"I'm coming," Mike answered, chopping his way across the room to help the idiot out.

But the tank didn't make it to Kevin before Dude_Farkowitz ate it. The dark elf dropped to the floor in a heap of plate mail, and the Ghouls surrounding him doubled in size, feeding on his death.

"This is why I told you losers no lowbie alts!" Scott shot Lightning Lance at the back of one of the Menaces. It shook and shimmied, half its HP eaten up by the electricity, but Chain didn't trigger that time around. "Close in, guys. Don't let them surround you."

"Oh my God, micromanage some more," Kellie groaned, firing off another air-shaking Resonating Light.

Mike giggled as he gleefully hacked apart a Ghoul Menace.

"Cut the chatter and kill these punks," Scott said, smashing another one upside the head with his mace.

Together the three of them managed to clear the last of the Menaces and Hounds, and Scott managed to get PwnrBwner the majority of the kill shots.

He'd picked the Barrow of the Damned specifically because it was a high-level dungeon full of Infernal chimeras. They would be facing the same Infernali spells and crap here that they would in the Cruel Citadel against the Trolls, and they could get a better feel for how their Divine-based magick would work against the Griefer. Plus, Scott had brought a junk mace, no enchantments and barely any damage, so he could max his XP from each kill and level his Mace Class Weapon like crazy.

While they were looting the Ghouls, RangerDick and JohnJon came back from their scouting mission down one of the tunnels that branched off this room.

“We got a crypt up ahead with Blasphemers,” RangerDick said, lowering his Ilexim Forest Bow. “At least nine.”

“Every one of ‘em’s gonna cast Ethereal Copy when we get in range, so shoot for the one that hangs back.” Scott checked the cooldown timer on his Shield of Blades, then recast it on himself. “And this time, don’t get separated.” He hefted his Crystal Mace and led the way down the tunnel. “All right, let’s bust some caps in these ghouls.”

He felt a smug grin twisting his lips. He was going to grind so hard that he’d be through the roof the next time he faced down that modding dickeater Roark. Then none of the Griefer’s overpowered bullshit cheats would matter.

CHAPTER 18

BONDING AND BLADEWORK



Roark found Kaz and Zyra in the antechamber with a small band of Changelings finishing off a raiding party four heroes deep. In the far corner, near where the door to the great hall was earlier, the one-eyed Griff sat on a crate, eating succulent beef skewers and watching the show.

Not wanting to interrupt the griefing, Roark ducked under a Shoddy Iron Arrow and joined the grizzled weapons trainer, sitting on a barrel nearby.

“Come for another spot o’ training?” Griff asked without looking away from the fight.

Roark checked his mystic grimoire and found that enough time had lapsed for him to buy another round in blade-class weapons. Strange how time moved here in the citadel without the sunlight to judge by.

“Another level wouldn’t go amiss,” he said, reaching for his gold. “I’ve also got your cut of the gold from yesterday’s griefing.”

With a slow hand, Griff waved that away. “It don’t do to discuss business over food. Gives you the indigestion. We’ll worry about it after I finish my dinner.”

Then suddenly the lethargic-looking old man was on his feet, waving his arms and shouting.

“Ah, come on there, tiny!” Griff hollered into the fray. “You shoulda seen that opening a mile away! He practically gave it to you!”

“Hey, shut up, old man!” a hero in dented plate mail yelled back.

“Mind your own!” Griff flapped his hands at the hero. “I wasn’t talking to ya!”

The hero took a threatening step toward Griff. Roark stood, drawing his slender rapier, ready to get between the trainer and the young man.

But Zyra was already there with a knife in the hero's kidney. His red bar flashed green—poisoned—and a pair of Changelings fell on him in a frenzy of shortsword and morning star.

Griff chuckled as he eased himself back down onto the crate with a soft groan. Roark returned to his barrel, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Nice of you to distract him for them," he said, nodding toward the battle.

The old man shrugged. "Your friends do well enough, but it ain't always easy to keep an eye on the little guys." He picked up his plate of skewers and gnawed on a slice of vegetable. "You can get a sort of tunnel vision, 'specially when the opponents have the superior levels."

Roark nodded thoughtfully. He'd experienced that often enough himself, here in Hearthworld and back home in Traisbin. The heroes in this party were levels 8 through 10, and while Kaz and Zyra looked up to the task, fighting four of them with a band of Changelings darting in and out and only half sticking to the strategy of attacking two to a hero seemed to be wearing on his friends. He hardly wanted to think about how the scene would change if the heroes had been sitting at levels nearer those of The_Mustard_Knight's band. The image of that female Thusr's head flying off flickered through his mind.

"At least the Experience will be worth it," Roark mumbled under his breath, his thoughts returning to Kaz's warning about the consequences of griefing.

"Somethin' on your mind, lad?" Griff asked, craning his neck so he could spear Roark with his one remaining eye.

Roark pasted an easy smile on his face. "I wouldn't want to ruin your dinner."

"Nonsense! Nothin' better for the digestion than a bit of a gab about someone else's troubles. Makes a man feel fortunate."

For a few long seconds, Roark scratched at the back of his neck and tried to gather his thoughts. It wasn't just the increasing level of

players coming down on them. Kaz had been right about that. He'd also been right about Roark's insistence on becoming Jotnar calling down Azibek's attention on them, and he was right again about using the players as leverage in the negotiations with Wurgfozz.

Worst of all was that it had taken the softhearted Thusr to call Roark's attention to each situation. He'd been too busy rampaging ahead with his usual single-minded determination to consider the consequences, telling himself that if the consequences came with the risk, then they must be somehow worth it. The ends justified the means. The heroes could be sacrificed if they got him what he wanted. The whole city of Korvo could burn if he could just kill the Tyrant King.

"Our alliance with the second floor ... You were in the great hall, so you know we handed them over to Wurgfozz." Roark faltered. Stumbling over his words wasn't an action he was accustomed to. He tried to collect his thoughts into some sort of sense. "He's a vital ally. It won't be possible to survive the Dungeon Lord's assassination attempts, let alone take over the citadel without his help. But there's a reason he's known as Wurgfozz the Sadistic. The heroes we gave him are going to be in agony until they die. *If* he ever lets them die."

Griff chewed thoughtfully, but made no move to speak.

Roark sighed in frustration. "I'm no pure white knight. I've killed plenty of men and even a few women in the name of freedom, and I'll do it again if that's what it takes. I don't have any right to cry foul now. But this might be the lowest I've stooped." He shook his head, angry at himself. "It's no different from something Azibek or Mare—" he caught himself before speaking the Tyrant King's name. "Uh, or a hundred other tyrants would do, and I did it without a second thought because they're not my people. And what's worse, I didn't even notice the cruelty of it until someone else pointed it out to me. I've traded off more than my share of civil niceties over the years, but I didn't think I'd ever hand over my humanity without even noticing."

At the word *humanity*, Griff swiveled his balding head to glance at Roark. Roark thought he saw surprise in the old man's eye, but the weapons trainer turned back to watch the final moments of the grieving before Roark could be sure.

Across the room, Kaz sliced a blue-robed rog across the back of the knees, laming him just before Zyra planted her long knife in his heart. The mage rog gave a dying screech as his red bar flashed critical and emptied, then he dropped to the floor. Dead.

Ascending chimes rang through the room as Zyra leveled up. Kaz gave a whoop of excitement and pumped a huge fist in the air as golden light shined from the hooded Reaver's midnight skin. Two of the Changelings had leveled as well, and the lot of the tiny blue creatures were dancing and hopping around madly—chanting, hooting, waving their weapons in the air.

At Roark's side, Griff dug the sharp end of an empty skewer into his teeth, attempting to extract a bit of gristle.

"Y'know, lad, I wasn't too sure what to think of this mob outfit comin' in," the old weapons trainer said in his gruff voice. "Your war ain't my war. I can't say as I understand it, and I damn sure ain't about to get involved in fightin' it. But I know a thing or two about losing your humanity. Thirty years in the arena makes a man look different at what constitutes savagery, and there's times when what I think of as a reasonable response would make a gentler man kick up his guts. The things we see every day have a way of blindin' us." Griff turned his head to cast a sly glance Roark's way. "And unless I miss my guess, lad, this ain't the only hard world you've laid eyes on."

Roark raised an eyebrow at the old man. "How did you—"

"Nobody's as obvious about secrets as those that have 'em," Griff said with a shrug. "Is what you did to them heroes cruel? Sure. But look around you! This place ain't named the Cruel Citadel because it's a nice spot to settle down and raise a family." He paused a moment to suck at the offending gristle, then, satisfied with the result, went on. "I will tell you this, though: You brought in an old man too washed up for combat, gave him a warm bed, a steady stream of meals, and a place to ply his humble trade. That ain't the mark of a man—or Troll—without a thread of compassion left in the weft."

Roark considered this, ghostly pale hand rubbing at his hairless chin.

“When I first walked into this job,” Griff said, leaning close and pitching his voice low, “I didn’t think much about gettin’ anyone else involved in this madness, recruitment bonus or no. But you’ve changed my mind about you, lad. In fact, now I’m starting to think—”

Before Roark could hear what Griff thought, however, Kaz bounded over to join them in the corner. The weapons trainer quieted and leaned back against the wall.

“Did Roark see?” Kaz demanded, his onyx-chip eyes glowing with exhilaration. “Zyra leveled up! She’s only one level from *Evolution!*”

In spite of the interruption, Roark couldn’t fight back a smile in the face of his friend’s limitless enthusiasm.

“I saw, mate,” he said. He nodded at the hooded Reaver, who wasn’t far behind Kaz. “It was well-done. Congratulations.”

Zyra gave a smug bow and flourish of her hands. Roark rose, clicked his heels together, and returned it flawlessly, the picture of courtly manners.

Rather than continue the playful charade, however, Zyra turned serious.

“We need to get you in the rotation,” she said. “The sooner you’re Evolved, the less we’ll have to worry about an assassination knocking you back down to level 8. Next party, you’ll take the lead.”

Roark smirked and canted his head to the side. “You’re worried about me? I didn’t realize you cared.”

“Just trying to make my job easier watching your back,” she replied, the lilt in her voice betraying the teasing smile hidden in the depths of her hood. “Next party.”

“I’m training with Griff first,” Roark said, jerking his head at the weapons trainer. “If the man ever finishes his dinner.”

Griff chuckled and set aside his plate of empty skewer sticks.

“Let’s stop all this jawin’ and see if I can’t teach you how to hold a dagger and rapier at the same time,” the old man said, standing. “Now, let’s see what you’re working with, huh?”

Roark pulled free his Kaiken Dagger and offered it to the trainer with a dip of his head. The man scratched at his belly, then stifled a long belch with his hand before accepting. He eyed the weapon

carefully, noting the gleaming blade, running his fingers over the contoured grip, checking the balance. After a beat he grunted and nodded. “Aye, this’ll do. First, it’ll do us well to show you the bloody right way to hold the thing.” He spun the blade with a flourish.

“The first grip is the hammer grip. If you were fighting with the dagger in your main hand, this would be your go-to. A solid grip. Offers good reach”—he took several swipes at the air, graceful, delicate arcs—“great slashing potential, and the blade retention is unmatched. Chances are you won’t be easily disarmed. But since you’re mostly gonna be using it in your off hand, I’d recommend the icepick grip.”

With a flick of his fingers, he inverted the weapon so the blade ran along the outside of his forearm. “This is particularly usefully close in.” His feet danced and his shoulders swayed as he thrust and stabbed, each fluid movement leading into the next. “Now, the natural inclination of most new fighters using the icepick is to treat the blade as a slashing instrument, but it’s most effective as a thrusting weapon—particularly the downward thrust.” He made a series of quick, brutal, downward thrusts. “Clavicle, neck, even the heart. Those are your targets.” He straightened after a minute and offered Roark his blade back. “Now, why don’t you give it a try, lad?”

Roark accepted the weapon and worked through a handful of different routines, trying the different grips and the various slashes and thrusts, getting a feel for each as Griff corrected everything from posture and footwork to blade angle and attack speed. After only a handful of minutes’ study with Griff, Roark had unlocked his Off-Hand Combo ability—a move that allowed him to follow a rapier attack with a quick slash from his Kaiken Dagger for double damage. And not a moment too soon.

“Heroes!” the level 2 Changeling at the top of the stairs called.

CHAPTER 19

MIGHT MAKES RIGHT



The last of the heroes darted toward Roark, blood streaking the rog's green skin, a vicious slash crisscrossing his face courtesy of Roark's rapier. The rog wore heavy wooden plate armor, but he was only a level 7 and in well over his head. The rest of his overly ambitious party lay scattered around him, brutalized and dead. A level 9 Swashbuckler here, a level 6 Warpriest there. He alone remained and was on his very last legs. But there was no retreat, not for the one called [CooterJoe]. No, the lesser Changelings and Thusrss were spread out in a rough semicircle behind him. Not attacking, but rather hemming him in, ensuring there was no retreat from Roark's blade.

Roark and company had been grinding relentlessly for the last five hours, carving their way through opponent after opponent, raiding party after raiding party. A seemingly endless stream of bloodshed, with Roark at the fore of literally every battle, syphoning off ever-greater amounts of experience. They'd been griefing heroes on and off for so long, Roark had actually lost count of the heroes he'd killed. But he was close now, so very close to hitting his mark.

The rog in front of him grimaced, lips pulling back to reveal yellowed teeth, changed stances, his arms high, boxy meat cleaver of a battle-ax slanting downward over his head, and charged.

"I. Am. Cooter. Joe!"

It was an act of sheer desperation. Roark dropped the tip of his rapier, opening his guard, *chiamata invito*, making the lumbering warrior think he might actually have a chance. The rog took the bait, his axe whooshing toward Roark in a clumsy but powerful overhand

strike. Roark easily sidestepped the weapon as it fell, then before the rog could correct or counter, the Griefer closed with him, lashing out with his new Off-Hand Combo.

The tip of the Kaiken Dagger descended into the hero's exposed neck, plunging deep and eating up the scant remainder of Health left to the rog. As Roark pulled the blade free, the hero gurgled weakly and dropped to his knees, swaying for a heartbeat before toppling onto his side. Dead. An ascending chime rang through the antechamber as the rog hit the floor, a pool of deep crimson spreading out around him like a devilish halo.

[LEVEL UP!]

Golden light exploded from Roark's skin, as bright as the noonday sun. Raw heat flooded through him, racing along his arms and legs, while a lightning storm seemed to fill his belly, sending out sporadic bolts of primal, infernal energy. Roark felt his bones growing, *stretching*, his teeth lengthening, his body *evolving* into an Elite Jotnar. When the change stopped, he was standing over Kaz once more, nearly eight feet tall, and those vestigial wing bones in his shoulder blades had poked out into sharp nubs as thick as his thumb. He was still as lean as a whipcord, but he could feel the added power in the muscles rippling under his ghostly pale skin.

He stowed his Slender Rapier and the Kaiken Dagger. Over the last five hours, he'd raised his proficiency in both weapons until he'd barely needed to reach for his Initiate's Spell Book or Infernal Shield. That had been part luck and part intention; he wanted to go into the confrontation with the third-floor Overseer with all his spell slots available.

Roark opened his mystic grimoire.

[*You have 30 undistributed Stat Points!*]

He dismissed the notice and inspected his character page, eager to invest the points he'd been hoarding while they grieved. After a

few moments' thought, Roark managed to restrain himself from dumping the lot into Intelligence. Instead, he spent only nineteen of his points on Intelligence, thirteen on Dexterity, and left the remaining eight to Constitution. He'd never match Kaz for Strength, but he could make up the difference with his movement speed and Magick. He examined his new character sheet:



Character Overview																																							
Name:	Roark	Level:	12																																				
Gender:	Male	Player Class:	.error (): W3RL0CK																																				
Type:	Troll-Hybrid (Elite Jotnar)	Alignment:	Infernali																																				
Current Experience:	35	Next Level:	10560																																				
Health:	338	Infernali Magick:	700																																				
H-Regen / 5 Sec:	46	Magick-Regen / 5 Sec:	31.75																																				
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Troll Leadership Lv. 2																																							
Player Special Skills:																																							
Spellcraft (Class Skill)	Lv. 3																																						
Bladed Weapons (Melee Skill)	Lv. 5																																						
Weapons Specialty: Rapier	Lv. 3																																						
Calligraphy (Trade Skill)	Lv. 2																																						
Blacksmithing (Trade Skill)	Lv. 6																																						
Tailoring (Trade Skill)	Lv. 2																																						
Enchanting (Trade Skill)	Lv. 4																																						
Enchanting Specialty: Cursed!	Lv. 2																																						



He noticed his new evolution had come with a number of different perks—everything from increased Critical Hit Chance and Attack Damage to boosted Health Regeneration—and among those perks was a brand-new Jotnar spell: Infernal Torment.



Infernal Torment

Ranged Attack Spell

Range: 40 feet

Casting Time: Instant

Casting Cost: 6% Base Magicka

Infernal Torment burns target from the inside out with Infernal flame, inflicting 1 Damage x character level per second on target for 30 seconds or as long as caster maintains eye contact.

Note: Infernal Torment disrupts concentration-based spells.

Note: Divine creatures are invulnerable to Infernal spells.



In addition to the new spell, Roark's increased Magick had come with two more level 1 spell slots, two more level 2 slots, and a pair of level 3's. With the Plain Maple Wand, he now had eight level 1's, five level 2's, and three level 3 spell slots.

Satisfied, Roark looked over his numbers one final time, then accepted the changes.

"It's time we headed back downstairs," he told Kaz and Zyra. If he wasn't up to facing the third-floor Overseer now, then he never would be.

"Is Roark sure he wouldn't like to make at least Soul-Cursed before he tries the third floor again?" Kaz asked anxiously, tapping his huge fingertips together. "It will take time, yes, but in the meantime, Kaz could make Roark a delicious feast while he is grieving, and—"

"It's now or never, mate," Roark said. He'd spent five hours grieving and had gained a mere three levels, and that was with his new ring that increased experience by 7% per kill. Soul-Cursed required level 18. No, he simply couldn't afford the time it would take to grind out another six levels, especially since the experience requirements shot up drastically with each new level he obtained. "The longer we put this off," he continued, "the better entrenched Azibek is becoming down there." And there was no telling what

Lowen was up to, wherever the man was—though that he kept to himself.

“Okay,” the mighty chef agreed reluctantly.

Zyra—who’d gained her Elite level as well, though much earlier than Roark—appeared in the only doorway still currently attached to the antechamber. She stood a foot taller as well, nearly six feet, and had grown willowy in the bargain. Her skin was now a shade of blue so dark it was almost as black as her assassin’s leathers, though in the light, her flesh had a slight sparkle, like ink mixed with powdered sapphire. Her white ringlets almost glowed against it.

“I’ve got Health potions fresh from the marketplace,” she said, her voice tinged with singsong. She tossed a trio to Roark and then three more to Kaz. “Not the lowly Modest version, either. Old hag wanted twice what they’re worth, but I won out in the end.”

“By poisoning her?” Roark asked wryly, cocking one eyebrow.

“By refusing to pay her outrageous prices without a deep discount,” the hooded Reaver said smugly. “Though to hear her tell it, she’d have preferred the poison.”

Roark inspected one of the magenta potions she’d thrown him. Its bottle was a sight more ornate than the Modest ones, and as he scrutinized the potion, a page of his mystic grimoire opened, allowing him to study it in more depth.

||||
Sufficient Health Potion
Restores 50 HP
Uses: 1
||||

It was a step up in healing, certainly. He just hoped the flavor concentration wouldn’t be doubled as well.

“We’re ready to head below,” he told Zyra, storing the potion in his Inventory.

The Elite Reaver’s hood dipped, then rose as she inspected his newly evolved height from head to toe.

"It'll do, I suppose," she said. "Just remember: Show no weakness. Grozka can't stand weakness."

Roark nodded, then turned on his heel and headed for the door from the antechamber. Griff caught up to Roark before he slipped deeper into the dungeon and pulled him aside.

"A moment, Griefer," he said. "There's a lass I know, a young widow on the down side of her luck. She can cook a meal like glory be, but what's more, she can train others to do it almost as well. If you have a mind to treat her as well as you've treated me, she could use the extra coin."

"Of course." Roark nodded, thinking of Kaz's would-be kitchen assistants. Without a trainer, the best the Trolls who wanted to help in the kitchen had been able to do so far was run errands for Kaz. "She'll have the same guarantees as you. No involvement in our fight, protection from the heroes and other Infernal chimeras of the citadel, and a share in the profits. If she's willing to move in, she can start today."

"I'll just slope off for a bit, then, and see if I can't find her," Griff said, jerking his thumb at the crumbling staircase.

As the grizzled old weapons trainer headed up, the first-floor Overseer and his honor guard headed down.

Wurgfozz's throne room was a mess of blood and gore, though the activity had died down somewhat as three of the four heroes had gone quiet. The Mustard Knight was the only one still screaming, and so Wurgfozz's honor guard was concentrating their efforts on him.

"Think of the XP, think of the XP, think of the XP," the hero mumbled between bloodcurdling screams, his face ashy and body drenched in sweat.

Roark's stomach turned as they passed. What had Griff been about to say before Kaz and Zyra interrupted? *I think you're*—what? A tyrant in the making? Out of the humanity pool for good? A lost cause? Not a lost cause? Salvageable? The only one who can make these sorts of terrible but necessary decisions?

No answers came to him as they descended the steps to the third floor, and from the bottleneck on, there was no time for idle thought.

As far as Roark was concerned, they were in enemy territory. The three of them maintained a watchful silence, weapons out and ready for attack as they traveled the winding stone corridors. Most of the torches in the halls had burnt out, seeding the damp, dank, crumbling corridors with a multitude of shadows perfect for lurking assassins. Zyra scouted ahead as Roark and Kaz followed a few paces behind. They saw plenty of eyes tracking them, but none made to attack.

A good sign. It showed that the third level was at least open to the idea of parlay—assuming Roark could properly impress the floor Overseer.

Finally, they came out in the throne room, a cathedralic nave, lit by the weak combination of a single glowing Infernal stained-glass oculus high on the rear wall and a dozen or so pale blue witch lights wandering between the rotting and burnt wooden pews. A double colonnade of pillars arched up into the chipped and peeling painted ceilings.

Here, the silence was heavy enough to suffocate. The soft scuff of their boots on the stone, the creaking of Roark's and Zyra's leathers, and especially the *tock* and *clack* of Kaz's wooden armor seemed to offend the quiet. But rather than cringe away from the noise, Roark straightened his back and let his footsteps ring out with confidence. As if he owned this floor and everyone in it.

A trio of Dread Reavers and a hulking Thusr Behemoth skulked in the shadows as he approached the head of the nave.

Roark came to a stop at the foot of the chancel, where a heavily armored Thusr Knight sat on a scorched-wood throne. She cut an impressive figure, that was for sure. The wide rack of stag horns on the Knight's helm tilted back slightly as she looked down her crooked nose at Roark. Her nameplate, thin white letters surrounded by a bloody aura, read:

[Grozka the Zealot]

Before Roark could open his mouth to address the muscle-bound Knight, she raised a spiked scepter of charred black metal with one substantial hand and forestalled him.

“No need to spew your pretty words at me, Roark the Griefer,” she said, her voice every bit as deep and gravelly as Wurgfozz’s was high-pitched and smooth. Spoken from the chancel, her words echoed off the acoustic tiles and resonated through the nave like a sermon. “I know why you’re here. You want us to turn against the Dungeon Lord and help you take the citadel.”

“I do,” Roark agreed, infusing his words with the strength of his absolute conviction. “We’ve reached an alliance with the second floor already. If you agree to join our side, we’ll be even stronger, a three-braid rope Azibek won’t stand a chance of breaking. Together —”

“If you want talk, go to Wurgfozz,” Grozka snapped. “Where two words will do the job, he thinks a hundred will do it better. But if you want us, then yakking is pointless. We follow Azibek the Cruel because he’s strong. Are you strong, Griefer?”

“Yes,” Roark said without hesitation. “And getting stronger every minute.”

“Easy enough to say.” Grozka waved a gauntleted hand dismissively. “But talk is a cheap thing made of dust and promises. Down here, we believe in action. You want our respect and our allegiance, then show us you deserve it. Show us the strength of your fist.”

“How do you propose I do that?” Roark asked.

Grozka’s black-onyx eyes glittered with a sudden fervent fire, and Roark suspected he knew how she’d gotten saddled with the nickname Zealot. He forced himself to hold her unwavering manic gaze, not betraying the tingle of unease he felt. He’d faced down predators before, and showing fear before them was the surest way to incur their malice and wrath.

“By beating me one-on-one in a barehanded brawl,” she said finally, rising to her feet amidst the clanking of heavy armor. She was much taller than he’d originally thought—at least ten and a half feet to his eight, and nearly twice as broad in the shoulder despite being

a female. Her armor was heavy black plate mail, studded with spikes and bits of yellowed bone. Pale white runes stood out in stark contrast against the metal. More than a few he now recognized from his enchanting work. *Rorne* and *Sikea*, offering a bonus to movement rate and attack speed. *Grist*, which increased Constitution, and *Onn*, which granted elemental resistances.

Below these were a handful of other runes he couldn't make out.

A pale witch light wandered closer to her, and in the gaps between her plates of armor, he could see thick cords of muscle flexing. "None of this namby-pamby magick or suckling at the healing potion teat," she barked. "Just you and me and the sweet music of knuckles pounding skulls."



Might Makes Right

Grozka the Zealot has challenged you to a bareknuckle fistfight to prove your strength.

Objective: Beat Grozka the Zealot senseless with your bare fists.

Reward: Win Grozka's Respect, 1,000 Experience, and forge an alliance with the Trolls of the Third Floor.

Failure: Get beaten senseless by Grozka the Zealot.

Penalty: Lose Grozka's Respect; alliance with Trolls of the Third Floor permanently locked

Restrictions: No assistance; no gauntlets, magick, or Health Vials may be used.

Accept quest? Yes/No



The weight of the penalty for losing settled heavily on Roark's shoulders: no chance of forging an alliance with the third floor if he failed. *Permanently locked*. And if he rejected the quest now, what were the chances that Grozka would offer him another opportunity? Likely zero. Odds were if he simply walked away from the quest, she would turn on him like the wolf she was, murdering him and his

honor guard where they stood. This would be his only shot. There was no other way to gain the support of the third floor.

At the same time, however, Roark was surprised to find himself strangely relieved. After the moral dilemma and frustratingly murky areas of the last alliance he'd made, to have such a straightforward task staring him down felt like a mercy.

Grozka was big, and she looked strong, but he was fast. Fast and clever. Roark thought he could wear the bulky Thusr Knight down, then move in for the kill ... or the *beating senseless* as the case was this time.

Some small measure of his accustomed confidence quickly returned, and Roark accepted the quest.

Like a bolt of lightning, Grozka the Zealot leapt down from the chancel and drove a meaty fist into his face before he could move.

CHAPTER 20

FISTICUFFS



Roark stumbled backward, bringing his hands up too late; Grozka didn't give him an inch or a moment to recover. She pursued him, lashing out with her enormous fists at a speed that left Roark disoriented. *How the bloody hell could someone so big be so fast?* Another blow landed, his mouth throbbing as his head snapped back. Though the quest had specified that this was a brawl to unconsciousness, every blow sapped Health from his red vial. In moments, the Knight was backing him across the nave.

The back of his knees hit the edge of a pew and buckled, dropping him into the seat. Grozka's eyes blazed with excitement as she cornered him and began raining down punches. He tucked his chin and covered his head, curling in on himself so she couldn't hit the vital bits, but it was useless.

Then from nowhere, Roark heard Danella's silky steel voice.

"Dig your way back into it! This isn't tea with Mummy. Nobody's going to beg your pardon milord and ask if they can knock your bloody block off. You'll never see it coming. All you can do is be a hell of a lot harder to kill than they expected and take as many of them with you as you can."

Roark opened his eyes and found himself staring down at Grozka's feet. She rocked back and forth from foot to foot as she punched, hips pivoting, throwing her weight into every blow. But there was a split second each time when her weight was mid-transfer and her grounding was compromised. A small weakness, but a weakness all the same.

Grozka reared back, then started to throw her fist. Roark hooked his foot around her thick ankle and jerked, sliding her foot forward by several inches and pulling her off balance. The Thusr Knight's eyes went wide. Before she could recover, Roark launched himself out of the pew like a half-crazed bull, slamming his shoulder into her armored gut.

With a surprised "whoof!" Grozka stumbled backward, trying to brace herself and pummel his shoulders and back at the same time. But Roark kept pushing, driving his legs, digging in with the toes of his boots, forcing the Knight back until she slammed into one of the pillars. She grunted from the impact, and the falling hammer of her fists momentarily ceased. Roark shot his head straight up, smashing into her jaw and snapping her head back. Her skull slammed against the pillar with a vicious *crack*, which drained a handful of her red bar.

Taking advantage of the Knight's momentary daze, Roark promptly drove his bony Jotnar fists into her thick skull. Left then right. A jab to the cheek. A sharp right hook to the mouth. Another jab followed by a wicked uppercut that landed right on her chin.

Rather than go down from the thrashing, however, Grozka shouted, "Ha-ha!" as if this were the most fun she'd had in ages. She jerked her head forward as fast as a striking viper, obviously intending to headbutt Roark, just as he'd done to her, but he was ready. He slipped aside like water rolling around a smooth river rock.

The move also had the intended secondary effect, though—forcing Roark out of the way so Grozka could get off the pillar. She turned to follow him, swiping at him with a mean hook of her own. He ducked and took the blow on the top of his head, then instinctively darted inside her guard and went to work on her body, hammering at her ribs and belly. He quickly realized how futile that was when his fist bounced off an armored breastplate with a metallic *thud*.

The Thusr Knight laughed again and drove her armor-plated knee into his gut. The blow fairly lifted him off his feet and knocked the air from his lungs, his soft leather armor as effective as a thin layer of silk at dissipating the blow. Roark wheezed and sputtered, desperate for air, but his body seemed dead set against cooperating.

Before he could pull himself up straight, she grabbed him by the hair with one huge hand and under the chin with the other. With barely a grunt of effort, she threw him off his feet.

Roark crashed back-first into a pew, splintering it as he toppled over, then hit the next one and smashed right through the burnt-out seat. He rolled to a stop in the debris, stars dancing before his eyes.

Roark rolled again, this time onto his side, and shook his head, trying to clear it.

From this angle, he could see that the Dread Reavers and Behemoth Thusrss who patrolled the throne room were standing in a circle at a safe distance from the fight, cheering and stomping and swinging their fists in the air. Kaz was crouched overtop of Mac—or was he lying on top of the Elite Salamander?—trying to keep the angry beast from tearing into the fight to Roark's rescue. For a moment, Roark thought he saw Danella standing there wearing some sort of hood. Then he realized the hair was white, not golden, and that Zyra was the one hiding her face back in that strange dark cave of leather.

Grozka grabbed the unharmed pew between them and threw it aside as easily as a child hurling a cornhusk doll, then stalked through the ruins of the others toward him, a wide grin on her face. Every step thudded to the floor so hard it nearly shook the flagstones beneath Roark.

She was fast, but she wasn't light.

Roark waited until Grozka came within arm's reach, trying to look as dazed and helpless as possible. It wasn't hard, considering the state he was in. But just as she was about to set her left foot down, he grabbed her boot and pulled it out from under her. This time, the Thusr Knight's weight got the better of her, and with nothing to stop her, she toppled, crashing through the one unbroken pew to the floor in a clatter of armor and boards.

Before she could turn over, Roark scrabbled over to one of the bigger chunks of pew—a heavy piece with the end board still attached to a hunk of the seat—and threw it over Grozka's chest, a miniature wooden mountain pinning her arms to her sides. Roark threw himself overtop the mountain, adding his weight to the

equation, then reared back and threw hell for blood. One punch after another knocked the Knight's head to the left and right and left again as she struggled and kicked, trying to back him off and get free. But Roark grabbed the neck of her metal breastplate with one hand, holding on for dear life, and switched to single punches.

He drove his right fist into her teeth, her nose, her eyes, each strike more forceful than the last. More desperate than the last.

The red bar over her head was dropping quickly. Roark didn't know how far it would have to go before she was unconscious, but he kept at it. She went for a headbutt again, trying to force him back or off, but Roark tucked his chin and took it on the top of the head, then came back swinging even harder. His arm ached from the exertion and the fingers gripping her neckline were going numb, but he couldn't quit. If he stopped now, he knew he would lose. Though he was slowing down from exhaustion, so was Grozka's struggling. He realized with a surge of relief that her eyes were losing focus.

Finally, she blinked, then her head fell back, lolling on her neck.

Before he could slump to the floor, his mystic grimoire opened to the *Quests* page.

*[Congratulations! You have completed the quest *Might Makes Right!* You have won Grozka's Respect, 1,000 Experience, and forged an alliance with the Trolls of the Third Floor!*

To Maintain the Alliance: Allow Grozka the Zealot to continue ruling the third floor, and back your claims with swift, decisive action.

To Break the Alliance: Challenge Grozka the Zealot for the third-floor Overseer's position, or fail to take decisive action in the war to take over the Cruel Citadel.]

Roark closed the grimoire with a thought and was mercifully allowed to slump to the floor in a heap, using the last of his energy to roll off of the Thusr Knight's still body. The cold stone felt like heaven against his bumps and bruises.

He didn't get much of a reprieve, however.

[Congratulations! You have leveled up your Troll Leadership Skill to Level 3! Trolls who were On the Fence about your Leadership will become Receptive to your Leadership when spoken to face-to-face!]

And as soon as he'd dismissed that notice, Roark was immediately knocked flat on his back by three hundred pounds of Elite Salamander. In celebration of Roark's survival, Mac's sticky black tongue slapped against Roark's cheeks and eyes and forehead over and over.

"Bloody hells, Mac," Roark said, trying to shove the beast's head away. "Let me stand up, you little monster."

When he had finally extricated himself from the overgrown salamander and stood, Roark dug into his Inventory and produced a Sufficient Health Potion. He gulped the sticky, sweet concoction down with a grimace—it tasted like blackberry brandy mixed with sour wine. As he finished it off, a line of text appeared.

[Brought to you by NEW Monster Hyperactive! Thanks for drinking!]

Disgusting, but effective. Warmth and vitality flowed through Roark's battered and bruised face. It eased the ache deep in the muscles of his arm and erased the cramps in his fingers—both the ones that had been gripping the collar of the breastplate and the ones that had spent what felt like hours balled into a fist.

Off to his side, Roark heard the rumble of deep, gravelly laughter. He turned to find Grozka the Zealot clambering to her feet as well and offered her a hand. She clasped it, still chuckling delightedly.

"That's the best fight I've had in a Changeling's age! One damned jolly romp!" she declared, slapping Roark on the back. "In return, I'm more than happy to weed out the assassins and spies coming up from below."

"Many thanks," Roark said, making to turn toward Kaz and Zyra.

But Grozka didn't let go of Roark's hand. Instead, she pulled him in closer and lowered her voice, eyes squinted.

“I respect a Troll of action, Griefer, so I’ll give you a bit of advice about the fourth floor: Don’t even try to convert them peacefully. They’re Azibek supporters through and through. Lackeys to their very core. If the Dungeon Lord says bleed, they say how much. If you go down there without the intention to kill, you’re already dead.”

“You’re saying my only hope is to take it by force,” Roark said.

Grozka tapped her nose with a thick forefinger and nodded. “Once you’re running the show, though, the underlings’ll fall into line. It’s the fatal flaw in Azibek’s strategy. Promote staying true to Troll tradition, then lose a floor’s worth of followers to their new Overseer. Same’ll go for the citadel once it’s yours.”

Roark felt a wry smile twist his features.

“Sure, all I have to do is overthrow a level 36 Jotnar Exarch,” he said. He didn’t want to take on the fourth-floor Overseer even as a Jotnar Elite. It would be dozens of levels before he was ready to take down Azibek himself.

Grozka threw back her head and laughed as if she’d never heard anything so funny.

“Naïve child!” She doubled over, still whooping laughter. “The Dungeon Lord’s well past the final Jotnar evolutionary cap. He’ll be a level 40 if he’s a 1! Probably more.”

CHAPTER 21

UNWELCOME VISITOR



As Roark and his honor guard returned from their third-floor excursion, the problems of the lowest floors weighed heavily on his mind.

If what Grozka had said was true and he couldn't gain the support of the fourth floor by anything but open battle, then taking over the Dungeon would be that much harder. He doubted even an Elite Jotnar could do much more than mildly inconvenience the fourth floor's Overseer before being ripped apart, and Roark had no plans to die at the hands of a lackey. His plan was to return to the smithy as soon as they made it to the first floor. A few levels each in Blacksmithing, Enchanting, and Tailoring wouldn't go amiss. Plus he had a few new ideas about his cursing ability—a way to increase his griefing.

And besides, he'd never yet found a better place for thinking than sweating over an anvil while hammering away at a bar of hot metal.

But the moment Roark set foot in the first-floor throne room, he was accosted by a level 5 Changeling named Zag.

“Griff the trainer, Lord Overseer! Griff is in the kitchens with a”—Zag dropped his voice to a panicked whisper, wringing his clawed hands—“with a human!”

Roark shot a withering glare at a certain snickering hooded Reaver.

“I’m no lord,” he told the anxious Changeling. “It’s Roark. That’s all.” He slashed one hand through the air.

Zag nodded, but still shivered and shook like a scared pup. “Will the Lord Over— Will the Roark come to Griff? Griff wants to speak

with him about the ..." He glanced furtively around as if someone might be eavesdropping. "*Human*," he finished in a whisper.

For a moment Roark was too startled by the fact that, though he knew himself to be a man and thought of himself in human terms, the Changeling and even Kaz and Zyra all thought of him as a Troll. Then Roark realized the significance behind the summons. A human with Griff. The grizzled old weapons trainer must've returned with his cook.

"Yes, I'll be right there." Roark nodded at Kaz. "I'll need you to come with me. Griff was supposed to be bringing back a cook from Averi City, and you'll have to help her get acquainted with the kitchens."

Kaz's heavy brows pulled low and together over his onyx eyes, but before he could say anything, Zyra spoke up.

"Unless you need me to point out pots and pans, I'll be keeping an eye on our open door," she said, gesturing to the arched doorway leading to the staircase they'd just climbed. "Make certain nobody uninvited pops in for a visit."

"You do realize there are two more friendly floors between us and Azibek than we had earlier today," Roark said.

Zyra shrugged one bare shoulder. "I'm not prepared to trust either of them on the strength of their word alone." When he didn't look immediately convinced, she said, "You brought me on to be paranoid where you overlook the dangers. That's my job. Let me do it."

"You might find yourself out of a job if you keep spreading this Lord Overseer nonsense among the Changelings," Roark muttered.

The hooded Reaver chuckled, stepping into the shadows by the doorway and disappearing in a puff of inky smoke. But not before he caught a glint of tooth in the depths of her hood.

"Lor—Roark?" the Changeling prompted.

Roark nodded, waving the Changeling on. "Let's go then."

The lumpy little Changeling scrambled out of the throne room, Roark and Kaz not far behind. Mac's sticky footsteps kept time overhead, his huge body nothing more than a distortion passing over the beams and stonework.

They'd barely gotten out of the throne room when Kaz said, "Roark has hired a cook from Averi City?" in a slightly watery voice.

"A trainer," Roark explained, glancing over one shoulder at the Thusr. "She'll be able to help unlock your apprentices' Cooking Trade Skill. Ultimately, that will be more practical than slouching off to the marketplace every time a Troll wants a Trade Skill. And you can train with her to gain levels in Cooking the same way we did with Griff for Melee Weapons."

Several steps passed without comment, the only sound the creak of leathers and clack of wooden armor over the backdrop of Kaz's lumbering footfalls. Roark assumed the matter was taken care of; his mind had already wandered to accommodations for the chef and how long it would be before he could rearrange the Floor Design again. If they acquired many more trainers from outside the citadel, he would have to discuss barracks space with the second- and third-floor Overseers. Unless, of course, he could take the fourth floor by force—that would solve many of his problems.

"But Roark said Kaz's food was excellent!" the Elite Thusr wailed, his cries echoing down the corridor and startling the Changeling ahead of them. "He said it was better than any that Roark and Kaz had in Averi City. Is this because Kaz hasn't finished the gourmet quest yet?" He wrung his oversized hands in the air. "Because Kaz has been trying to find information on the ingredients in the library! Kaz has been reading, Roark, *reading*, but—"

"What? No!" Roark stopped and grabbed the wailing Thusr by his meaty shoulders. "This doesn't have anything to do with your performance, Kaz. You are an excellent chef, and I know you'll finish the gourmet quest, it's just—"

"Not if Kaz never has the time!" Beneath the antlered headdress, Kaz's eyes were wide, nearly hysterical, and brimming with unshed tears. "Kaz cannot find anything if he never leaves the citadel!"

"Listen to me!" Roark had to shout to be heard over his friend's cries. "We've two more floors to provide food for now, Kaz. You can't do all that yourself and expect to finish your gourmet quest *and* grief heroes. Hiring this woman on will actually afford you more time. Not only can she help prepare meals, but she can train your apprentice

chefs so that they'll be able to cook, too, instead of just fetching things while you cook. But make no mistake, you are the head chef of the Cruel Citadel."

This calmed the wailing, but Kaz remained sullen.

"She'll want to poke around Kaz's kitchen and touch everything," the Elite Thusr grumbled, crossing his massive arms. "Maybe even the salt."

"Isn't there anything Gry Feliri says about hiring experienced kitchen help?" Roark asked, desperate for any way to make this a tad more palatable for the Thusr.

Kaz scraped a huge foot at the gritty flagstones and admitted reluctantly, "He recommends an experienced sous chef for anyone cooking large quantities of food."

"Think of her as your sous chef, then," Roark said, coaxing his friend back to a walk. "It's still your kitchen, mate, she's just there to make things run more smoothly when you're out."

Though still clearly unconvinced, Kaz allowed himself to be led through the stone corridors to the kitchen.

Griff was there already, seated at the rough-hewn oak table, drinking a flagon of ale and munching on a loaf of bread. Across the room at the enormous fireplace, a particularly wide-hipped and buxom woman with blonde hair stood with her backside to the door, sprinkling something into the pot.

Kaz's mood darkened further, his face contorting into a thunderhead.

"That is a stew," he announced, stepping up behind the woman. "And it is simmering now to reduce the gravies and bring out their flavor. It does not need any more salt. Kaz put in enough."

The woman wiped her hands on an apron strung around her waist as she turned.

"Yeah, well, I just threw in a couple florets of wild—" When she caught sight of Kaz's hulking form looming over her, the woman screamed and stumbled backward, slamming into a shelf and rattling a series of dishes and pots.

In a blink, Griff was at her side, moving with a speed one wouldn't think possible in such a wiry, grizzled old body. The cook clung to the

old trainer, eyes wide with terror as she tried to shrink behind him.

“Now there, Mai, remember I was telling you how much higher level these few are because they run this floor?” Griff said in a soothing voice, patting the woman’s healthy shoulder. “There’s nothing to be afraid of from ‘em, nothing at all. That big’n is Kaz, and this lanky fella’s Roark the Griefer. He’s the one in charge down here.”

“Over the first floor, at least,” Roark said, sketching a courtly bow, but remaining far enough away that he wouldn’t tower over the frightened cook. “For now.”

Mai looked as if she couldn’t decide whether to curtsey or scream again.

Griff saved her the trouble, his one good eye swiveling up to the ceiling. “And isn’t there usually a salamander creeping along on your heels, Griefer?”

“I suspect he’s around here somewhere,” Roark said, not pointing out the telltale distortion climbing down the wall toward the warmth of the cookfire.

Her initial panic dissipated, Mai straightened up and smoothed out her skirts. She was still visibly pale and her hands were shaking like leaves, but she was recovering quickly.

“I didn’t ‘spect no one to sneak up on me’s all.” She dipped her head at Roark, then Kaz, and forced a tight-lipped, “Charmed.”

Kaz didn’t return the sentiment. “What was Mai putting into Kaz’s stew?” he grumbled, broad nostrils flaring as though he might be able to discern her trickery through scent alone.

“Wild jot leaf,” she said, adjusting the straining décolletage of the bodice reining in her ample bosom. “It complements the cliff fowl and quiets the gaminess down a bit.”

“Gry Feliri didn’t say anything about jot leaf,” Kaz replied, eyes narrowing, brow furrowed.

Mai rolled her eyes. “That blowhard don’t know half the herbs and spices in Hearthworld. If it ain’t salt, he’s never heard of it.”

Kaz’s scowl darkened.

“Salt enhances flavor in every essential way,” he growled. “It is the *ultimate* spice.”

Roark decided it was time to step in before someone got hurt.

“Mai, did Griff explain to you what we’re doing here and how you’ll be paid?” Roark offered, before things could escalate further.

“I heard plenty about the strange goings-on in the Cruel Citadel of late—and not just this one, but the Vault of the Radiant Shield as well. Seems the whole of Hearthworld’s gone mad.” The *Vault of the Radiant Shield*? Now that was something Roark would have to inquire about in greater depth. Before he could, however, she plowed right on ahead. “But Griff sorted out the rumors from the facts for me, yeah.” She crossed her thick arms beneath her breasts. “He also mentioned I’d have a place to stay down here included. Only I haven’t seen much in the way of sleeping quarters. I’m not a picky one, mind you, but if it’s just grab a bit of floor, then I can’t say as it’s much better than where I was sleeping ...”

“You’ll have your own bedchamber,” Roark promised, offering her a reassuring grin. She shied back from his smile—a subtle reminder that though he still thought of himself as human, others didn’t. Even a simple smile with his wicked serrated black teeth was probably quite intimidating. “I can’t rearrange the floor layout until tomorrow, but when I do, I’ll put a room for you off the kitchen.”

Mai’s eyes widened, and she glanced over at Kaz. Griff cleared his throat and looked at Roark meaningfully.

“I’m getting on in years, Griefer, and not as spry as I used to be,” the trainer who had, not three minutes before, leapt over the rough-hewn wooden bench and to the cook’s aid in the blink of an eye said. “Could you maybe put the young lady within shouting distance of my rooms, case I need a bit of help every now and then?”

“Of course.” Roark nodded, catching on immediately.

At this concession, Mai relaxed visibly. Griff might understand that Trolls were no more savage or wild than any other human or hero in Hearthworld, but he’d had years in the arena to get used to them and the other, more civilized, chimera. Roark suspected that, given time, Mai would come around as well.

“For now, Mai, if you’d like to put your things in Griff’s room and then get settled into the kitchen—”

“Somewhere away from the stew,” Kaz suggested rather sternly.

Mai glared at the Elite Thusr.

Roark forged ahead. "While you're doing that, Kaz will round up the Trolls who've been helping him out and send them your way. None have unlocked their Cooking Trade Skill yet."

"Well, I can help them with that." Mai looked over at Kaz haughtily. "I can also teach you a thing or two about herbs that Gry Feliri don't know. Just my own findings on some of the less common ones. Might save you a bit of trial and error if you ever come across them."

A hint of curiosity seeped into Kaz's expression, his scowl softening by a hair.

"How much is it to train with Mai?" he asked begrudgingly.

"Ten gold, and well worth it," she said.

Kaz stared her down for a moment, then went to the stewpot. He ladled up a scoop in the wooden stirring spoon, blew on it, then took a bite and chewed thoughtfully.

Slowly, the last of the anger burned away, and Kaz's face lit up.

"The jot leaf does complement the cliff fowl!"

"I did tell you," Mai said rather smugly.

"Roark should try this!" Kaz said as he refilled the ladle.

Before Roark could decline, the Elite Thusr had shoved a spoonful in his mouth.

At first, he didn't taste anything different from the usual, savory flavors of meat and vegetables. It was delicious, but no better than what Kaz had been preparing for them. Then a hint of tanginess settled in, not overpowering the gamey taste of the meat, but making it somehow more delicate.

"It's good," he agreed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Good?" Kaz shook his huge head. "No, Roark, it's genius! Mai, Kaz would like to train in spices immediately." He pulled a fistful of coins out and shoved it at her.

Mai inspected the gleam of the gold briefly, then slipped them into her cleavage, the lot disappearing into her bodice. She waved Kaz over to the stewpot.

“Come on over here and have a look at the jot leaf so you’ll know it next time you see it,” she said. “It’s not hard to gather in the wilds yourself if you know what you’re looking for.”

The pair of cooks inspected spices in the stew, lost in their own world.

“She’s just wound a bit tight, Mai is,” Griff said in a low voice to Roark. “Ain’t been more’n a year since she lost her husband to that damned olm Legion of Order. Been a rough time for her.” The weapons trainer turned his piercing blue gaze on Roark. “She’s like kin to me, Griefer. The daughter I never had.”

“She’ll be safe here,” Roark said. “We’ll give her all the same protections we promised you.”

Griff nodded, clapping him on the back. “Aye, I know you will. That’s why I brought her.”

CHAPTER 22

FORGE WORK



With Kaz busy showing Mai around the kitchen and rounding up his apprentice chefs, Roark was finally free to slip off to the smithy. Macaroni tagged along, curling up in his accustomed place against the forge while Roark stripped off his leather armor. Though the chamber stayed hotter than seven hells day and night round, the fire still needed stoking before it reached the perfect metalworking point. Roark threw himself into the familiar tasks required to prepare the smithy for a serious run of work, thankful for the mind-scouring that hard labor afforded.

Over the next hour or so, Roark forged weapons and tailored armor, improving them all with the grindstone as he went, and gaining a level in Blacksmithing and Tailoring. These came with the ability to smith Infernal weapons and armor—though he didn't yet have the required Obsidian Ingots, Infernali Shards, and Hellbender Leather—and the ability to improve armor to twice its Base Protection. He didn't come up with any brilliant plans for securing the fourth floor besides the catchall Level Enough to Challenge the Floor Boss while he worked, but the popping of the sparks inspired some new ideas for nasty curses, which might help even the playing field.

Assuming he could get them to work.

Excited to try inscribing them, he moved to the Enchanting table.

To begin with, Roark disenchanted a few of the new items that they'd taken in the most recent rounds of griefing. Any items enchanted with Divine spells, which would harm Trolls and other Infernal chimeras, Roark destroyed for their gemstones. By the time

he finished off the items, he had gathered a small pile of precious stones of various types and qualities—even one Perfect Amethyst. He'd also learned the Enchantments for Fire Damage, Frost Damage, Increased Strength, and the slightly less practical Waterlungs, which allowed one to breathe underwater. He immediately set to Enchanting the items he had just forged with these, along with the Enchantments he already knew for Movement Speed, Increased Backstab Multiplier, Magick, Intelligence, and Constitution.

He'd only made it through half his stock when a line of text appeared.

[Congratulations! You have leveled up your Enchanting to Level 5! Enchantments are 15% stronger, and you can now add two Enchantments, two Curses, or one Enchantment and one Curse to each Item!]

Very interesting. That would come in especially handy in one level when he could finally disenchant PwnrBwner_OG's rose mace and learn how to inscribe its myriad attributes. In the meantime, however, there was no reason not to try it out. Roark fished his quill and inkpot from his Inventory, placed an already enchanted Hoary Fulgorite Warhammer on the table, and pressed his palms to the blue arcane symbols shaped like a quill and a skull.

*[Would you like to Curse this item? Yes/No?
Note: For every item you inscribe with a Curse, Cursed! will extract a share of your Health equal to your Enchanting level x your character level.]*

In the beginning, the cost to Curse a given item had been minimal, but now that he was a level 12 Elite Jotnar and a level 5 Enchanter, the cost for each curse would be a hefty 60 Health points. No small thing, though his increased Health Regeneration as an Elite would help to offset the cost a bit. Roark made a mental note not to

get carried away and give himself Enchanter's Sickness this time, then selected Yes.

A piece of parchment appeared beneath a depiction of the warhammer, a sprinkling of falling snow glowing around the craggy head.

[The bearer of this Hoary Fulgurite Warhammer will explode at time of death, causing damage to anyone within a fifteen-foot radius.]

As he finished the inscription, the letters turned into a strange string of runes that flared a brilliant blue-green in the warhammer's handle, then disappeared. The cost of the Curse hit him in the gut like a physical blow, draining away nearly a fifth of his Health in one fell swoop.

Roark checked his Inventory for Modest Health Potions and came up with the larger Sufficient ones Zyra had retrieved from the marketplace. Even better. He grabbed a Double-Bladed Sickle he'd imbued with Fire Damage using the rune *lscar* and inscribed it with the Exploding Corpse Curse as well. Then he went through a series of breastplates and shields, Cursing each one—any fool unlucky enough to loot one of the items from a Troll corpse would find a Plague of Flesh-eating Beetles descending on them in force.

While bolting down a Sufficient Health Potion, Zyra's fondness for poison began to niggle at the back of Roark's mind. Could he turn that into a Curse in some fashion? He placed a set of oiled leathers already Enchanted with Movement Speed on the arcane table and pressed his palms to the depictions of the quill and skull.

[Twice per day, the wearer can trigger a toxic fog that poisons all targets within a fifteen-foot radius.]

Warning: This Curse will affect Friends and Enemies alike!]

The deep brown oiled leathers darkened until they were black, the glowing blue-green sigils worked along the seams. They flared,

then disappeared, like otherworldly embers being smothered in the night.

Encouraged by the success, Roark returned to the workbench and set to work Tailoring a handful of leather strips into Superior Hand Wrappings. After he improved them to Outstanding, he brought the wrappings to the Enchanting table and inscribed the same Toxic Miasma Curse onto them, followed by an Increased Backstab Multiplier. A little more back and forth and he'd made a set of soft leather boots imbued with another Increased Movement Speed and the Toxic Miasma.

Roark stored the set in his Inventory to give to Zyra when he next saw her, then turned to the Outstanding Dual Scythes he'd forged for Kaz. Placing one hand on the blue sigil of a curl of smoke and the other on the green eye, Roark activated the Enchanting table and set to work inlaying the Runes *Iscar* and *Algor* into each weapon with the appropriate stones. Fire and Frost. When they were finished, each one spit a combination of blazing sparks and glowing blue-white snowflakes. A deadly combination that would prove especially effective against the Trolls of the lower floors.

Roark was about to begin work on a pair of Obsidian Gauntlets when Mac bolted to his feet, snarling at the doorway to the smithy.

A moment later, Zyra stepped out of the shadows trailing inky smoke. Instead of relaxing when he saw it was a friend, Mac's bulging eyes locked on the long-limbed level 16 Dread Reaver with looping necklaces of teeth and a gnarled root staff standing by Zyra's side. A burbling growl rolled out of his throat.

"Take it easy, Macaroni, she's up from the third floor," Zyra explained. "A messenger from Grozka."

The Dread Reaver nodded, leaning on her gnarled root staff. "A wave of troops from the fourth floor have attacked our throne room, seeking to push through to the upper levels. The Zealot sends for the Griefer and his troops to assist in repelling the ascenders."

Roark set the gauntlets aside and leaned against the anvil, wiping away a sheen of perspiration from his brow as he faced the new arrivals.

“Is she certain they’re not just a group of assassins trying to slip through?” he asked, Azibek’s word-of-mouth quest flashing to the forefront of his mind.

“If they were trying to slip past, their notions of stealth are painfully misguided,” she rasped. “They demanded passage in the Dungeon Lord’s name, then attacked us outright when the Zealot refused.”

Mac stalked to Roark’s side, bumped against his leg, and placed his fat-padded body between Roark and the pair of Reavers. Roark patted the Elite Salamander’s shoulder absently, but Mac didn’t relax, just stood there possessively guarding the Griefer.

“How many attacked?” Roark asked.

“By my count, at least thirty.” The Dread Reaver’s eyes glimmered with something akin to morbid curiosity. “Will you uphold the alliance, Griefer, when it is not your own neck in immediate peril?”

“Of course,” Roark snapped. He went to the shelf and pulled on the leathers he’d stripped off earlier. “An attack on one allied floor is an attack on all. I assume you can outpace us?” The Dread Reaver nodded in reply. “Very well. Tell Grozka we’re gathering our troops and will be there soon. She needs to hold the line for only another half an hour.”

“Oh, we *will* hold,” the Dread Reaver growled. She dipped her head once more, then twirled and vanished back into the shadows by the door. Curls of dark smoke swirled and eddied in her wake.

“Cheerful sort,” Zyra remarked.

“They’re holding off an attack and asking for our help,” Roark said. “Does this change your trust in them?”

The hooded Elite Reaver shrugged. “*If* there is an attack.” She slipped an obsidian dagger from her belt and began inspecting the razor-sharp edge. “This could be a trap, you know. A way to lure you down to their floor for an ambush.”

Roark smirked. “If it is, they’ll have to get through my honor guard first.”

“Spoken like a true Jotnar,” Zyra said, the lilt in her voice betraying the hidden smile. She twirled the dagger and slammed it

home in the sheath at her belt.

After a quick survey of the smithy, Roark began gathering armloads of finished weapons and armor from the workbench.

“Are those for our troops?” Zyra asked.

“And anyone who fights alongside us,” he replied. “They’re Enchanted, so they’ll eat away at Troll Health faster. We’ve got fifty percent resistance to unenchanted weapons.”

She fingered a glowing blue scythe. “You’ve been giving this some thought.”

“You’re not the only paranoid Troll in the citadel,” he said, flashing her a grim smile. “Grab as many weapons and armor as you can carry. We’re going to need them all.”

Together, they loaded their Inventories with the enchanted items, then headed down the corridor, through the open secret passage and into the throne room. It was empty except for a pair of newly evolved Thursrs posted at the doorway to the second floor.

Roark made for the twisted obsidian throne, dropping into the seat and opening the Overseer’s Grimoire to the Troop Management page. The roster showed a full floor, none of the chimeras in respawn. With a thought, he selected the mass telepathy option below it.

“The lower floors are attacking in the name of the Dungeon Lord,” he said, magick carrying his words to all the Infernal creatures of the first floor. “Our allies on the third floor have called for our aid, and we will not fail them. This is our opportunity to show the rest of the citadel what working together can achieve. Every Troll, bat, or salamander who’s reached their first evolution, gather in the throne room immediately. We march for war.”

Roark closed the grimoire just in time to catch sight of Zyra adjusting her hand wrappings. The motion sparked memory of the Toxic Miasma Curse.

“Almost forgot.” He pulled the set of Noxious Leather Armor out and handed it to the hooded Reaver.

Zyra turned the set over in her hands, cocking her head as she inspected it.

“It’s all right, they’re not poisonous to you,” Roark said. “Just your friends and enemies.”

“What are they for?”

“Wearing.”

“I mean, why are you giving them to me?” Her hood swiveled to face him and Roark could feel suspicious eyes boring into his skull. “Are they part of the Jotnar’s Blessing? My boon as your Faithful Servant?”

Azibek had given Roark just such a gift during their first meeting —a gift Roark still had, since he was unable to get rid of the bloody thing or destroy it. The Lash of the Waning Blood Moon, meant to remind Roark of the chains tying him to the Dungeon Lord’s good favor.

“I thought they would suit you better than those scraps you’re wearing now,” Roark said, eyeing the scanty bits of armor clinging to Zyra’s lithe body. “They come without any strings—or chains—attached.”

She was silent for a long beat, almost as though she were searching for some dastardly hook hidden away in his words. Finally, she shrugged and stripped off her assassin’s leathers. The hood remained in place, though it drew the least of Roark’s attention.

“You’d be smarter to chain down your servants like the Dungeon Lord does,” she said.

Her voice startled Roark, and he realized he was staring openly at the starry-midnight expanse of the Reaver’s bare skin. He cleared his throat and busied himself removing Enchanted items from his Inventory and sorting them into one pile of weapons and another of armor.

“I’ll cut my own throat before I follow the lead of that two-bit tyrant,” he replied, fighting the urge to look at Zyra.

“Kaz would never let Roark do such a thing!”

Roark glanced up, surprised to find that the Elite Thusr’s arrival in the throne room had escaped his notice. That was the distraction power of a bit of exposed flesh. Thankfully, when Roark glanced Zyra’s way again, she was fully dressed, the Noxious Leather Armor

concealing nearly all of her starry skin behind a veil of malignant black.

“Don’t worry, mate,” Roark told Kaz. “It won’t come to that.”

The plumage on Kaz’s antlered headdress bobbed and bounced when the Elite Thusr jerked his head in a robust nod.

“I’m only pointing out that there’s a reason Azibek made it to Dungeon Lord,” Zyra said, winding her new hand wraps down one delicate wrist. “And *stayed* Dungeon Lord.”

“Point out whatever you like,” Roark said. “But I’m not in this to become Azibek; I’m in it to kill him.”

CHAPTER 23

BATTLE LINES



After outfitting the half-dozen level 4 and 5 Thusrss, trio of Reavers, and handful of Elite Reaver Bats who called the first floor home, Roark led the way down the torchlit staircase and into the torture chamber that was the second floor. Though he couldn't hear the sticky smacking of Mac's feet on the stone over the thunder of his own force's boots and armor, Roark knew the bloodthirsty beast was somewhere overhead, following along and leading a small pack of Elite Stone Salamanders like the *maka-ronin* Mac was supposed to have been named for.

As they stepped into the first major chamber filled with gruesome devices, Roark was met by several more muscular Thusrss and one skulking Reaver, all level 7 and above—all Lesser Vassals who had migrated downstairs since evolving.

“We want to stand with you, Griefer,” said a level 9 Elite Thusr named [Pivo], resting a two-handed battle-ax on his shoulder. He seemed to be the spokesperson for the group. “You may not be our Overseer anymore, but you’ll always be our Overseer, if you catch my meaning.”

Roark offered his hand. “You’ll be a welcome addition.”

Pivo gripped Roark’s hand and leaned in close. “What my meaning was is we’ll always follow you, Griefer. Because it’s like you’re still our Overseer even though we’re living on the second floor now, and Wurgfozz is our Overseer now—”

“Yes ... I understand,” Roark said, disentangling his long-fingered hand from the Thusr’s mighty paw. “And I appreciate the sentiment. Anyone who wants to fight can. It’s your decision.”

“Good, I didn’t know if you got what I was saying, seeing as the statements sound contradictory—”

“I managed to grasp it.” Roark slipped around the slow Thusr and pressed on toward Wurgfozz’s throne room.

As the second-floor Vassals fell in with the first-floor ranks, Roark heard Zyra tell Pivo in a stage whisper, “You really should call him Lord Overseer to his face. I know what he says, but he prefers the title.”

Roark scowled, his strides picking up speed. Zyra was only doing it because she knew it got under his skin. He shouldn’t let it get to him. *He* knew he wasn’t a tyrant. That was all that mattered.

Still, when he stalked into the throne room and saw Wurgfozz the Sadistic tormenting the final raving hero from the good faith showing, Roark’s mood turned tar-pit black.

Without a word, Roark crossed the room, drew his newly improved and Enchanted Outstanding Kaiken Dagger, and sank it into The_Mustard_Knight’s heart. The hero’s last bit of tortured red bar flashed a critical warning, then emptied.

“Thanks,” the Knight breathed as he died.

“What in the Infernal piss of the Dungeon Lord do you think you’re doing?” Wurgfozz spat in his grating, high-pitched voice. “I had at least an hour left in that one! He was dead set on sticking out the Death of a Thousand Torments quest to the end. You just threw that 1000 Experience into his lap!”

“The third floor is under attack,” Roark said evenly, returning his dagger to his belt. “Azibek supporters. Gather your highest-level fighters and catch up with us below in the nave.”

Without waiting for the spike-studded Overseer’s reply, Roark shouldered past him and down the winding staircase to the third floor, troops following along behind. Far ahead, he could hear the faint clash of metal on metal and the cries of the injured.

Kaz fell into step beside Roark, holding up the twin scythes Roark had enchanted for him. They glowed with subtly shifting blue and red light, illuminating the shadowy bottleneck where Roark had most recently died.

“Kaz thinks Roark did the right thing,” the Elite Thusr said. “Even if it did give the hero Experience points.”

Roark stared at Kaz for a moment, then mumbled, “Thanks, mate.” He didn’t bother reminding Kaz that his morally dubious deal was the reason the heroes had fallen into Wurgfozz’s clutches in the first place.

The ring of battle grew louder as they traversed the lava pit rooms of the third floor. Roark could hear Grozka shouting orders, though too many walls still separated them to make out the words. Roark drew his Initiate’s Spell Book. His palm tingled as the tome levitated over his open left hand. All his spell slots were available. Hastily, he jotted down a few level 1’s, two level 2’s, and a level 3. The rest he could inscribe on the fly.

Satisfied, Roark traded his spell book for his Bow of the Fleet-Fingered Hunter. Immediately, a quiver full of Steel Arrows bounced against his back. He drew one and nocked it against the bow at half-ready. Roark hadn’t had time to add an Enchantment to the bow’s 2x Drawing Speed, but the Improved Damage on the arrows he’d crafted was nothing to sneeze at. Taking their cues from Roark, the few Trolls who didn’t already have a weapon in hand drew one.

They crossed into the final winding corridor before the nave. Straight ahead, the swarm of pale blue witch lights floated peacefully in the darkness, a sharp contrast to the commotion of the battle raging just one room away.

All around Roark, Kaz and the Thusr broke into a lumbering run. Their armor clanked and rattled, disturbing the relative quiet of the hallway.

Ahead, the shadows flickered. Zyra and the Reavers slipped in and out of the gloom, disappearing and appearing closer to the throne room in puffs of black smoke, quickly outpacing their stronger but slower counterparts.

A Reaver with a glowing bone staff fired a ball of green energy at the scorched double doors at the end of the hall. They exploded inward, revealing the battlefield that had once been the nave.

Grozka’s honor guard of Dread Reavers and Thusr Behemoths clashed with an assortment of Thusr Knights and Reaver

Champions. They were fearsome looking creatures, each one different from the last. The Knights all stood head and shoulders over even the Elite Thusrss—broad in the shoulders, arms and legs built like small tree trunks. Some were fat, others lean, but all looked deadly in their spike-studded black plate armor, covered in glowing glyphs. The Reaver Champions were a lanky lot in black leathers, who likewise towered over their lesser brethren.

Thusr Elementals and Reaver Shamans stood off to the sides, hurling multicolored spells into the crowd without regard for friend or foe. The Thusr Elementals wore no obvious armor at all, but rather were clad in elemental power—a chest plate crafted of arctic white ice here, battle robes built from flickering green foxflame there. The Reaver Shamans sported swishing robes of deep purple instead of the slick black leathers of the Reaver Assassins.

Grozka's force was putting forth a valiant effort, but they were outnumbered and losing ground. There were three Azibek supporters for every one of Grozka's, and none of them was below level 21.

As soon as they passed through the doorway into the confusion of the nave, Zyra and the Reavers disappeared into the shadows. They would target the spell casters, since they were the biggest threat and the most vulnerable to a flashing blade in the back. Kaz's Thusrss slammed through next, crashing into the battle like a wave on a beach. While the heavily muscled warriors bashed and cut through the enemy with club and sword, the Reaver Bats circled overhead, swooping down at exposed backs, chipping away at red Health vials.

From what Roark could see, the highest of their opponents was a level 26 Reaver Shaman. She tossed icy white whirlwinds of death from one hand and arcs of blue chain lightning from the other. Whenever a Thusr barreled toward her, she disappeared—without the aid of shadows—and reappeared somewhere else. She was the greatest threat on the battlefield, and Roark intended to take her off it.

He stopped just inside the door and fired at the Shaman. His arrow buried itself in her shoulder, but did an insignificant amount of

damage. The Shaman spun and flung a crackling bolt of lightning his way. Roark leapt right, dodging the blast of elemental force as he fit another arrow to the string. The lightning bolt slammed into the wall behind him, chunks of rock flying, dust swirling and eddying in the air. He took a calming breath and let the arrow fly. This shaft whistled over her head, sprouting from the back of a Thusr Knight behind her.

But it had the intended effect—the Shaman hurled more lightning at Roark and came after him, her weird gait a cross between the side-scuttle of a crab and the gallop of a horse.

Roark backpedaled into the corridor, peppering her with arrows as he went. They bit at her red bar like fleas on a bear.

The Shaman scuttled into the hallway after him. With a twist of her deep blue hand, she sent a snowy white whirlwind spinning toward Roark. There wasn't enough room in the corridor to avoid the vortex. Roark threw up an Infernal shield, but the whirlwind blew through it, chilling him to the bone and sapping his purple Magick vial, draining it to zero. Hells! There would be no more Infernal spells until that vial refilled itself. But that was all right—Roark traded the bow for his Plain Maple Wand and tapped the floor—he'd come prepared for a battle of words anyway.

As the Shaman threw another lightning arc, Roark tapped himself on the chest and cast his first level 2 spell.

[45% of all damage done to target rebounds to the opponent for the next 30 seconds.]

Electricity crackled along Roark's nerve endings as the bolt hit and a small amount of red ran out of his filigreed Health vial, but the spell didn't knock him to the ground seizing and shaking as it had done to the unprotected Thusrss in the nave. Better yet, the Shaman yelped with surprise as the ricocheted damage burned away a slice of her red bar as well.

Without wasting a moment, Roark tapped the Maple Wand on the stone floor and cast a level 1 Acid Bath, leaping out of its way.

A hole opened up where he'd been standing, fifteen feet in diameter, dropping the Shaman into a hissing and bubbling pit of fluorosulfuric acid. She screamed and splashed toward the edge, trying to get out while her deep blue flesh sizzled and dripped from her bones.

As she struggled, Roark cast a level 1 Fireball. The sparking and popping flame blurred toward her, but at the last moment, the Shaman threw a hand up, stopping the spell with a shield just a shade lighter than her melting flesh. The crackling electricity disappeared from her other hand and a red glow suffused her palm.

Overhead, the Shaman's red bar refilled itself, reaching nearly full before the acid began burning away at it again. She was making no move to leave the Acid Bath now. As soon as the Health spell in her palm burnt out, she began over. She dropped the magical shield barrier and shot a shrieking beam of blue-black at Roark's center.

He threw himself into a roll, but couldn't escape the beam of darkness in the narrow confines of the hall. The beam hit him in the back. Before he could stand, his own hands were tearing at his face and neck, the hooked razor-sharp talons tearing into his flesh. Blood poured over his ghostly skin like hot water, and red drained from his Health bar. It was then that his Rebound Spell ran out, settling all the damage squarely on him. The black talons of his left hand ripped into his stomach, opening a hole so his right could yank out a fistful of entrails. Agony and disgust roared through his body in equal measure as his hands kept digging at the wound, pawing out more ropy organs.

Roark heard a hoarse voice howling, then realized dully that it was himself. He had to put a stop to this torture or risk madness.

From the corner of his eye, Roark saw the Shaman approaching —she'd climbed from the Acid Bath at last. Without thinking, he rolled onto his side and cast Infernal Torment, his only ranged Jotnar spell. Though he hadn't realized it, his Infernali Magick had regenerated around the same time his Rebound spell ran out.

A blast of purple-black energy infused with strange dark sigils roared through the corridor and slammed into the Reaver Shaman. She screeched as plum-colored flames flickered from her eyes and

mouth. Immediately, Roark's hands stopped clawing at his own body—the Shaman's spell broken when the Infernal fire shattered her concentration. She raised her palm, red light flickering between her spidery fingers, but it seemed she couldn't Heal herself without concentration. Here and there the flames burst from inside her, the deep blue surface of her skin cracking and blackening.

Remembering the wording of the Jotnar spell—that the damage continued for thirty seconds or until he lost eye contact—Roark very carefully pulled a Sufficient Health Potion from his Inventory and gulped it down. There was a moment of disturbing motion—his skin tingling like mad, his guts roiling as they slipped back into his stomach—then warmth and energy flowed through his limbs like a soothing balm.

Despite his best efforts, the disturbing healing broke his concentration, interrupting the Infernal Torment. He was lurching to his feet when he caught sight of the Reaver Shaman's hand darting toward him. Roark threw up an Infernal shield, the violet barrier glowing in the dark hallway. But it was another Magick-sapping whirlwind. The icy white tornado blew through his shield and devoured every last bit of his purple vial like a starving grass lion.

He grabbed his Maple Wand again and cast his second inscribed level 2 spell:

[Any single opponent within a ten-foot radius becomes instantly paralyzed for 30 seconds.]

A crackle of lightning shot from the Shaman's outstretched hand, then broke off short as the spell hit her. She glared with wide black eyes at Roark, a furious snarl frozen on her face.

Quickly, Roark swapped the wand for his Slender Rapier and Kaiken Dagger and set to work hacking, slicing, and hewing through her red bar before the spell wore off. As he cut and chopped, lines of text informed him that his Off-Hand Combo ability had gained a level and now earned him twice as much damage per dual slash. He was exhausted by the time her Health bar finally flashed the near-empty

warning. Too tired to end things with a flourish, Roark settled for running her through with a lightning-fast *stoccata*.

The Shaman wheezed, utter disbelief dancing across her face, then slumped in a heap on the floor, dead. Though she'd badly out-leveled him, she'd come to battle cocksure and overconfident. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting his spell-casting ability, and it had cost her five hard-earned levels. When she respawned, she would fall back to level 21. A shame for her, though it would be a hard-won lesson she likely wouldn't forget for some time. Sadly, Roark would earn nothing from the kill, since Trolls couldn't level up from killing their own—not unless there was an Overseer Quest tied to the kill, such as Azibek's word-of-mouth quest.

No longer occupied with the Shaman, the din of battle once more caught Roark's attention.

Well, as the saying went, he could rest in the cold embrace of the grave. He stowed his rapier and dagger, pulling out the spell book and quill once more, and inscribed his final two level 3 spells.

CHAPTER 24

HOLD FAST



Roark returned to the nave, fighting his way to the thickest of the combat, rapier flashing out here and there, *mandritto* and *riverso squalembrato*. Many of the Trolls he slashed were levels double his own 12. They came at him, unafraid of his blade. Seemingly invincible.

As a burly trio of Thusr Knights leapt for him, Roark cast his first level 3 spell—Minor Paralyze. Two of the three brutes were instantly paralyzed, and Roark danced out of the way of the third easily, running his rapier through the soft spot behind that unlucky Knight's chin and up into his brain. The blade came free with a wet slurping sound. The Knight shook his head dazedly and swiped a massive three-headed flail at Roark. Roark sidestepped again, feinted left, then lunged right and low, driving his blade into the creature's exposed knee. A potentially crippling blow that would likely slow his movement rate, at least for a time.

A moment later, a pack of angry Stone Salamanders led by Mac landed on the Knight from above, ripping into his coarse-furred hide. Devouring him like a school of hungry river piranhas. Meanwhile, a group of Reavers from the first floor fell upon the Knight's paralyzed companions, slicing skin and chopping through meat. His health vial flashed sickly green as a poison attack landed.

Stepping back, Roark cast his second Minor Paralyze spell. Another pair of Azibek supporters froze in place, Grozka and a friendly Dread Reaver quickly cutting them down like a haying party at harvesttime.

“Don’t suppose you have any more of those handy,” the Zealot boomed at him, a grin stretching her face as she waded back into the thick of the battle. She looked as if she were having the time of her life.

“Afraid not,” Roark said, casting a level 1 Ice Spike at the Reaver Champion facing down Kaz and a second-floor Thusr. The ice spike hit like an oversized arrow, driving into the Reaver’s chest. The Champion’s motions slowed to a crawl, allowing Kaz and the other Thusr to put it down with brutal efficiency.

Kaz glanced over his shoulder, searching for the source of the spike. He cheered when he saw Roark.

“Roark is still alive!”

“For now,” Roark agreed. “Let’s finish this, and then we’ll celebrate.”

Kaz gave him a happy nod and bounded off to assist an Elite Reaver engaged with another lower-level Shaman. The Elite Thusr hacked his way across the nave with his glowing Dual Scythes, leaping over the remains of a splintered, burnt pew to chop into the Shaman’s neck. Roark was so caught up in watching the burning and freezing effects of Kaz’s blades that he nearly had his head taken off from behind by a Reaver Champion. He darted out of the way just in time, only losing a few strands of shaggy black hair over his right ear to the Champion’s blade.

With the Plain Maple Wand, Roark cast his final level 3 spell.

[A fog of noxious gas poisons enemies within a fifteen-foot radius.]

With a hissing puff, bright yellow gas billowed up from the floor. In Roark’s spell book, the Noxious Fog was supposed to do 1 x Roark’s Intelligence damage immediately, followed by three damage per second for thirty seconds, but most of the Dungeon Lord’s force were already wounded from the battle with Roark’s supporters. As the toxic fumes filled their lungs, several clutched their throats, gagging and coughing up bloody chunks onto the scorched stone floor.

Zyra and another Elite Reaver danced through the masses, putting their Backstab Multipliers to good use, picking off several of the lowest Health bars. Roark, Kaz, and many of Grozka's Trolls followed suit.

A high-pitched battle cry echoed through the nave, then a flood of fresh Elite Thusrss and Reavers from the second floor tore through the room, Wurgfozz at their center, finishing off the remaining troops in effective but gratuitously nasty ways.

Roark slumped against the wall as the second-floor relief troops cleaned up the last of the Azibek supporters. He wasn't dangerously injured anywhere, but he was exhausted. The battle had been a near thing, and the only reason they'd won at all was their vastly superior numbers. But hells, had it been costly. He glanced around. Trolls lay dead everywhere. Mac appeared soon after, standing upside down on the wall beside Roark. The gore-splattered beast's sticky black tongue shot out and slapped Roark's hand. With a tired chuckle, Roark scratched the Elite Salamander between his shoulder blades. It was one of the few places not covered in blood.

A moment later, the still-grinning Grozka joined them.

"Well, Griefer, you proved yourself more than equal to your word," the Zealot said. She slapped him on the shoulder, knocking a sliver of red from his filigreed vial. "It was a pleasure."

Roark scowled.

"It was a waste of time." He stopped scratching Mac and straightened up—Mac chirping in protest—and strode to the nearest corpse, that of a fallen Thusr Elemental. A quick looting brought him five gold pieces and two Cracked Sapphires. He held them up for the third-floor Overseer to inspect. "This is all we have to show for beating this wave—no Experience, no levels, and Azibek knows it. In fact, that's why he did it—why he'll keep doing it."

Zyra stalked out of the shadows nearby.

Roark pointed at her. "How many Trolls from our floor are respawning now?"

"Six Thusrss and three Reavers by my count," she said. "Also, three of the Reaver Bats. I can't be certain how many of the Stone Salamanders came down, but I count four of their corpses."

“Sixteen casualties from the first floor alone.” Roark pitched the handful of gold and precious stones at the floor. They bounced off, jingling away. He returned his glare to Grozka. “Likely more on your and Wurgfozz’s floors. And now that we’re down on numbers, Azibek will attack again. He’ll keep us busy fighting down here so we can’t grief heroes up there because he knows if we can’t grief heroes, we can’t level up. If I can’t level up, I can’t challenge him without dying.”

It was dirty and underhanded, an unfair trick Roark wished he’d been in a position to pull. Unfortunately, all avenues of retribution that he could see at the moment played along with the game Azibek had set up.

“If only we could plant contact poison on his throne,” Zyra sighed, fiddling with her new leather hand wrappings. “That’s a sight I would pay good gold to watch.” Seeing Roark’s suddenly hopeful look, the hooded Elite Reaver shook her head. “Azibek never leaves his throne unless heroes make it down to the Keep. Or he’s challenged.”

“Seven hells take it,” Roark grumbled. He ran his claw-tipped fingers through his shaggy black hair, mind racing. “We’ll have to change the rotation, push a few rounds of Changelings through evolution, then set up shifts. A group down here with Grozka’s and Wurgfozz’s lot, a group upstairs griefing. And a third set training as soon as the ones who died down here respawn.”

Grozka nodded her approval. “Saved me the trouble of demanding that you keep a company down here. We love a good fight, but we’re not your slaughter fodder. I lost three of my honor guard in this skirmish, and that’s three too many. I’ll have to post replacements for the two hours they’re off respawning.”

As the final enemy died, Wurgfozz minced over to join them, opening and closing a wide, blood-covered push dagger with a pair of extra blades that extended outward like eviscerating flower petals whenever he squeezed his hand shut.

“Good fun, Griefer,” the second-floor Overseer said in his high-pitched voice. “Not terribly filling, but a nice whetting of the appetite. Have we a second course on the schedule?”

“That depends,” Roark said. “Do you have any qualms about looting your own kind?”

Wurgfozz's nose wrinkled, the spike through it moving. "It's very ... tedious. Not at all the sort of work an Overseer looks forward to."

"Then have your underlings do it," Roark snapped, stalking to the next corpse over, a gutted Reaver Champion. "But I'll be damned if this first battle yields us nothing. We'll split the spoils between our floors."

"If you insist."

Between the few remaining Infernal chimeras of the first floor, Wurgfozz's relief troops, and the portion of Grozka's honor guard still standing, they looted the twenty-three Azibek supporters who'd fallen in the nave. They came up with a hundred and eleven gold, six gemstones, a scattering of potions and ingredients, a whip-bladed Rare Urumi of the Wind, a set of Humanbone Greaves, and a pair of Bleeding Gauntlets glowing red and lined with jagged blades.

Roark inspected the Bleeding Gauntlets. A page of his mystic grimoire appeared, showing him the attributes of the Enchanted pieces of armor.



Bleeding Gauntlets

Armor Rating: 48

Durability: 46 of 60

Level Requirement: 16

Strength Requirement: 21

+10 Bleeding Damage inflicted when blocking or punching without equipped weapon

Absorbs 10% of Health Stolen from Target



Both Grozka and Wurgfozz's eyes glittered with greed when they read the gauntlets' description.

"Those look just my size," Wurgfozz purred.

Grozka snorted. "You'd only hurt yourself with a toy like that."

"I don't see how that's a deterrent."

"They're made for a Knight. Just look at the level requirement."

“They’re made for a torture chamber, and since you can’t stomach the finer arts—”

“Neither of you can have them,” Roark said, storing the gauntlets in his Inventory. When they opened their mouths to protest, he barreled on. “This Health Stealing Enchantment is too precious to waste. I’m going to disenchant them. By tomorrow I’ll have forged you both an identical pair imbued with the same Enchantments.”

Roark wasn’t actually certain he could match the Absorb 10% of Health Stolen without raising his Enchanting several levels—so far the best he’d managed was a 7.5% Enchantment, and that had been a low-level Fire Damage—but he claimed he could do it with enough confidence that Wurgfozz and Grozka accepted his order with minimal complaints.

A page of text appeared before his eyes.



A Troll of His Word

You have promised to forge (2) identical pairs of Bleeding Gauntlets for Wurgfozz the Sadistic and Grozka the Zealot by tomorrow. You must deliver on your promises to gain Troll Leadership Level 4: A Trusted Leader. Fail and you will lose a level, falling back to Level 2:

A Persuasive Speaker.

You have 23:59:58 hours remaining.



Roark dismissed the page with a thought and squeezed the bridge of his nose. This leadership role was getting damned complicated.

After dividing the loot up with the other two Overseers, Roark and his remaining handful of first-floor Trolls trekked up the stairs. Zyra and Kaz walked beside him when the corridors and rooms provided enough room to walk abreast, and Mac shadowed them from overhead, leading the remnants of his Stone Salamander pack.

“We should push you through as many evolutions as we can,” Zyra said, breaking the silence as they came out in the second

floor's main torture chamber. "Get you to Exarch so you can challenge Azibek before he manages to kill you again."

It was tempting, but Roark shook his head. "It sounds reasonable when you say it like that, but think of all the low-level Trolls who'll be dying down on the third floor while I grief all the heroes. Eventually, Azibek's army will push through, take the third floor, take the second, and be knocking at our door. Who knows if I'll even be to Soul-Cursed before they get to us? They'll wipe the first floor out, and then we'll lose whatever progress we've made. Better to level the Changelings as evenly as possible—you and Kaz, too—so we have a chance to hold the lower floors back. Azibek's going to attack us as many times as he can, as fast as he can muster the troops to wear us down."

"Roark," Kaz said hesitantly. "Kaz doesn't want to complain ... but when Kaz overheard Roark talking to the Overseers about shifts ... there didn't seem to be any time scheduled for finishing the gourmet quest?" This last bit ended on an upward lilt, turning it into a worried question.

"This isn't the time for trivial side quests," Zyra said baldly, saving Roark from having to break the news to the softhearted Elite Thusr. "Azibek's started a war, and unless we figure out a way to get ahead fast, we're going to lose everything. All it will take is one bad loss to prove we're the weaklings here and turn the citadel on us."

Kaz looked to Roark, his big onyx eyes wide and chin quivering. "But Roark, gourmet foods provide boosts to many different stats—the cookbook says so. This could be just the thing to provide Roark's Trolls with an advantage over Azibek's."

The wheels creaked to life inside his skull. There was a certain logic to it, Roark thought. An army well-fed on Strength-, Intelligence-, and Constitution-boosting foods could perhaps even be boosted enough to stand against the highest-level Trolls of the citadel. And even if such food only gave them a small edge, any edge was invaluable at this point. Still, the memory of the timer counting down on the Troll of His Word quest dragged Roark back to reality. Much as he wanted to indulge Kaz, he couldn't afford to lose

his allies, and gaining Troll Leadership Level 4 would doubtlessly be a boon as well.

“We can’t tonight, Kaz,” he finally said. “We have to divide up the Changelings, then I’ve got to get to the smithy—”

“Griefer!” The sound of running footsteps and jostling armor echoed up the stairs hard on the heels of the shout. “Griefer, come quickly!” A Thusr Behemoth rounded the corner into view, wheezing with exertion. “Azibek’s sent a second wave up from below! They’re making another push for the nave!”

CHAPTER 25

THE GEARS OF WAR



For a full day, Azibek threw wave after wave of Trolls at the third floor with barely a pause between attacks.

Roark and his guard could no more make it up the stairs than a messenger from one of the allied floors came running to demand they return and assist in fighting off the latest incursion. Grozka's good humor wore thin quickly, and Wurgfozz admitted he'd had his fill of non-torture-related violence after the third clash. By then, Roark had run out of Evolved Trolls he could bring down from the first floor to help and had to resort to bringing down Changelings, nearly all of whom were slaughtered as soon as they entered the battlefield. One held out long enough to hamstring a Thusr Knight, then was chopped in half by the Troll it had lamed.

All their hard-earned levels gone. Wasted.

It was during the interlude after that round of battle that Roark insisted he be left alone long enough to organize his Lesser Vassals upstairs into a griefing rotation optimal for expedited leveling. Grozka made a few complaining noises about holding off the Azibek loyalists with no aid but Wurgfozz's lot, so Roark left Kaz and Zyra with her as a concession. Roark found he wasn't very surprised when a few hours later, in the midst of outfitting a newly Evolved Thusr with Enchanted weapons and armor, the hooded Elite Reaver respawned wearing a dirty loincloth, a ragged corset, and a scowl.

Without saying a word, Zyra snatched the pair of Cursed Longknives out of his hand and stalked back downstairs.

As soon as the first full group of Changelings had made it to evolution, Roark led them down to the third floor and rejoined the

battle, sending Zyra up to regain the levels she'd lost with the next shift on grieving duty. Kaz wanted to stay with Roark, but Roark sent him up to train with Griff and Mai. The whirlwind of battle was so consistent and intense that first day that Roark didn't even think of the Troll of His Word quest until a scrap of paper crammed with text appeared before his eyes in the midst of an attack.

[Oh no, you have failed the Troll of His Word quest! Your twenty-four hours has run out without presenting Wurgfozz the Sadistic or Grozka the Zealot with their Bleeding Gauntlets!

Penalty: -1 Troll Leadership Level

New Troll Leadership Level: 2; Trolls who were Receptive to your Leadership will become Supportive of your Leadership when spoken to face-to-face.]

Roark dismissed the page, cursing under his breath, and threw himself into the swarm of Azibek supporters with renewed vigor.

But, as always happens with repeated tasks, no matter how violent or taxing, the cycle of war eventually fell into a routine.

Roark would take an eight-hour stretch in the nave with Mac and a small band of first-floor chimeras, fighting the Dungeon Lord's relentless assaults with Grozka and Wurgfozz's troop rotations. Eventually, he'd be relieved by either Kaz or Zyra and their respective squads when it came time for their turn below. Then eight hours of grieving heroes upstairs—frequently with second- and third-floor Trolls mixed in amongst his first-floor natives. And finally, eight hours crafting in the smithy and training with Griff before bolting some of whatever Kaz, Mai, or their kitchen apprentices had cooked up that day.

Then he was promptly back downstairs for another shift in the nave and it all started again.

Roark had never been a part of open warfare before, only guerilla-style attacks with the *T'verzet*. The constant grind was both mind-numbing and physically exhausting, and he found himself slipping into bad habits such as inscribing the same spells several

times a day simply because he was too worn out mentally to come up with new ones. And it wasn't only him. Morale was low all around. He and his honor guard kept up their rotation so that at least one familiar face was down below leading the first-floor natives at all times. The rare moments he caught with Zyra now found the hooded Elite Reaver less teasingly sarcastic and more downright scornful of everyone and everything. Even Kaz's indomitable spirits began to bow under the strain.

He needed to find a way to break the siege or at least shift the momentum in their favor. He needed to find a way to kill the fourth-floor Overseer, and the sooner the better.

But how? That, he didn't know.

The one bright lining to the cursed cloud of this civil war was that the unvarying routine of grieving, crafting, and training brought in a consistent flow of Experience points. Though the fighting in the lower floors was fruitless and frustrating, the heroes raiding the citadel now were all in the double digits for levels, and with the aid of the second- and third-floor Trolls, even the most formidable of them could be grieved. What's more, Roark's Cursed items were deadly effective, far more than he could've ever dreamed of. In no time, he ensured at least every third Troll carried a Cursed item. And when they died—which happened all too frequently for Roark's liking—the hero unlucky enough to loot the corpse would suffer mightily.

Plagues of flesh-eating locust descending in a cloud.

A rain of acid, scorching earth and melting through armor.

Bodies turned into gruesome bombs of fire, gore, and bone shrapnel.

The Cursed items also had a secondary effect that Roark hadn't known about or been prepared for: as their creator, he earned 10% of all Experience from every single victim. That—when combined with his extra 7% Experience gain from his Signet Ring of the Initiate—had him earning unprecedented levels at breakneck speed.

Within a few days, Roark managed to gain five more levels, bringing himself up to 18, and forcing yet another evolution—this time to the exalted *Soul-Cursed Jotnar*. He'd been hunched over the enchanter's table, tinkering away on a new curse when an influx of

Experience and power flowed in thanks to another one of his Cursed items claiming the life of some loot-greedy adventurer. One moment, he was carving a line of text with his awl, the next he was hanging in the air, surrounded by golden light, which was quickly swallowed by a cloud of churning purples and angry blacks.

War drums resounded throughout the forge, bold and pounding furiously.

His body changed, growing even longer, his muscles strengthening, his teeth sharpening, while pulsing, violet tattoos appeared along his skin. Twisted, swirling marks of power sprinted along his arms and legs, swooping over his shoulders and covering his chest. Chillingly cold infernal fire raced from his belly outward, zapping through his veins and nerves until it crackled in his fingertips and toes and eyes. The stubs of bone protruding from his back lengthened and folded, turning into stumpy flaps too warped to be called wings, but only just.

When the drums and purple light finally receded, and the scent of slag burned away, Roark found himself standing at nearly nine feet tall—now of a size with Kaz, though Kaz was still far broader in the shoulders and chest.

The real gains, however, were not in his appearance or sheer *mass* but rather in his stats. He'd gotten his standard allotment of points, of course, most of which he dumped into Intelligence, but it was his other stats—Health, Health Regeneration, Attack Damage, Armor Rating, and Movement Rate—which were the biggest winners.



Character Overview																																					
Name:	Roark	Level:	18																																		
Gender:	Male	Player Class:	.error () WXRLOCK																																		
Type:	Troll-Hybrid (Soul-Cursed)	Alignment:	Infernali																																		
Current Experience:	15	Next Level:	20160																																		
Health:	582	Infernali Magick:	1010																																		
H-Regen / 5 Sec:	76	Magick-Regen / 5 Sec:	47.25																																		
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All of those abilities had leaped forward with the evolution, far outpacing what he'd been able to do as an Elite.

Additionally, his chance at landing a Stunning Blow—a natural attack that would temporarily stagger an opponent—had increased from 12.5% to 15% and his movement rate had jumped to 1.25 x the speed of his opponent. During one of their training sessions, Griff had briefly explained that the majority of chimera stats existed as variables in relation to their heroic opponents. If their opponents were faster or stronger, the mobs would “scale,” likewise becoming faster and stronger at a rate specified by their current evolutionary form, ensuring all dungeons could provide some level of challenge even to more advanced heroes.

Roark was also pleased to find he'd unlocked a new Jotnar Spell called *Infernial Invigoration*, which would restore 10n (n being his character level) of Health to any Infernal-aligned creature he cast the

spell on. A tremendous boon in a battle such as this. Moreover, his World Stone Authority had leapt significantly; he now had fifty-one Lesser Vassal slots available and two Greater Vassal slots. He'd been saving his Greater Vassal slot, not wanting to squander one on an unworthy ally, but now that he had two, he needed to find someone else to add to his inner circle.

The Vassal increase also piqued his curiosity enough to inspect the World Stone Pendant he'd pilfered from Marek, which was when he discovered the final perk of his new status as a Soul-Cursed: another of the pendant's hidden properties was now visible.



World Stone Pendant

Durability: Indestructible

Level Restriction: 1

Property: Soul-Forge - Imbue the undead with life and will.

Current World Stone Authority: Greater Vassal 3/5; Lesser Vassal
49/100

Property: Glamour Cloak - Use arcane power to disguise your appearance even to the keenest of eyes.

Cast 1 per day; duration 3 hours.

Property: ???

Property: ???

Property: ???

Property: ???

The World Stone can bend, shape, and distort reality, allowing the bearer the power of Creation and Life itself ...



Glamour Cloak. Now that was a truly intriguing spell.

In his world, simple illusions and glimmerings weren't a terribly uncommon form of magick, but to cast a full-body glamour, capable of fooling even trained practitioners? That was another thing entirely. Roark couldn't help but wonder how the Tyrant King had used this trick—a dark spell that ought not to exist—against the folk of

Traisbin. Marek always had known too much. Things only those at the highest levels of the Resistance had known. What were the chances that Marek himself had infiltrated the ranks of the *T'verzet* in the guise of a stalwart follower? Concealed as one of their own by an impenetrable mask of magick? Disguised as Roark himself without the original around to reveal the impersonation?

It was a terrifying notion.

But in Roark's hands ... well, the possibilities were nearly endless. Assuming he could get back to his home world, such a spell would surely allow him to get close enough to the Tyrant King to plant a blade in his black heart. Just as he'd planned to do the night he'd found himself cast through the worlds and into this strange citadel.

How best to use it here was the real question, though.

Roark stewed on that as the next few days sped by—a barrage of pitched battles, endless grieving, and tireless effort in the heat of the forge.

In what seemed like no time, Roark earned another two levels, bringing him to a solid 20, while Kaz had crept up to level 14, halfway to his next evolution. Zyra slashed and backstabbed her way to level 15, earning her another evolution—this time to Dread Reaver. Her next transformation would happen at level 21, where she would be forced to choose her path, becoming either a Champion or a Shaman. Mac, unable to craft to add to his leveling, only managed to eke out a single level. Roark watched the bloodthirsty beast as he leveled up to 10, curious to see what evolution Mac would go through next. But other than the usual ascending chime and golden light shining from Mac's slate skin, nothing had happened.

Ten, it seemed, was not an Evolving level for salamanders.

In less than a full week, Roark had crafted enough weapons and armor of Faultless quality that all three allied floors were wielding and wearing the finest items that could be made. They were weaker than Azibek's troops, true, but at this point they were far better equipped. And the cursed items worked just as well against Azibek's loyalists as they did against the heroes, though sadly Roark earned

nothing for the kills. Nothing save for the sweet satisfaction of seeing Azibek's followers blown limb from bloody limb.

It certainly didn't level the playing field, but Roark was starting to see payoffs. Fewer respawns on their side. More kills against Azibek's troops. No new lost ground. He'd also built up *quite* the stockpile of Enchanted items, which now sat in the smithy's storage chest—every one of them worth a stack of gold. Unfortunately, he could no longer pass for human, and everyone who *could* possibly take them to the market was too busy to go ...

And then a thought occurred to him as he was hunched over the rough-hewn table in the kitchen, a spit of hearty roasted boar on a tin tray before him. What if he *could* go? Was it possible he could use the Glamour Cloak ability to assume the guise of a hero? The glamour wouldn't change his actual shape or size, of course, so he would need to be careful in crowds or when going through doors, but it seemed distinctly possible that he could venture topside again. And in the form of a hero, he might even be able to ask around for any rumor of Lowen's dungeon.

"Roark!" Kaz's hysterical shout echoed down the corridor, cutting off his thought. "Where is Roark!"

Convinced that Azibek's supporters had broken through the third and second floors and were now invading the first, Roark leapt over the bench, rapier and dagger in hand before his feet hit the flagstones.

Kaz sprinted into the kitchen and nearly collided with him.

"Roark, finally!"

"What is it?" Roark demanded. "Are we under attack?"

"No, no. Look!" Kaz shoved a crumbling board book under Roark's nose, one razor-sharp claw tapping the woodcuts. "Kaz has found the saffron crocus!"

"So, we're not under attack?" Roark's heart hammered in his chest.

Kaz cocked his massive head to the side. "What would give Roark an idea like that?" Then before Roark could mention the Brute Thusr screaming bloody murder up and down the halls, Kaz forged on, onyx eyes glittering with exhilaration. "Kaz was in the library

between griefings—Kaz knows Roark said to stay at our stations, but Kaz's quest countdown timer has less than two weeks left—and anyway, Kaz found *Unique Flowers of Hearthworld* underneath the table. Does Roark see?"

He pointed to the woodcut of a mountainside again, and this time Roark did see. According to the writing on the opposite page, the mountainside was the Hearth, the volcano the world was named after, and on its slopes was an intricately carved field of flowers.

Mai ambled over from an enormous cook pot in the corner, wiping her hands on her apron. She leaned over, eyes squinted, and read aloud, "*The saffron crocus grows only on the north slope ... Why, I didn't know you were wanting a saffron crocus, Kaz. You could've just asked.*"

Kaz's eyes doubled in size. "Mai has seen saffron crocuses?"

"I used to gather them with my mum, now didn't I?" she said smartly, drawing herself to her full height. "We ate like the gods themselves in our house, and that's the truth."

The board book clattered to the kitchen floor as Kaz fumbled out the moth-eaten quest book he'd bought at the market. His huge fingers turned the crumbling pages gently until he found what he was looking for.

"Does Mai also know where to find white truffles, buzz fish caviar, or chocolate orchid bean pods?"

"Well, I don't know about no truffles nor bean pods," she said, "but the buzz fish spawn just down the mountain from the Hearth, in the mineral springs. They like the heat, I suppose."

"Two ingredients!" Kaz threw his head back and crowed triumphantly at the ceiling. "Mai is a treasure of information!"

Mai waved him off, a faint blush creeping into her cheeks.

With a sigh, Roark slid his rapier and dagger back into their places on his belt. "Kaz, don't get excited. What Zyra said about side quests right now—"

Kaz shut the book, his manner suddenly grave. He rested a hand the size of a stewpot on Roark's shoulder.

"Kaz didn't want to bring this up," he said, "but Roark *did* promise he would help Kaz finish this quest. Besides, becoming a Gourmet is

about more than food now, wonderful though food is. When Kaz is a Gourmet, he can prepare meals that will benefit all Infernal chimeras fighting for Roark. Even Roark himself.”

Roark fell silent, stilling his gut-reaction to protest as his mind worked over Kaz’s words. He had to admit that it made sense. The food here—aside from being impossibly delicious—also seemed to have numerous side benefits. Everything from restoring Health and increasing Regen rate to slightly boosting Experience gain and combating the ill effect of some poisons. Truly, there was no downside to food that could boost the stats of anyone who ate it. And to find two ingredients in one place ... Hadn’t Kaz’s quest book said something about a unique weapon, too?

Still ...

“We’re in the middle of a war,” Roark finally said with great reluctance.

Kaz slammed his enormous fist to his chest, eyes blazing with conviction. “This is why Kaz must complete the quest. It is his duty to the citadel.”

Roark rubbed the back of his neck, trying to come up with a valid reason not to go. Except he could find none. They *did* need every advantage they could get, and he’d promised Kaz he would help. He’d already failed on the Troll of his Word quest, and didn’t want to become known as a man, or Troll, who wantonly broke oaths. Besides, if he had enough time to go gallivanting in the marketplace disguised as a hero, he certainly could afford the time to assist Kaz on his expedition. It would have to be after he and Kaz had pulled their shifts below, during Zyra’s next stretch. And Griff would have to agree to oversee the griefing for a turn ... But it was doable.

Roark looked at Kaz. “How long does it take to get to the Hearth from here?”

CHAPTER 26

SAVORY SAFFRON



Gray-white smoke billowed overhead, hiding the sun behind a thin layer of cloud, and sandy black soil shifted under Roark's boots as he and Kaz trekked up the side of the Hearth.

Suddenly, the ground began to rumble, grains of that rocky black sand skittering down the slope. Roark raised his arms overhead to protect his face, then turned toward the mouth of the volcano, counting. This was the third eruption they'd experienced so far, and always prefaced by that low thunder beneath their feet.

“And … now,” Roark said when he reached nine.

Like clockwork, a cracking like ice floes breaking up sounded down in the belly of the Hearth, marking the explosion.

He squinted up at the spray of lava as it hit the open air. So far, nothing larger than a coin had fallen, but he wasn't taking any chances. Especially when his companion on this quest was more concerned with the local flora than the hot rock spewing from the living mountain below them.

Moments later, flakes of ash and tiny bits of pumice rained down, bouncing harmlessly off the protective barrier of his arms.

“Hmm?” Kaz looked up at the sky as if confused, then turned back to the patch of yellow flowers growing from the black soil. The huge Brute Thusr leaned down and pressed his nose to the cup of one bloom like a vastly oversized minute-flit sipping nectar. “No, no, no.” He shook his head and moved on to the next delicate, identical crocus.

With the brief rain of debris over, Roark laced his hands over the back of his neck and blew a long breath up at the sky. It was all he

could do to keep from groaning with frustration. They'd been on this volcano slope for nearly two hours already. Kaz had inspected hundreds—if not thousands—of yellow flowers. He had stared, sniffed, gently prodded, even stuck out his tongue and taken the occasional exploratory lick. But each time he came to the same conclusion: coquelicot, not saffron.

Mai had warned them before they left, "You'll have to be dreadful careful. They grow together, the saffron and coquelicot crocuses, but one's a heavenly spice and the other's a devilish poison. Keep in mind: the cup of the saffron is scalloped while the coquies are just in waves, and the saffron's a creamy gold. Coquelicots are just flat yellow."

Roark had tried to listen while she listed the dozen or so other differences between the two flowers—most of which sounded like similarities to him—but Griff had interrupted, needing his old arena short sword and shield Improved before he took over Kaz's round of griefing, and then Mac frisked around wanting to play, and before Roark knew it, he and Kaz were creeping out into the graveyard that surrounded the citadel's bailey.

Near the beginning of their hike up the mountain, Roark had tried to help Kaz assess the flowers, but every time he showed one he thought was saffron to Kaz, he received a good-natured chuckle and "Oh no, Roark. That is coquelicot." After the first hour, he'd given up looking and taken up a guard position, watching for attackers and overlarge debris from the Hearth's eruptions.

By this newest patch of crocuses, Kaz shook his head and straightened up.

"None of those?" Roark asked, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

"No, no." Kaz grinned at Roark as if he were a stupid but lovable family pet. "The saffron will be scalloped, not wavy."

"Silly me," Roark muttered under his breath, glaring down at what certainly looked like a patch of scalloped crocuses to him.

Kaz didn't hear the grumbling. The Brute Thusr was already headed for the next blanket of yellow farther up the slope, in a natural bowl in the landscape. Roark sighed and followed.

While Kaz bent down in his studious pose and began to poke and prod at the next round of crocuses, Roark pulled out his Slender Rapier and Kaiken Dagger. First he went through the exercises he'd already known when he came to Hearthworld, then he practiced the new combinations Griff had shown him during their training sessions. The Off-Hand Combo. The Feint and Stab. The Dual Slash. The Throat and Kidney.

With the exertion and the heat radiating up from below, Roark was covered in a sheen of sweat by the time Kaz dismissed this bowl of flowers as the deadly coquelicot and moved on, diving into the next patch a little farther up the slope.

A stiff breeze chilled the sweat rolling down Roark's back, and he shivered. In Traisbin, a cool wind often blew in rain. He turned his face up to the sky, searching for clouds behind the smoke.

Rather than storm clouds, however, Roark caught sight of a flock of monstrous creatures like gray, winged horses swooping down toward them. He put away his rapier and dagger, trading them for the Bow of the Fleet-Fingered Hunter, to which he'd added a Flawed Jade. When he nocked an arrow and aimed it at one of the winged creatures, the dappled green stone enhanced his eyesight by four.

Up that close, he could see the flesh clinging to the horses' ribs. Their feet were small and cloven like goats' hooves, and curling beards fell from their bony chins. Their wings were made up of iridescent feathers that shifted seamlessly from ash gray to black to deep ruby, and their coats went through the same shifting of colors.

Over the long, narrow head of the creature Roark had in his enhanced sight floated spidery white letters, almost invisible against the curtain of pale smoke.

[Lava Kelpie Foal]

He tracked the Lava Kelpie Foal as it swooped down toward Kaz, ready to loose his grip on the bowstring and put his first arrow through the creature's chest. But at the last moment, the Foal banked away, gliding up the slope a dozen yards to land beside a

wide stream of red-hot lava flowing from a crack in the earth, its coat and feathers shimmering to match the black of the sand beneath it. The rest of the Foal's flock followed, dropping to the black sand by the cascade of molten rock. One by one, the weird gangling creatures stepped into lava, their bodies and wings shifting to match the red surrounding them, and swam to the middle of the stream until even their heads disappeared beneath the rippling surface.

Roark relaxed his hold on the bowstring and returned the arrow to his quiver. He turned to ask Kaz whether he'd felt the breeze on that Foal's dive, but the Brute Thusr was already moving up the slope to the next patch of crocuses, completely unaware of what had passed overhead.

A patch not ten feet from the edge of the lava stream.

Roark saw Kaz kneel and begin his inspection of the yellow cups without a glance at the flowing molten rock. Almost immediately, the top of one long, bony head rose in the swell of lava, only visible against the glowing red around it because of its motionlessness. Its orange eyes, set on each side of the skull, blinked slowly, then focused on Kaz and *narrowed*. A second head pushed up from below, then a third. Suddenly, there were six of them, and they were swimming toward the sandy black shore and the oblivious Brute Thusr absorbed in sniffing crocuses.

“Roark, look!” Kaz tore a flower from its stem and turned to show Roark, putting his back to the stream, face awash in pure delight. “It is the—”

“Behind you!” Roark pulled an arrow again and began to sprint toward Kaz, feeling as if he were running through a chest-high sucking mud pit.

The flower-smelling Brute looked over his shoulder just as the first wave of Lava Kelpie Foals galloped out of the stream. They whinnied furiously, an eerie combination of a goat's bleat and an owl's screech, as they raced for Kaz. Their cloven hooves struck sparks when they met rock, and their wings spread wide, shedding beads of cooling stone as they reared up and leapt into the air.

Kaz was pulling his wicked-looking Fulgorite Short Spears, but too slowly. The Foals swooped and circled, screeching and diving at

him, trampling him from the air.

Roark stopped, took aim with the enhanced eyesight the Flawed Jade provided, and loosed his first arrow. The bolt landed just left of center in a Foal's chest, gaining its attention—and its fury. The creature veered toward Roark. He drew again and fired, his arrow punching through a wing. A third of the Foal's Health bar disappeared. The creature foundered and veered off course, screaming as its injury dragged it back to earth. A third arrow pierced its throat and drained the last of its red Health bar. It stumbled and fell, its wings flopping brokenly as it died like a crushed bird. They were impressive creatures, but fragile.

Not wasting any time, Roark spun back to Kaz's aid. Another of the angry Foals lay dead, impaled on one of the Brute Thusr's short spears, its skeletal body half in and half out of the glowing lava stream. The rest, however, were shooting in and out of Kaz's range, distracting him from one side while another attacked him from behind.

Roark focused on the Foal diving at Kaz's back and loosed a trio of arrows in quick succession. The first tore into the creature's shoulder. The second flew wide, but the third sank into one of the Foal's fiery orange eyes. The creature tumbled from the sky, slamming into Kaz and knocking the Brute Thusr to the ground.

While Kaz struggled to disentangle himself from the creature's bony carcass, Roark loosed into the swarming Foals, scattering them. One of the three screeched, turning sharply in the air and diving toward Roark like a bird of prey. Roark fired again, but the creature banked away from the bolt. Thanking fate for the bow's drawing speed bonus, Roark nocked another arrow and let fly. But he didn't see whether this one hit the mark.

A flash of blinding pain seared the top of his head as a cloven hoof laid his scalp open. A second blow fell less than a second later on the back of his neck, sending bright white sparks dancing in his vision.

[*You have been temporarily dazed! Dexterity decreased by 50% for 8 seconds!*]

Roark stumbled, fighting to bring the bow back up and aim it with arms that felt as if they were made of stone. He fired off a wild shot at one of the Foals, but the bolt passed harmlessly overhead. He groped in his quiver for another arrow, his numb fingers fumbling over the fletches.

Too late his dazed brain remembered their attack maneuvers. He whirled around to find a flurry of hooves and wings plunging toward his face. Just before they struck, however, another Foal slammed sideways into his attacker, driving them both to the ground.

“Take that!” Kaz shouted, the blood of the creature he’d thrown dripping from his massive hands.

Finally, the countdown timer hit zero and Roark’s Dexterity went back to normal. Feeling and flexibility poured back into his limbs. At his side, Kaz pulled another short spear. Overhead, the final two Foals circled, searching for an opening to take advantage of.

“Put your back to mine,” Roark told Kaz, resting an arrow against his bowstring.

A second alter, Roark felt the hulking Thusr bump against his back and had to duck the end of a fulgurite spear as Kaz cocked it over his shoulder. He heard the flutter of wings as both Foals dove simultaneously.

With a grunt, Kaz hurled his spear. A Foal screeched.

At the same moment, Roark raised his bow, aiming at the Foal diving for his face, and let fly in one smooth motion. The bolt buried itself in the creature’s right wing. It wheeled, flapping the injured appendage frantically. Before it could recover enough to land, Roark fired again, then a third time. His arrows thudded first into the breastbone, then into the Foal’s long face, eating up its meager Health bar. The Foal slammed to the ground, delicate bones snapping, and skidded several feet before coming to rest at Roark’s boots, dead.

Roark let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding and let his bow drop to his side.

"Bloody hells," he whispered. No Experience points because, like the Trolls in the citadel, these creatures weren't heroes. What was the word Mai had used? Mobs?

Shaking his head, he turned to the closest Foal and bent to search its Inventory.

Empty. The next one came up the same. He went through all six, finding only a single Obsidian Ingot. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. Killing these creatures had been even less profitable than killing Azibek's supporters.

"Roark." A huge finger tapped his shoulder and a yellow flower appeared an inch from his face. "Roark, look. It is a saffron crocus! This entire patch are saffron."

Roark straightened up and looked from Kaz's jubilant expression to the yellow flower. It looked exactly like the thousands of other yellow flowers they'd already passed over.

"You're certain?" he asked the Thusr.

Kaz nodded, grinning. "Smell it! The aroma is savory, with a hint of warmth, just as Mai said it would be."

"I'll take your word for it," Roark said, pushing the flower away. "Did she warn you about the Lava Kelpies?"

"Oh no," Kaz said. "But Lava Kelpies only attack males. Mai probably didn't even know they were dangerous since she gathered saffron here with her mother."

Roark scowled. "Next time maybe we should send her."

"Perhaps next time, Kaz will bring Mai here instead of Roark," Kaz said, bending back to the patch of saffron crocuses and gently plucking more of the blooms. Suddenly, he stopped and looked up at Roark, horror etched in his face. "Not because Roark was not good company! Mai ... Kaz thinks she ... she would like to, um, talk about spices and, eh ..."

With a chuckle, Roark returned his bow to his Inventory.

"It's all right, mate, I understand." He wasn't entirely sure Mai would, given her initial reaction to the Brute Thusr's imposing size, but he found himself hoping the young widow would eventually come

around. A gentle soul like Kaz deserved to find some happiness. "Shall we circle round, then trek down to the hot springs and find your buzz fish caviar?"

Kaz nodded, his arms filled with saffron crocuses.

The ground rumbled beneath their feet, that low rolling grumble like distant thunder. Roark kept one eye on the mouth of the volcano as they started walking, counting down to the eruption in his head. With a thundercrack, hot ash and a spray of lava exploded into the air. The rain of ash and pumice sprinkled down on their heads, harmless except for a few sharp bits, and rustled a patch of yellow flowers just ahead.

Heavenly spice or devilish poison, and they all looked exactly alike to Roark.

The thought of the deadly consequences of choosing the wrong flower touched off a spark of inspiration that lit his brain up like a fire.

"Kaz, are those—"

"Coquelicot," the Brute Thusr said, nodding sagely. "Kaz can see the difference a mile away now that he has found the saffron. But Roark can smell them if he doesn't believe Kaz. They are earthier than the saffron, and they leave an aftersmell of sweetness in the nostrils." He held out one of the saffron cups. "Try it. Smell the difference."

Roark took a quick sniff, then leaned down and tested the coquelicot's scent. He thought he smelled a difference. Probably. Maybe. Or maybe he just wanted to smell the difference.

He pulled up a handful of the poisonous yellow flowers and stored them in his Inventory.

"Just don't tell Zyra we almost died smelling flowers," he told Kaz. "She'd never let us live that down."

CHAPTER 27

FRIENDS AND TRAITORS



When they returned to the citadel—with both saffron and buzz fish caviar in hand—Zyra was just coming up from her shift below. Roark pulled the bundle of coquelicot from his Inventory and tossed it to her.

She caught the flowers and held them at arm's length, as if afraid the yellow blooms might bite.

"What are these?" she asked, voice oozing suspicion.

"Poisonous," Roark said cheerfully. "Soon as I can, I'm going to find you an Alchemy Trade Skill tome. Then you can brew your own poisons. Keep all of us supplied as well as yourself. Find some more efficient ways to kill our never-ending line of enemies."

That seemed to warm her up to the unexpected gift. She tucked the bouquet away, careful not to damage the petals.

"I take it your mission was a success, then," Zyra said.

Across the room, Kaz was recounting their brush with the Lava Kelpies to a rapt Mai. The buxom young widow clapped with glee as the Brute Thusr concluded the tale by bringing out his armful of saffron.

"If it wasn't before, it is now," Roark said. The buzz fish caviar was just the icing on the pastry.

"Good. It's your shift downstairs, Kaz's turn grieving with your loyal subjects, and my lunch break." She turned on her heel and stalked off toward the kitchen. "Welcome home, Lord Overseer."

The appellation snapped Roark's attention away from her swaying hips.

“Handing you over to Wurgfozz sounds like a better idea every time you address me like that,” he called after her.

Zyra just shook her head and kept walking. “Jotnars and their promises.”

Smiling in spite of himself, Roark left in the opposite direction to find Mac and round up his group of Trolls, all ready for their next round of civil war.

From the moment they made it down to the nave on, nothing went right.

A high-level Thusr Elemental paralyzed half of Roark’s force as soon as they stepped into the battle. Roark and one of the Elite Reavers who’d come with him fired off spells and arrows between their frozen bodies, trying to hold off the Knights and Champions cutting their way through the chaos of second- and third-floor Trolls, but every shot was answered by a dozen from the archers and magick workers loyal to Azibek. Grozka lay dead in the clutter of a shattered pew, an ice javelin through her face, and Wurgfozz was nowhere to be found. Soon, Roark’s paralyzed troops fell to the slicing blades and deadly magicks, and the few second- and third-floor Trolls left alive were scrambling out of the nave, screaming, “Retreat!”

The remaining first-floor Reavers and Thusrss looked to Roark, panic in their black eyes.

“Retreat to the bottleneck at the stairs,” he ordered. “We’ll hold them there.”

Roark found an Elite Thusr carrying a tower shield—[Druz], according to her nameplate—and crouched behind her, covering his army’s retreat with a barrage of arrows and Infernal spell fire. The Azibek supporters pressed forward, hard on their heels. Roark’s shots took out a Reaver Champion and then a Thusr Knight in the winding, witch-light-lit hallways, but the deaths of their comrades didn’t even slow the loyalists down.

Finally, Druz and Roark made it to the bottleneck where he had most recently died. Unlike the stony corridors where two or even three Trolls could walk abreast depending on their size, the bottleneck wouldn’t allow more than one through at a time—and that

was if the larger Thusrss turned sideways. Roark stepped back and out of the way.

As the first of Azibek's Reaver Champions charged into the narrow space, Druz pointed her heavy club at the bottleneck, and a pair of Elite Reavers leapt out of the shadows to either side, chopping the Champion down. A Knight was right behind the Champion, but at Druz's whistle, the Elites ducked aside and a hail of short spears and arrows from the Trolls on the stairs ended it.

Roark raised an eyebrow at the Elite Thusr. "Did you plan that?"

"It works well for griefing, especially in a dead end." Druz shrugged her massive shoulders. "This seemed like a good time for it."

It had been a perfect time for that maneuver, but Roark hadn't expected a Thusr to recognize something like that, let alone put it into action with a few gestures and a whistle. She must be a natural leader for the lower-level Trolls to follow her so willingly.

A bellowing war cry interrupted Roark's musing, and a skull-bedecked Thusr Knight barreled into the bottleneck, swiping blindly with a longsword from behind a massive kite shield studded with sharpened bone spikes. Just like before, the Elite Reavers popped in behind the Knight, trailing inky black smoke, and slashed away at his red Health bar in perfect coordination.

A blast of purple light hit one of the Elites. She screamed as purple-black flames licked through her skin, stealing away her life. Roark aimed a counterspell down the hallway to break the concentration of whichever Troll was casting Infernal Torment, but the Elite was dead before Roark felt his spell hit anything.

The Elite hit the floor and exploded in a shower of putrid acid. The remaining Elite Reaver dove behind the Knight, letting the enemy Troll take the sizzling spray full in the face, the Knight's Health bar dipping significantly. Before the enormous Knight could recover from the Curse, Roark cast his own Infernal Torment, burning away the rest of the Troll's life. The Knight dropped onto the pile of corpses clogging the hallway.

A scuffle broke out in puffs of smoke, the single remaining Elite Reaver and an enemy Shaman suddenly tangling in the shadowy

corner of the bottleneck. A shimmer of light distorted the air over their heads, then Mac slammed on top of them, driving both to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs and paddlelike tail. The Elite Salamander sunk his Venomous Fangs into the Shaman and chewed away at her Health, but from down the corridor came a blast of purple light. Those purple-black flames flickered through Mac's skin, but the bloodthirsty beast only dug his teeth in deeper.

Roark threw up his Infernal Shield and bolted forward, pulling free his Kaiken Dagger. He planted the blade in the Shaman's eye socket, finishing her off before she could scream—and more importantly, dragging Mac out of the Torment caster's line of sight before they could finish off the ferocious salamander.

In the wake of this last death, heartbeats passed in silence. Moments stretched into minutes, the tension in Roark's shoulders clenching tighter the longer the stillness dragged on.

No one wanted to commit suicide by running into the bottleneck from either direction.

Only another Jotnar could cast Infernal Torment.

Azibek had sent up one of the few Jotnar in the citadel—perhaps even the Jotnar Soul-Cursed from the Troll High Court. As Roark thought this, he immediately dismissed it as ridiculous. The Trolls on the High Court weren't the type to dirty their hands fighting. They were like the nobles of Traisbin who'd flipped allegiances to support Marek Konig Ustar because they thought that would protect them. The Trolls on the other side of the bottleneck—Jotnar included—had most likely been ordered to fight or die by the Dungeon Lord. Of course, the only way any of them would gain any Experience from this senseless battle was by striking the killing blow on Roark.

Roark found himself grinding his teeth at the thought, fed up with the utter uselessness of this endless war. He could be smithing something right now. He could be in the marketplace, trying out his new glamour spell while selling off the extraneous weapons and armor or searching Mogrifa & Mogrifa with Zyra for an Alchemy tome. But no, he was stuck down here killing off Azibek's hordes, sending untold levels back to the great unknown, conveying wave after wave of his own Lesser Vassals to their deaths.

“Enough!” His bark boomed down the corridor, shattering the silence and causing several of the Trolls at his sides to flinch. “Do any of you lower-floor Trolls even want to be here or is Azibek forcing you to fight?”

There was no reply from the other side of the bottleneck. Only the subtle creak of leathers and the faint clinking of armor down the passageway hinted that Roark’s troops weren’t standing there alone.

“Can’t you see we have nothing to gain from killing one another?” he yelled. “We could be working together right now, attaining higher levels while repelling the heroes who plague our citadel rather than hamstringing one another.”

Another space of silence.

Roark had started to think he would go unanswered again when a craggy voice shouted back, “That’s rich coming from the hero-lover! Azibek said you cut off all the hero killing because you’re bosom friends with the outsiders! If bringing in non-mobs like strays is what we’re in for when you take over, I’ll pass.”

“Hero-lover?” The accusation was so ridiculous that, at first, Roark almost couldn’t comprehend it. When it finally hit, he threw back his head and laughed. “Do you even know what they call me, mate? The Griefer. I didn’t earn that name by coddling heroes. There hasn’t been any traffic to the lower levels since I took over the first floor because my floor has become too efficient at killing them.”

A bark of laughter echoed down the corridor. “Typical honeyed lies from a Jotnar!”

“Then what does that make Azibek’s claims?” Roark called back. “On my floor—and not only my floor, but the two others allied with me—we’ve worked out a griefing rotation to obtain the most levels in the shortest amount of time. How many times were you killed by a fellow Troll just short of evolution? How long did it take you to scratch your way up to where you are now?” Roark waited a moment, allowing the skeptic to think back on all the bitter losses and frustrations suffered.

When he deemed that enough time had passed, he opened his mouth to explain that they were stronger together than alone. Instead, Druz—the Elite Thusr—the Elite Thusr wielding the tower shield and club—

pushed forward into the bottleneck. Miraculously, no spells or spears slammed into her.

“I was a level 3 Changeling on the first day of this civil war,” Druz yelled, her voice like the roar of a lion in the small space. “I followed Roark the Griefer into battle willingly and died at one of your hands. I respawned at level 1 in my first-floor home and was immediately put back in the griefing rotation. Eight hours later, I was a Thusr! Did Azibek ever do that for any of you?”

A wave of murmuring filtered down the corridor.

“You’re not going to listen to that bootlicker, are you?” the skeptic whined. “The Griefer told her to say that!”

“Nobody tells me what to do!” Druz boomed, slamming her club against her shield. “I am my own Troll, not some Dungeon Lord’s slave!”

As several of the Trolls behind Roark added their shouts of affirmation to support the outspoken Elite Thusr, it occurred to him that, in spite of her relative newness, Druz was one warrior he was very glad to have on his side.

At the opposite end of the bottleneck, among Azibek’s supporters, the conversation was shifting from hushed murmuring to angry growling. Dissention was growing in their ranks.

Roark seized the opportunity.

“Anyone who wishes to join me can come forward now,” he shouted down the corridor. “You’ll be given the exact same treatment as the first-floor natives. I’ll put you into the griefing rotation so you can start killing heroes and earning levels. You’ll have a share in anything looted from the bodies and access to the finest weapons and armor. We also have trainers. You can buy levels in your melee skills or learn a Trade Skill, if you’ve got the gold, all working toward raising your level.”

“And there’s food,” yelled one of the Reavers behind Roark. “It’s delicious the way it tastes in your mouth ... And it goes great with ale!”

“How do we know you won’t kill us as soon as we step into the open?” a shrill voice shouted down the hall.

"I'll kill you myself if you take one damned step!" the skeptical loyalist threatened.

Roark ignored the skeptic's threat and spoke instead to the shrill voice. "How do I know I can trust any of you? Most of you have probably accepted Azibek's quest to kill me."

The sound of a quick, fervent discussion drifted down the hall.

Steel rang as a sword was drawn from its scabbard, and the skeptic's voice swore, "I'm warning you ..."

Then the crash and clang of a fight. Angry shouting. Chaos and flashes of spell light. Someone screamed, then gurgled into silence.

Roark tipped his ear that direction, straining to hear any hint of what had happened.

Something bounced down the corridor and rolled to a stop—several things of various size and texture. Roark counted five in all before he realized the stringy material hanging off one was hair. Then he saw the eyes, noses, mouths, and ragged, bleeding stumps where the neck had been severed.

"These were the Trolls on our side loyal to Azibek," the shrill voice shouted. "Is that proof enough that we wish to join you?"

Roark faltered for a moment, staring at the heads. That was certainly a *forceful* show of good faith. "All right, I'm convinced," he said, sidestepping a rivulet of blood trickling toward his boots. "If you don't try to kill us, we won't kill you."

Slowly, cautiously, a cagey band of Trolls crept down the corridor. They couldn't all fit through the bottleneck at once, but leading their approach was a rangy level 24 Reaver Shaman.

Roark stepped forward, palms raised to show he wasn't a threat, then extended his ghostly pale hand to her. She checked it for wands, wrists, and poisoned needles, then grasped it.

[Congratulations! You have forged an alliance with the Mugwump Trolls of the Lower Floors.

To Maintain the Alliance: Allow Mugwump Trolls access to first-floor kitchens, trainers, and griefing strategies.

[To Break the Alliance: Do not allow Mugwump Trolls access to first-floor kitchens, trainers, and griefing strategies.]

As soon as Roark dismissed this, a second line of text appeared.

[Congratulations! You have leveled up your Troll Leadership Skill to Level 3! Trolls who were On the Fence about your Leadership will become Receptive to your Leadership when spoken to face-to-face!]

“Are there any lower-floor Trolls holding out back there?” Roark asked the Shaman.

She shook her head, the bones beads in her white hair clicking against each other. “We killed all who would oppose our decision before they could kill us.”

Roark nodded. “In that case, brothers and sisters, welcome to the uprising.”

CHAPTER 28

GLORIOUS INSIGHT



After Roark returned to the first floor and assigned Druz to show their new allies around and organize them into the griefing, training, and fighting rotation, he slipped off to the throne room with Mac.

Not an altogether pleasant experience, as the Mugwump Trolls from the battle had each brought up the head of the loyalist they'd slain and left it beside the twisted obsidian throne as some sort of tangible tribute to prove that they had earned their place on the first floor. Unfortunately, these heads—like the ones Ugoraz the Vile had piked around as decoration when the throne room belonged to him—didn't disappear. They just sat there, rotting.

But the success of that shift mid-battle had gotten the cogs in Roark's mind turning furiously. Gaining the allegiance of Trolls who were tired of Azibek's oppression and getting them to take out loyalists for them was unquestionably efficient. Divide and conquer, right within the Dungeon Lord's forces.

He opened his mystic grimoire and scanned the ribbons running along the top of the tome, each one labeled in elegantly flowing script: *Inventory*, *Maps*, *Quests*, *Skills*, *Spells*, *Character*, *Party*, *Followers*, *WikiLore*, *Chat*. He tried the *Quests* page first.

|||||
Active Quests:
Memento Mori
Completed:

*Getting a Head in Life
Might Makes Right
~~A Troll of His Word (Failed!)~~*



There was nothing detailing how to create a quest, and focusing on each existing quest only brought up the details of his success or failure.

Not deterred, Roark turned to the *Skills* page.

Roark focused on the Troll Leadership Skill and a second page opened.



As a Jotnar and the leader of an uprising, you have unlocked the Troll Leadership Skill. Gain Abilities and Experience in Leadership through character-to-character or alliance-to-alliance interaction.

Leaders Level Three and above can create open quests.

Leaders Level Six and above can create individual quests.

Leaders Level Nine and above can create life-or-death quests.

See Blank Quest Form for sample quest.



With a thought, Roark brought up a *Blank Quest Form*.



Summary of quest goes here.

Objective: Detail what is required to complete the quest and obtain the reward

Reward: To be paid upon completion of quest; cannot be more than 2% of the required Experience for your last character level, an equal amount of gold, and an optional boon that is within your power to grant

Failure: Detail circumstances required to fail the quest, lose reward, and obtain penalty

Penalty: Losses upon failure, including any permanently locked skills, items, or abilities

Restrictions: Up to three allowed

Note: Any additional information or extenuating circumstances not provided for on the lines above

Flavor text: A quote or idea that captures the spirit of your quest.

Any item not filled out by you will be randomly generated by Hearthworld's patented Synergengine.

Create quest? Yes/No?



Roark rubbed his hands together and selected Yes. Time and the world disappeared into the background as he wrote out his quest.

When he finished thirty minutes later, Roark was grinning and on the edge of his seat—both because this was exactly what his war on Azibek had needed, and also because Mac's fat-padded body had slowly pushed him nearly out of the throne in the beast's effort to get comfortable.

Roark inspected his quest one final time.



Roark the Griefer has issued an open quest to all Infernal chimeras who are tired of living under the oppression of Dungeon Lord Azibek the Cruel.

Objective: Bring Roark the Griefer the head of a Dungeon Lord loyalist.

Reward: 200 Experience, 200 gold, and the freedom to choose a place with Roark the Griefer's forces with access to first-floor training, kitchens, and expedited leveling strategies OR live in peace on an allied floor away from the fighting.

Note: Place in Roark the Griefer's forces and all boons—including promise of safety—will be immediately revoked upon killing another allied Infernal chimera or skill trainer.

“Trolls with clay feet shouldn’t run races.”



Roark had tried to add a Blessing, as Azibek had with his Memento Mori quest, but had promptly received a notice that only Dungeon Lords could bestow blessings. Unfortunate. Hopefully the promise of faster leveling would make up for that. It was the best he could do for the time being.

He selected the option to send the quest out, then stood and stretched sore muscles, stiff from sitting for so long. On the throne's wide seat, Mac rolled over onto his side, extended his fat legs out straight, and arched his back, letting out a chirping yawn.

“Now, time to try out something new,” Roark said. He opened his character page, staring for a moment at the slowly rotating Soul-Cursed Jotnar simulacrum that was supposed to represent him.

With a moment's concentration, he triggered his newest World Stone ability, Glamour Cloak, focusing intently on himself as he'd once been. The nine-foot-tall ghostly pale, purple-tattooed Troll shimmered and faded, replaced by the olive-skinned, leanly muscled man Roark had seen in looking glasses for most of his adult life. The Enchanted leathers were the same, and his rapier still hung at his hip, but those only served to advance the illusion of being a hero.

In the corner of his vision, a countdown began.

2:59:59

Roark shut the grimoire and raised his arms to Mac. “What do you think?”

The Elite Salamander rolled back onto his belly and cocked his head at this strange new creature. A sticky black tongue shot out and slammed into Roark's chest, right through the glamour's face, which Roark could see as sort of a faint glow. Apparently, this illusion didn't alter his size, just his outward appearance.

Mac chirped out a questioning sound, then shifted to darker and darker gray, until he disappeared against the twisted obsidian throne.

“I’ll take that as a sign that it’s convincing,” Roark said, digging out a Book of Town Portals with six uses left. “Be right back, mate. Hold down the citadel for me.”

Mac didn’t give away his position by answering.

With a shrug, Roark cast the portal, watching as the glamour performed everything his real hands were doing, but on a smaller scale. If he watched it too closely, the effect was dizzying. He blinked away the dual images, braced himself, and stepped into the portal.

As before, goosebumps prickled across Roark’s skin and an icy breeze fluttered through his shaggy hair, and then he was walking out into the Averi fountain court, lit for the night by enormous flickering braziers.

Bloody hells, the portals in Hearthworld were so consistent that it was unsettling.

Red-orange firelight danced and glinted off the splashing water, mingling with the shimmering blue-violet of the portals scattered around the cobblestone plaza. It was a breathtaking sight, but Roark didn’t stop to admire it. The clock was running down, after all. He had less than three hours before the glamour wore off and a long list of things to accomplish while disguised as a hero. He turned down the street that led to the bazaar.

In spite of the late hour, heroes of every level and class crowded the avenues as if it were still midday. Better yet, all of the businesses were open. He wouldn’t have to break into any stores to get the items he needed.

As Roark wove his way through the marketplace toward Mogrifa & Mogrifa, he heard his name.

“...the Griefer,” a female voice was saying. Roark caught sight of a pale elf in shining plate mail by a shield merchant’s stall. “I don’t know what Pwnr’s thinking, but I’m not reporting it. This is the first time I’ve played through and gone back to the Cruel Citadel after like, level three. And it was freaking fun! The citadel! Who’d have thunk it?”

“Well, I think it’s bullshit,” her companion, a purple-robed olm growled. “I’ve died there three times this week. I lost my Boots of Waterbreathing! They were the last piece I needed for the full set!”

“So come with me and we’ll get them back.”

“No, we won’t. You can’t beat him because he’s a cheater. A bona fide pumpkin-eating dickbag of a cheater.”

Roark sidled past the pale elf and olm, pretending to examine the merchant’s selection of low- to mid-level shields.

“We can beat him if we just work out the right strategy,” she said. “They’re not like crazy-OP, they just play smart. We can beat ‘em if we play smarter.” She tapped a finger on her temple.

“Do you know how many idiots like you are saying the same thing right now?” The olm threw an arm out to indicate the throng of heroes milling through the bazaar. “You’re making this dude rich out the ass with all the gold and weapons you’re giving him.”

With a clinking of ringmail, a musclebound rog joined them. “Are you guys talking about the Griefer? You know him and his buddies are in this together, right? Him and that”—the rog snapped his fingers—“what’s-his-nuts—Lowen.”

“Excuse me,” Roark said, sliding in between the elf and the rog, careful not to jostle either with his invisible shoulders. “You said this Lowen bloke is a friend of the Griefer’s?”

“Yeah, you didn’t hear about this?” The rog shook his head, tusk-rings jangling. “They’ve got an Infernal dungeon and a Divine one and they’re expanding every day so they can grief a wider area. I heard the whole sitch is out of control. These guys know how to wipe their hacker fingerprints so the devs have no way to track them down.”

“They’re just loading up on crap they can sell.” The elf shrugged. “Give them two weeks and I bet you these guys transfer their gold to some alt completely unconnected to their griefing accounts, then they’ll disappear forever.”

The olm scowled. “They’re going to break Hearthworld’s economy.”

“Don’t be stupid,” the pale elf snapped.

Ignoring all the words that didn't make sense, Roark tried to formulate the least suspicious way of drawing out information about Lowen's activities.

"Could you loot the gold from them if you were to kill one?" he asked. "Before they transferred it?"

"I know what you're thinking, and I wouldn't try it." The olm looked Roark's glamour up and down. "You're, what, a level 15 or something?" Interesting. It seemed the Glamour Cloak also obscured his level, since he was actually 24 thanks to his copious griefing and the constant influx of Experience from his cursed items. "The Vault of the Radiant Shield is just south of the Firewren Fortress, super high-level zone," the olm continued. "You can't even get a quest there until you're over 36."

"Yeah, for once in his life, Clayton's talking sense," the elf said, nodding vigorously. "If you thought the Cruel Citadel was hard since the Griefer moved in, you won't stand a chance against the Vault. Heralds are like Trolls on speed and steroids—and they can fly and they've got all kinds of Divine creatures that can fly."

"And that was before this Lowen modder even showed up," the olm said.

Roark ignored the olm. "What sorts of creatures?"

"Manticores, wyverns, wyrms, phoenixes ..." The elf ticked them off her fingers as she named them. "All that fire and light stuff."

"My bro was in there right after Lowen showed up," the rog said, shifting from foot to foot in his excitement. "And he told me this guy maxed himself out at Malaika Herald, like, first thing. That's the highest Heralds can evolve to. That's how they knew he was a modder right off the bat."

"Sounds like a real tosser," Roark said.

"Word," the rog said in a tone Roark took as agreement.

"Thanks for the enlightenment," Roark said, clapping the rog on the shoulder and nodding to the elf and olm. "I'll be sure to steer clear of the Vault of the Radiant Shield."

Carefully, Roark excused himself from the little circle and slipped through the crowd toward the wooden sign reading *Mogrifa & Mogrifa Booksellers*. This was certainly unwelcome news. Roark had

hoped that Lowen was struggling through the levels like he was, but it seemed that the horse's ass had found a way to start out at the top tier of evolution. Was it a spell or just a trick of the unreliable portal Lowen had come through? As Roark stepped through the bookshop's door, he cursed again that the portal hadn't simply crushed the bastard under billions of tons of water. That would've been so much more convenient.

The first time Roark and Kaz had visited the bookseller, Kaz had been in disguise and Roark posed as a mindless familiar. Now, however, with the glamour making him indistinguishable from a hero, Roark went directly to the shopkeep, a battle-scarred old woman with a length of grubby cloth wrapped around her head, covering her eyes.

He studied the blind old woman for a moment skeptically.

"Well?" she asked, her voice gravelly with age. "I suppose you're in here for another batch of Trade Skill tomes?"

Roark's brow furrowed. "How—"

"I never forget a buyer, boy, never." The old woman felt around under the counter for a moment before pulling out a leather-bound ledger. She opened it to a page near the middle, then ran her gnarled finger down the line until she came to a handwritten order. "Yes, Calligraphy, Smithing, Enchanting, Tailoring, Cartography, and Cooking. Tall order." Her head snapped up as though she were scrutinizing his face. His Jotnar face, not his illusory human face. "You aren't scalping my books at hiked prices are you, hmm?"

"Of course not." Roark squirmed under her eyeless gaze. "My friend and I needed Trade Skills and this was the most efficient way to learn them."

The old woman flipped her ledger closed and leaned a bony elbow on the counter.

"And now you need more?"

"I have a lot of friends."

She frowned up at him a moment longer. Then said, "If I see one of my precious books on the player-to-player market, I'll have the Averi Guard on you, boy. We'll see how smart you are while those precious skills are rotting away in the gaol."

Roark's eyes narrowed.

"You're not a very pleasant shopkeep," he said.

"I don't have to be," she returned, lifting her wrinkled chin. "I'm a successful one."

Roark turned back toward the shelves of books, determined to find the skill tomes himself. But before he'd gone a step, a whipcrack of a shout rang out behind him.

"Mogrifa!" It was the old woman's gravelly voice. "Trade Skill books!"

"Keep your garters on, Mogrifa," came the melodic reply. A beautiful young woman with flawless skin and flowing black hair appeared from the stacks with an armload of books, navigating her way around Roark to the counter in spite of the snowy white cloth covering her eyes. "These are all we have in stock. If you don't find what you're looking for here, then it likely wasn't a very good choice to begin with."

Roark sorted through them until he found *The Well-Rounded Alchemist's Guides to Heavy Metals*.

He grinned. "I'll take them all."

On his way out of the bookshop, Roark checked the countdown in the corner of his vision.

1:46:12

Just under half his time remaining. He could wander through the marketplace once more and see what sort of information he could pick up about Lowen and this Vault of the Radiant Shield. He considered finding Variok and inviting the merchant to the Cruel Citadel personally, but he didn't want to chance giving away his disguise before it had outlived its usefulness.

As Roark made his way back through the magick- and brazier-lit stalls, the glinting of silver-set gemstones caught his eye. In a tent of lavish jade and gold fabric floored by opulent carpets stood several gaudy displays of everything from the most intricate and ornate collar to plain, unadorned rings. A jeweler hunched over a lantern-lit table, loupe in one eye, stone-setting pliers and one of a pair of earrings in his hands. The man held the earring so close to his face that from Roark's angle, it looked as if he were holding it to his nose.

The notion called up the image of Wurgfozz twisting the rusty spike in his nose. That spike was about as far from these pieces of jewelry as their maker was from the rotting heads piled up next to Roark's throne.

Roark faltered, mid-step. Inspiration. Sheer, genius, brilliant inspiration.

Forcing himself not to run, Roark crossed to the jeweler's tent and ducked inside. Minutes later, he left with his hands full of glittering metal—earrings and nose rings of various sizes and quality. None of them magick. Still, he couldn't keep the smile off his face. Those little beauties were going to help him defeat the fourth-floor Overseer and change the tide of the war.

CHAPTER 29

THE RESISTANCE



When Roark returned to the citadel, Zyra was below on her shift in the trenches, so he dispelled the Glamour Cloak and passed out the non-Alchemy tomes to the Trolls who'd expressed an interest in learning a Trade Skill. With that done, he hurried off to the smithy, eager to put his new plan into action.

Not surprisingly, he found Mac already curled up belly to belly with the forge. As always, the chamber was glowing orange-red and hotter than seven hells. Sweat popped out on Roark's skin immediately. Stripping off the upper half of his leather armor didn't even begin to alleviate the sweltering heat, but soon he was too engrossed in his work to notice it.

Roark spread the pieces he'd bought from the jeweler across the workbench. Six pieces in all. With their lack of Enchantments, the ear and nose rings had hardly cost their weight in gold. A steal.

He selected the simplest of the lot, a plain gold eardrop, and took it to the Enchanting table. With practiced motions, he inscribed a Curse similar to the Exploding Corpse ... with one minor modification for size.

[Would you like to Curse this item? Yes/No?]

Note: For every Curse you inscribe, Cursed! will extract a share of your Health equal to your Enchanting level x your character level.]

Steeper than the jeweler's price to be sure, but still well worth the expense. Roark selected Yes. Along the curve of the eardrop, the ink

blurred and twisted into the familiar blue-green runes of a Curse, glowing brilliantly for a moment before fading to invisibility.

Nausea roiled in his stomach as the Curse extracted its price from his Health vial—120 points—and he shivered violently as cold spring water ran through his veins, but soon his hefty Health-Regen had gone to work replacing what he'd expended. Within seven seconds, his filigreed vial was full of red liquid once more.

Roark turned the eardrop over in his hand, examining it. The metal was icy to the touch, a seeming impossibility in this fiery hell of a smithy, and a thin rime of pale frost coated its surface. Satisfied, he returned the newly cursed eardrop to the workbench and selected a silver nose chain.

Ideally, he would test this new weapon before taking it into battle, but he felt certain that without each and every piece of jewelry, he wouldn't be able to defeat the fourth-floor Overseer. She was a level 33 Reaver Shaman, nearly double his own Soul-Cursed. He had seen his other Curses in action and felt the Experience gain from the deaths they'd caused. He knew they worked and he knew his inscription was flawless; he would just have to have faith that the rings would function as intended. There were always spell slots and blood cantrips to fall back on if he had to.

He worked steadily through the remaining ear and nose rings, pausing after each to recover his Health and avoid Enchanter's Sickness. As the final inscription took, glowing blue-green and then disappearing, a page of text appeared, obscuring his view of the twisted rose gold nose ring in his hand.

[Congratulations, you have leveled up your Enchanting to Level 6! You may now inscribe any nonliving flat plane with a malicious spell,

thereby hexing it for the next creature to touch the inscription.

Note: Only one hex may be inscribed per single plane, 20-foot radius. Enchanting table is not required to inscribe a hex.

Warning: Hexes do not distinguish between friend and foe or creator and enemy! Beware that you don't trigger your own hex!]

Fascinated, Roark dismissed the page. After a moment's consideration, he knelt down and wrote [*Icy Torrential Downpour*] at his feet. It was a relatively harmless spell to the Health, but depleted Magick as effectively as an ice tornado.

[Would you like to Hex this surface? Yes/No?

Note: For every Hex you inscribe, Cursed! will extract a share of your Health equal to your Enchanting level x your character level.]

With his newly increased level, that was nearly a fifth of his total Health. But, he reasoned, his filigreed vial had refilled while he read and his Health-Regen was fast enough to fix him up in a few seconds. He selected Yes.

Immediately, his vision swam, the world reeling around him, and his stomach heaved as the hex extracted its exorbitant price from his filigreed Health vial. If he hadn't already been on his knees, he would've found himself dropping to them. But the ink on the flagstones drew his attention away from his suddenly ailing body.

The inscription glowed a deep wine-colored purple, and the letters ran into a strange angular rune, which stretched until it covered an Elite Salamander-sized space of floor. Amethyst light flared up for a moment at the edges of the rune, then faded until only the closest inspection would reveal it.

Roark waited patiently for his Health vial to refill, the nausea and weakness slowly dissipating, then he braced himself for the worst and stepped onto the rune.

Thunder boomed, shaking the smithy, and sheets of icy rain poured down on his forge-heated skin like a waterfall. Roark yelped through gritted teeth and immediately began to shiver, the shift in temperature too drastic to stand. In the corner of his eye, the purple liquid drained out of his filigreed Magick vial.

“Bloody hells!” he shouted gleefully, leaping out of the target area. The spell had worked perfectly! “Mac, did you see that?”

The Elite Salamander was on his feet, backed up against the forge as if afraid the rain would come for him next. Roark couldn't

help but grin. Hexes would open up a whole new world of attacks and defenses. He wanted to try a dozen of them right away, but scuffling and shouting in the corridor interrupted his elation.

By the forge, the wary Elite Salamander bared his Venomous Fangs and let out a burbling growl.

A hero who'd gotten past the grieving shift, perhaps? Roark shook the dripping water out of his hair and stored his inkpot and quill, then grabbed his rapier and headed out into the torchlit hallway.

Coming toward him from the throne room were Zyra and a hulking Thusr Knight. The Knight was bent nearly double, his head pressed to Zyra's side and his empty hands raised. It took Roark a moment to realize the Knight was walking so strangely because Zyra had ahold of his ear.

"Just the Jotnar I was looking for," Zyra said in a bitingly cheerful voice. "This cringing wad of scum had the nerve to claim you said he could desert Azibek for us. He actually thought I would believe him just because he killed one of his fellow fifth-floor residents and chopped off their head in front of me."

At this she tossed Roark a massive bleeding ball of teeth and hair. Roark sidestepped, more surprised than disgusted. The head bounced down the flagstones behind him.

"Damn it all," he grumbled under his breath. If he'd been thinking, he would've bought extra pieces of jewelry. He cupped his chin in his free hand. "Maybe one of the Changelings has a nose ring I can trade for ..."

"What?" Zyra asked, the obvious confusion still not enough to take the edge off the anger in her voice.

"Nothing." Roark shook his head. "What were you saying?"

She yanked the ear of the Knight, eliciting a grunt of pain.

"This spy claims you sent an open quest to anybody from the Dungeon Lord's armies—just bring up a head and we'll welcome them in with open arms!" Her voice dripped sugary poison. "But I know you're not stupid enough to send out a quest like that because I know anyone with half a brain would realize Azibek can order any of his cronies to chop off any of the others' heads so they can come

up here and cozy up to you. That's why I *know* you'll let me kill this liar for trying to deceive us."

Roark shivered, partly from the breeze chilling his still-wet skin, partly from the Elite Reaver's deadly tone.

"Tell her," the Thusr Knight begged. "I didn't fight back when she captured me. I could've killed her, but I didn't."

Zyra barked out a laugh as if that were ridiculous.

"I want to be part of the uprising," the Knight insisted. "Please."

Roark sheathed his rapier and swiped the dripping water from his brow. "I should've contacted you and Kaz to let you know about the quest."

Zyra shoved the Knight away from her and threw up her hands, disgusted. She took a few steps away, then turned back.

"Can you add, Griefer?" she asked. All of the cloying sarcasm was gone. In its place was disbelief and fury. "Do you know how many Experience points this Knight"—she jabbed a finger at the big creature, who looked as if he wanted to disappear into the wall—"would get for killing a Troll from below, dragging the head up to you, completing your quest, then chopping you in half and completing Azibek's *Memento Mori* quest?"

The Knight raised his hand to interject. "I-I wouldn't do that."

"Twelve hundred," Zyra finished as if he hadn't spoken.

Kaz poked his head around the corner. "Why is Zyra shouting? Kaz could hear it all the way from the antechamber. And why is Roark wet?"

"Later," Roark said at the same time as Zyra snapped, "Your Lord Overseer is trying to commit suicide by sending out a quest to Azibek's supporters."

"Only the ones who're tired of living under Azibek's cruelty," Roark said.

"It's an *open* quest," Zyra said, enunciating slowly as if he wouldn't understand otherwise. "Everyone below the third floor got it. There's no way to sort between those who are sincere and those who are pretending."

Kaz came fully into the hallway.

“Roark’s quest was a good idea,” he said, raising his blocky chin. “Roark is fair and good and smart, and he only wants all Trolls to live a life as good as the Trolls of the first floor do! Kaz thinks the quest is wonderful.”

“You haven’t even read the quest, mate,” Roark said, running his fingers through his shaggy black hair.

“Kaz doesn’t need to read it to know that Roark’s quest was a good idea!”

Zyra gestured at Kaz. “Is this what you want? A legion of unquestioning followers?”

“Of course not!” Roark snapped. “Kaz, Zyra’s got a good point. There’s plenty of room for someone to take advantage of the quest. However”—he turned to search the depths of shadows in the angry Reaver’s hood—“it also has the potential to do us and whoever accepts it a lot of good as well. It is possible that we could be betrayed at any second, but if we’re watchful, we can mitigate the risk. Sowing the ideas of defection and sedition in Azibek’s ranks are well worth it. It’s already helped us retake the portions of the third floor we lost to the loyalists.”

Zyra and Kaz both opened their mouths at the same time, but Roark forged ahead before they could interrupt.

“But just to be certain,” he said. “I’m going to take out the fourth-floor Overseer tonight so we’ve got that floor on our side, as well. In the meantime, Kaz, could you get this new recruit into the griefing rotation?”

“Kaz would be happy to!” The Brute leapt into action, taking the Knight by his huge arm and leading him around the corner toward the antechamber. “Tuk came along just in time! Very soon Kaz’s griefing group will be retiring to train with the skill trainers and eat a delicious meal. Just wait until Tuk tastes stew! Tuk will not regret his choice. Not at all.”

When the pair was safely out of earshot, Zyra turned to Roark, hands planted on her hips. “You’re going to defeat Splatch? You realize she’s a level 33, right?”

“I’ve got a plan.”

“Of course the Jotnar has a plan.” She threw up her arms. “What sort of tricks do you have up your sleeve this time?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Roark said. “Just come along and enjoy the show.”

CHAPTER 30

DUAL AT THE CROSSROADS



When Roark, Mac, and Zyra arrived on the third floor—the Elite Salamander just a splotch of distortion on the shadowy ceiling overhead—the latest battle with the Azibek loyalists was just coming to an end.

“You just missed the fun, Griefer!” Grozka called, sticking her massive boot on the throat of a Knight’s corpse as she pulled her halberd free. She waved a gauntleted hand at a gangly Reaver Champion and a tattooed Elemental Thusr. “We’ve another pair of Mugwumps bearing gifts.”

As the Champion and Elemental skulked over, holding out a gory severed head apiece, Roark cursed his shortsightedness again. Two more perfectly good severed heads and no extra jewelry! When he next spoke to Mai, he would have to ask her to make recruiting that merchant Variok a priority.

Zyra watched their approach with a Cursed Longknife in hand, twirling it in a way that looked menacingly nonchalant. The Champion eyed her as if trying to measure whether he could kill her before she poisoned him, but the Elemental stepped forward before the Reavers could come to blows.

“We wish to join you, Griefer,” the Elemental said, bowing as she held out her severed head to him. “Please accept these tokens of our sincerity.”

Giving himself a mental shake, Roark left off brooding over the wasted heads.

“Welcome to the rebellion,” he said, stowing their tokens in his inventory for later use. He scanned the nave until he found a familiar face looting Troll bodies. “Druz!”

At the sound of her name, the Elite Thusr jogged over.

“Yes, Lord Overseer?”

Zyra laughed with pure delight—the sound sharp and wicked like the snap of breaking bones.

Roark glared sidelong at the hooded Elite Reaver.

“I didn’t even tell her to say that,” Zyra said, reaching into the depths of her hood to scrub away tears of laughter. “The new spawns must be learning it all on their own now. This is brilliant!”

Forcing himself not to grind his serrated teeth, Roark turned back to Druz.

“Just Roark,” he told her. “Griefer, if you prefer a title.” He gestured to the pair of Mugwump Trolls. “Could you show our newest allies upstairs and have Kaz add them to the rotation?”

Druz slapped a fist to her tower shield in a crisp salute. “Right away, Lord—uh—Griefer.”

“Thank you.”

Zyra giggled again as Druz showed the pair of them away.

“Do you have to work at being so frustrating or does it come naturally?” Roark asked her, starting for the crumbling archway below the chancel.

“I like to think I’ve always had a flair for it,” she said, shrugging.

“Going somewhere, Griefer?” Grozka hollered at his retreating back.

Roark paused and glanced over his shoulder at the mountain of a Troll. “I’m going to go secure the fourth floor. Hold down the floor while I’m gone, won’t you?”

The Floor Boss offered him a grin and smashed her weapon against a heavy shield. “About time. Show them the strength of your arm, Griefer. Make them pay in blood.” The *clang* and *ring* of rattling weapons—Grozka’s preferred sign of approval and respect—followed them into the entrance to the fourth floor.

Mac’s blurry form was waiting for him on the other side of the archway, clinging to the ceiling like a deadly shadow. Unlike the

previous three floors, the entrance to the fourth wasn't a staircase, but a maze of claustrophobic dirt tunnels just tall enough for Roark to navigate hunched over. Now and again he felt the cool, pebbled hide of the Elite Salamander bump against his shoulders from overhead as they proceeded. No torchlight flickered there. The only illumination came from colonies of green bioluminescent fungi lining the walls and the occasional Infernal shrine spattered with blood and glowing a soft purple.

Zyra stalked ahead, pointing out pit traps and checking around blind corners for ambushes.

On Roark's first trip through this maze, he'd seen several sullen Dread Reavers and hungry-looking Elemental Thusrss glowering at them from shadowy alcoves. This time Zyra led them down empty corridors and in deliberately convoluted paths to navigate around any of the would-be assassins. Though the feeling of having a target painted on his back intensified the farther into the fourth floor Roark went, they made it to the place where several tunnels came together in a wide intersection without being attacked. Here the ceilings were high enough that Roark could stand up straight with room left to stretch his arms overhead.

At the center, a Thusrss corpse lay etched with phosphorescent Infernal runes, his arms and legs outstretched and pegged to an inlaid floor shrine with jagged stone spikes. An enormous [Ravenous Hellbender]—a slimy-looking creature with black spikes sticking out of its spine and a spiked mace-like ball on the end of its tail—munched happily away at the poor bastard's open chest cavity.

At the head of the altar was a level 33 Reaver Shaman, [Splash the Abhorrent]—her name white against a bloody purple-red aura. She leaned on a staff, watching the scene with smug satisfaction.

“Don't lose, Griefer,” Zyra whispered, disappearing into a curl of inky smoke before he could say that he didn't intend to.

Roark drew himself up to his full height, throwing back his shoulders, and swaggered into the room with an arrogance he didn't feel. From the shadowy recesses around the throne room, rangy Reaver Champions raised wicked-looking crossbows and glowing daggers.

Before they could attack, Roark spoke, his voice clear and filled with confidence. "Splatch the Abhorrent, I challenge you for the position of fourth-floor Overseer."

The Champions stopped in their tracks, looking to their Overseer for direction.

At the altar, the Shaman's eyes lost focus for a moment, roving over unseen words, and Roark knew she was reading the quest.

"No, this will not do," she said in a rasping, craggy voice.

After a moment, a page appeared before Roark's eyes.



Dual at the Crossroads

You have challenged Splatch the Abhorrent for the position of Fourth-Floor Overseer, but the rules are a bit different down here on Splatch's level. Every spell slinger worth their Magick has an animal familiar to fight alongside them in battle.

Objective: Kill Splatch and her familiar, Gut, in dual combat, aided only by your animal familiar.

Reward: Become the new Fourth-Floor Overseer; command and deploy Fourth-Floor mobs; create and alter Level-One floor map; 20,000 Experience

Failure: Die at the hand of Splatch the Abhorrent or Gut the Hellbender in single combat.

Penalty: No respawn for combatant or animal familiar.

Restrictions: No assistance beyond animal familiar; no Health potions may be used.

Accept Quest? Yes/No



Roark hesitated. It was one thing if he died, but to risk Mac's forever-death as well ...

A gurgling growl at Roark's side drew his attention. He shut the book on the quest to find Macaroni standing beside him, facing down the much larger, uglier Hellbender.

“I suppose you want to fight this thing, challenge or not,” Roark murmured, scratching the back of the Elite Salamander’s thick neck.

Mac looked up at him, blinking bulbous eyes slightly out of sync, and chirped. Roark felt a grudging smile tug at his lips.

“Bloodthirsty little monster.” He reopened his mystic grimoire, turned to *Quests*, and selected Yes in answer to the challenge. “Fine.”

As soon as the quest was accepted the grimoire disappeared, and Roark found himself under attack. The Shaman thrust her palm at him, sending a gout of blue sparks his way. They sunk into his flesh where they landed, corkscrewing inward and chewing away at his Health vial by degrees.

Roark hit the floor and rolled away, launching Infernal Torment at Splatch as he came up.

Plum-colored flames licked at the Shaman’s flesh, but she didn’t drop to the floor screaming. Instead, she rapped herself on the chest with her gnarled staff. A bubble of pale blue light enveloped her, flared, then she disappeared.

Roark cursed, turning in a slow circle as he searched the throne room for some sign of where she would reappear. Infernal Torment—and most of his other Infernal attack spells—required concentration and line of sight. If she could pop in and out whenever she wanted, his Infernal spells wouldn’t be of any use against her. Still, he had his spell tome and a few tricks secreted up his sleeves, though he’d hoped to wait longer before revealing those. Unfortunately, it looked as if he wouldn’t have that luxury.

Roark dug into his Inventory, pulling free the first severed head. The silver nose chain slapped against its lifeless cheek.

By the altar, Mac shot forward, his fat-padded body low to the ground. He drove in, vicious and aggressive, latching his Venomous Fangs into the Hellbender’s throat. The Hellbender reared back; Mac released his jaws for a moment, scrambled onto the beast’s back, then bit down once more. In a flash, Mac sunk his claws into the slimy scales and wrapped his tail around the Hellbender’s center, anchoring himself in place. The Hellbender shook furiously, issuing a deep belly roar as it tried to shake off the much smaller Elite

Salamander, but no luck. The Hellbender simply couldn't dislodge him.

There was a sound like a sharp intake of breath behind Roark.

Roark spun, cocking back the severed head. He pulled the nose chain free with a gruesome tug, triggering the curse inscribed upon the simple piece of jewelry.

"What ...?" Splatitch cocked her head, scowling, and lobbed a ball of cerulean lightning at Roark.

He sidestepped the spell and threw the severed head. The Shaman batted the head with her staff, trying to deflect it, but at the moment of impact, it exploded. Gore and bone fragments flew in all directions, showering Splatitch in rotting brain and flesh, and tearing away a handful of her Health bar.

[The corpse will explode seven seconds after the Tooled Silver Nose Ring is removed, causing fire and shrapnel damage to anyone within a fifteen-foot radius.]

Roark grinned from ear to ear. Perfect. And with the slight delay built into the curse, he'd found an effective way to weaponize curses.

With a scream half fury and half pain, the Shaman shoved her fist at him. An icy tornado cut across the throne room. The grin vanished as Roark threw up his left hand, casting Infernal shield out of instinct, though he knew it wouldn't do any good. The ice tornado slipped through the violet barrier as if it didn't exist and slammed into him, sapping all of the purple liquid from his filigreed Magick vial. Had he been relying on his Infernal Jotnar spells alone, that might well have been a death blow. Roark, however, had known *exactly* what kind of game she would play—thanks to a little intel from Grozka—and had come prepared.

He pulled free his grimoire, which floated above his left palm, and cast his level 3 Rebound spell, offering him some small measure of protection from Splatitch's formidable magical attacks.

[55% of all damage done to target rebounds to the opponent for the next 30 seconds.]

He dug another severed head from his Inventory with his free hand, but from behind him, a tinkling sound like a shower of broken glass drew his attention. The Hellbender had dislodged Mac and was vomiting a beam of deep purple energy at the Elite Salamander. The beam struck Mac's foreleg, dissolving the appendage and eliciting a pained yipe as it drove him to the floor.

Distracted, Roark saw the ball of cerulean lightning coming too late to dodge. It slammed into his chest, knocking the head from his grasp and sending him flying backward as his muscles jumped and spasmed. His HP took a sharp plunge, but he heard a pained shriek as the majority of Splat's spell damage landed back on the caster.

A moment later, he crash-landed on something fleshy and slimy.

A set of razor-sharp teeth tore into his left ear. The Hellbender. Roark cried out in pain and threw a wild right at his attacker. His fist slammed into the Hellbender's flat face where its nose would have been if salamanders had noses. With a surprised bark, the creature's maw snapped open.

Mac took an off-balance leap onto the Hellbender, clawing chunks from its flesh with his three remaining legs, but the creature slapped Mac away with his macelike tail. The Elite Salamander was just too small to beat the Hellbender alone. Roark shoved his right palm against the creature and cast a pre-inscribed level 2 Fireball from his grimoire, blasting the creature sideways. His spell had done precious little to damage the creature, but it did buy Mac some time. Quickly, Roark cast Infernal Invigoration on Mac. His bleeding stump of a leg healed back to the knee, and his Health vial lurched back up above seventy percent.

Roark cursed. He had to find a way to help Mac kill the Hellbender.

A fountain of blue sparks sizzled to life, reminding Roark that they were fighting two enemies, not one. The burning embers ate through his leather armor into his shoulders and licked away at his Health—

though once more, partial damage was reflected back on the enemy Overseer.

Roark scrambled to his feet, fishing another head from his Inventory. There was a flash of movement off to his right. He hooked his finger into the loop of a fat, golden earring, activating the curse, then lobbed the head at the Reaver Shaman. She dodged this one, but it slammed into a Champion behind her and detonated. Another handful of Health disappeared from her red bar. Before Splatch could retaliate, Roark scooped up the head he'd dropped, ripped out a nose ring, and pitched it at her sidearm.

The Shaman threw up an azure shield, the equivalent of his Jotnar shield. The head exploded against the barrier without harming her.

But it had distracted her long enough for Roark to find the scroll of Summon Venomous Manticore that he'd taken off one of PwnrBwner's mercenaries. He hoped that invoking the beast wouldn't break the rules of the contest. True, it probably violated the *spirit* of the law, but since the Manticore was a magical construct summoned through a scroll, Roark thought it would be firmly within the *letter* of the law. He muttered a silent prayer and broke the wax seal with his thumb. A flash of blazing white light—blinding in the fourth floor's natural gloom—rolled out as the parchment ignited.

A gust of wind blew through the throne room, and a winged golden lion shining with Divine light appeared between Roark and the Shaman, its tail that of an enormous scorpion. The creature took a menacing step toward Splatch, stinger dripping with venom.

“No,” Roark said, infusing his voice with command. “Attack the Hellbender!”

The Divine creature turned to look at Roark. Its face was an eerie blend of feline and human, far too intelligent for comfort. The Manticore blinked, then spun to face Mac and the Hellbender, took a pair of loping steps, then flapped its wings and leapt into the air.

Roark pulled his fourth severed head, ready to fire off a grisly explosion with one hand and a pre-inscribed spell with the other, but when he turned around, the Reaver Shaman had disappeared again.

CHAPTER 31

ALL HAIL THE OVERSEER



Behind Roark, Mac chirped and the Manticore roared. The breaking glass sound of the Hellbender's energy stream tinkled through the throne room, but Roark ignored their battle. He had to trust that the Manticore would even the odds for Mac, who was *badly* outmatched by the Hellbender. Spinning in a slow circle, Roark strained his ears for the gasp of air that would indicate Splatch's reappearance. His heart pounded, sweat rolling down his forehead as he scanned the room. Mac wasn't the only one outmatched, and his rebound spell had finally lapsed, so he'd need to be extra careful.

There—to his right.

Roark lashed out with a level 3 Acid Bath.

The dirt floor beneath Splatch's feet turned into a bubbling green pit, dumping her into the center with the splash and sizzle of acid. The Shaman's red bar was dropping steadily—nearly down to half—but she cackled with glee and thrust out her hand.

Nothing happened.

Roark hurled the severed head.

But he didn't get to see the impact.

Spatch clutched her fingers into a fist and twisted. Pain like a dagger spiked through Roark's temple and sapphire-blue light clouded his vision. An Infernal Reaver spell. If it was anything like his Jotnar spells, then it required concentration and line of sight to work. But how could she be concentrating in a pool of deadly acid?

The agony in Roark's head intensified, driving him to his knees and blurring out his vision completely. The Shaman's cackling was inside his skull, filling every inch of his mind like icy blades. He

couldn't see to shoot an offensive spell at her or throw another cursed head.

Desperate to stop the pain, he slapped the ground with his empty hand, casting a level 2 Noxious Fog.

Bright yellow gas erupted from the floor, hissing as it filled the throne room air. Noxious Fog did an immediate damage of $1.5 \times$ Roark's Intelligence—for a grand total of 141—followed by three damage per second for thirty seconds.

Even better, however, was the dense cloud it created. As soon as the Fog surrounded him, the stabbing pain and mad cackling in his skull receded, then disappeared, cut off by the Shaman Overseer's loss of sight. Somewhere in the fog, he heard her choking on the poisonous gas. The coughs sounded wet and clogged, as if she were hacking up thick wads of phlegm.

From behind Roark came another hacking sound, like a crane with a fishbone caught in its throat. The Hellbender had been caught in the Noxious Fog as well.

Not wanting to waste a perfectly good advantage, Roark pulled out a quill and went to work on one of the empty spell slots in his Initiate's Spell Book. While still hidden in the embrace of the yellow haze, he hastily inscribed one level 2 spell and one level 3 spell.

He cast the first—Piercing Sight—on himself. Immediately, his vision sharpened, and the fog thinned and became transparent to his eye. He spotted Splatsh slashing her staff through the cloudy yellow gas, eyes squinted as she coughed up bloody chunks and searched for him.

Perfect. Next came Blinding Speed, his last level 3 spell, also cast on himself. With that mighty boost and the movement bonus Enchanted into his leathers, the world around Roark seemed to fall into a lethargic, dreamlike slowness. He stowed his quill, pulled the last two cursed heads free from his inventory, and hurled them at the Shaman in stunning succession, knocking her Health down to a third. He stashed his floating grimoire, exchanging it for his Slender Rapier and Kaiken Dagger.

Darting in and out around the fog-blinded Splatsh, Roark hacked and slashed, *mandritto* and *riverso*. He whirled, the yellow clouds

eddying in his wake as he triggered his Off-Hand Combo.

Splash crouched, moving so slowly that it almost looked like she was underwater, and fired a spell blindly into the haze.

Roark zagged around the icy tornado easily and lunged *pie' firmo*, lodging his dagger in her back. She screamed and spun around, firing off another wild spell. He ducked under it and sliced a perfectly horizontal *riverso tondo* across her belly, spilling ropy blue guts from the wound. She screamed and swung her gnarled staff with unwieldy sluggishness at where he'd been. She was an accomplished spell caster, of that there could be no question, but she was less than worthless as a melee fighter.

Roark casually clipped her outstretched arm with a flick of his wrist, shaving off another sliver of life. Picking her off from within the haze was an underhanded way to win, but Roark didn't have any illusions of a noble victory. Nobility was a luxury that survivors couldn't afford.

Splash flinched and recoiled from the attack. He capitalized on the opening and lunged in from the side, planting his rapier in her throat. She tried to whirl on him and scratch out his eyes, but with a gurgling howl, the last of her red bar drained away. She dropped to the dirt floor, dead.

Roark breathed a sigh of relief, but no grimoire page appeared to let him know that he had won.

The sound of tinkling glass followed by Mac's pained shriek quickly told him why. Roark wheeled around. Through the fog, his Piercing Sight picked out the Hellbender vomiting that violet wave of destruction at Mac. The Elite Salamander's tail had been severed from his body, the connection point eaten away, and was now flopping on the floor as if it were alive. Mac's fangs were buried in the Hellbender's side, but the Hellbender was whipping him viciously with its spiked mace tail, tearing bloody flags of flesh from Mac's side. The Venomous Mantidore lay in scattered pieces at their feet, but it seemed the creature had done a good deal of damage to the Hellbender before it died. The Shaman's familiar was battered and bloody, its Health bar flashing a poisoned green.

Roark thrust his palm forward, firing Infernal Torment at the Hellbender. Plum-colored flames erupted from the creature's face, stopping its magical attack mid-vomit, and shaving away the last of its weakened Health bar. The Hellbender's whipping tail slowed, and with a frantic screech, it slumped to the floor, dead.

The last of the Noxious Fog dissipated as Mac tore himself free of the much larger creature. The exhausted Elite Salamander limped over to Roark, weaving a bit unsteadily as if the lack of a tail made it hard to get his balance.



Congratulations! You have completed the quest Dual at the Crossroads!

You may ascend to the throne as Floor Overseer for The Cruel Citadel Level 4!

To accept position as Floor Overseer, place your hands on the sacrificial altar.

To reject position as Floor Overseer, leave the throne room without placing both hands on the sacrificial altar.

Warning: If you leave the room without accepting the position as Floor Overseer, you will not be able to return and accept later.

Warning: If you accept the position as Floor Overseer for the fourth floor, you will automatically be removed as Floor Overseer of the first floor.



Roark dismissed the page and slipped a Sufficient Health Potion from his Inventory, draining it as he crossed the floor to the altar at the center of the throne room. Warmth and life poured through his veins, chasing away the burns and lingering effects of the Shaman's spells. With a sigh, he placed both hands on the altar, careful not to touch the sacrificed Troll's corpse and its glowing sigils, most of which seemed to be related to death and the swallowing of life.

[Congratulations! You have ascended to Floor Overseer on The Cruel Citadel Level 4!

From the Overseer's Throne, you may command and deploy mobs throughout the fourth level, create and alter the layout of the floor, purchase resources or upgrades for the rooms, and sacrifice an Infernal chimera once per day to boost your Constitution for (8) hours.]

That could come in handy. As he stood up from the sacrificial altar, the sacrificed Thusr disappeared and an ascending chime rang out. Two of them, as a matter of fact.

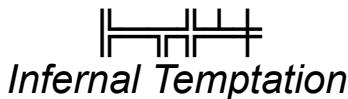
[LEVEL UP!]

Instead of the familiar golden light shining from his skin, however, a cloud of purple smoke sizzling with arcs of cobalt electricity engulfed him. War drums beat at the air with a pulsing, driving song of might, and the room filled with the stench of fiery slag. The violet tattoos up and down his ghostly pale body glowed from within as his arms and legs stretched and lengthened. Infernal power coursed through veins that stood out in his forearms making the flat straps of wiry muscle contract. His jaws creaked as his serrated canines grew into a set of two-inch-long fangs.

The twisted, stumpy flaps protruding from his back swelled and stretched until they were nearly as long as he was tall, then strained open, catching an eerie gust of wind. Roark could feel it caressing the leathery appendages, cool and comforting. With an effort of will, he moved the wings, slapping at the draft, but they weren't strong enough to lift him from the floor.

Yet.

As the smoke dissipated, the information for his newest Jotnar spell appeared on a page of his mystic grimoire.



Targeted Charm Spell

Range: 60 feet or hearing distance

Casting Time: Instant

Casting Cost: 12% Base Magicka

Infernal Temptation fills the target with the desire to serve only the honeyed voice of the caster, enslaving targets up to caster's Intelligence level to the caster's will for as long as caster maintains concentration or until the target can no longer hear the caster.

Note: Infernal Temptation has a 50% chance to disrupt concentration-based spells.

Note: Divine creatures are invulnerable to Infernal spells.



Roark dismissed the page and looked around the throne room at the former Overseer's honor guard.

The Reaver Champions were staring in awe at him.

Roark ignored them for the moment, focusing instead on Macaroni. Like Roark, the vicious little beast had changed, *evolved*, though the creature before him looked nothing like the Hellbender he'd been expecting to find. He eyed his transformed friend for a moment and a spidery line of text briefly flared over Mac's head: [Young Turtle Dragon]. It seemed that Trolls weren't the only infernal creatures that could delay evolution in order to unlock better, more potent forms. That would certainly explain why it had taken the creature so long to evolve. The clever little beast—who wasn't so little now—had been biding his time.

Truthfully, he no longer looked like a salamander at all. Mac's body was still squat and low to the earth, but a gigantic shell—equal parts snapping turtle and armadillo—of dark, ever-shifting color now covered his back. Powerful limbs protruded from beneath the shell, wicked obsidian talons adorning each foot, and his fat-padded tail had given way to a sleek reptilian appendage with a strange scorpion stinger on the end. At a glance, that tail reminded Roark of the Manticore's tail; he wondered if a Young Turtle Dragon was the Infernal equivalent of the divine beast he'd summoned with his scroll.

Mac's head had likewise lost its flat, oval shape; in its place was a bearded serpentine face that looked surprisingly dragon-like. Equal parts turtle and dragon as the name implied. But then a long sticky tongue flashed out, licking at a round eyeball that was strangely out of sync with the other eye. Roark chuckled. The beast was definitely still Mac.

The huge creature—twice the size of his former evolution—trundled over to Roark, impossibly silent as he moved, and batted Roark's leg with his blocky head. Nuzzling him. Roark reached down and scratched at the beast's extended neck.

Mac offered a chorus of familiar cooing chirps in response.

Roark patted the newly minted Turtle Dragon once more, then turned his gaze on Splat's remaining honor guard. Four of the Champions dropped their weapons and fell to one knee, bowing their heads in acknowledgement of his new position over them. But the fifth and final one straightened his back defiantly, glaring back at Roark, a matched set of glinting War Hatchets poised for attack.

CHAPTER 32

HEXORCIST



“Do you submit to me as Overseer?” Roark asked the rebellious Reaver Champion. If he needed to fight, there would be no better time than now, and he could sacrifice the Reaver on the sacrificial altar for the Constitution boost. It would be both efficient and advantageous.

The Champion’s black eyes narrowed, fists tightening on the hilts of the hatchets until the crude handles creaked. A snarl curled the Champion’s lips. His soft leather boots gritted against the floor as he took a step toward Roark.

Smiling, Roark reached for his rapier and dagger—both of which had grown with him. But with a puff of smoke, Zyra stepped out of the shadows behind the Champion.

“I wouldn’t,” she said, pressing a Cursed Longknife to the Champion’s throat and another to his crotch.

With a grunt, the Champion sheathed his hatchets. Zyra backed away.

“Fine.” The Champion knelt on the dirt floor. “I submit.”

“Good,” Roark said, hoping his disappointment didn’t show. He returned his rapier and dagger to his belt. “Anyone who can’t stomach my leadership is free to leave the citadel, but I’m afraid I can’t let you run down to the fifth floor and rejoin Azibek’s ranks. Make your decision before I finish altering the floor layout down here.”

With that bit of business laid bare, Roark returned to the altar. Mac plodded over to the Hellbender’s corpse and flipped it onto its side with a powerful heave of his blocky head. He pawed at the soft

underbelly with his talons, clearly trying to get to something, but unable to do so. Realizing what the salamander was after, Roark knelt and harvested the Hellbender's heart, then tossed the spongy tidbit to him. Mac snapped it up and chirped gratefully, finally satisfied.

"You deserve it, mate," Roark said, slapping Mac's new shell with his oversized hand.

Zyra appeared at Roark's side as he turned back to the altar.

"Congratulations on the evolution." Her hood moved slowly up and then down. Roark couldn't see her face, but he felt sure she was evaluating his new form. Apparently satisfied with what she saw, she crossed her arms. "You should have sacrificed that Champion as a warning to any of them thinking of turning on you ... Azibek would have."

"I'm not Azibek," Roark replied with a shrug. The fact that he had considered doing as much was troubling enough. He didn't need encouragement to act the despot at every turn from Zyra, too—not when he was having enough trouble keeping his humanity intact. He sighed in frustration. "Bloody hells, I need Kaz here to raise ethical objections to everything you say."

"Because part of you agrees with me."

"Not the better part of me," he said, trying not to eye the way the snowy white ringlets spilling from the depths of her hood lay against the curve of her breast. The sweet, earthy scent of those deadly coquelicot blossoms played in his nose.

With a start, he remembered his trip to the marketplace.

"I nearly forgot." He retrieved the Alchemy tome and held it out to Zyra. "This is for you."

She regarded the book with her usual suspicion of gifts.

"Is this to distract me from questioning every bad decision you make?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Is it working?"

"Yes." She snatched it out of his hand. "But only because it's one I've been wanting to read."

Roark grinned and left her to it.

He was excited to scope out the new options available to him as the fourth-floor Overseer, but he decided to take care of his personal business first. He pulled up his mystic grimoire and selected his character page. He noticed immediately that he had a new message waiting for him.

[*You have unlocked the .error (): WRLOCK Class Specialty: Hexorcist!*

Hexorcists have tinkered too long and too intensely with the dark power of Curses! and as a result, have become Cursed themselves! Yet the Hexorcist is ingenious and clever, twisting the power of their own cursed nature in their favor, extracting ever greater devastation and vengeance against any who would stand against them!

Hexorcists gain an additional 10% Experience from all enemies slain with a cursed item. All Curses! do $2n$ (where n is the character's Cursed! skill level) more damage upon activation. As a Hexorcist, for every item you inscribe with a Curse, Cursed! will now extract a share of your Infernali Magick equal to your Enchanting level $\times .5$ your character level. Additionally, Hexorcists gain access to the Cursed Spells Hex-Touch, Hex-Aura, and Hex-Armor, which can be inscribed in your grimoire as regular spells!

Warning: Players can only have (1) Class Specialty, are you sure you would like to add Hexorcist? Yes/No?]

With a furrowed brow, Roark read over the class description once, then twice, then a third time.

If he understood correctly, this new class had no real downside—save that it would limit him from selecting another class specialization in the future. And the benefits were legion. Not only would he deal more damage with his cursed items, but he'd gain additional Experience with each kill. Perhaps best of all, it lowered the cost of creating cursed items and instead of paying the price of the Curse in Health, he could pay from his plentiful pool of Magick. Even if the new spells he'd gained access to—Hex-Touch, Hex-Aura,

and Hex-Armor—were utterly useless, this was still too good an opportunity to pass up.

He quickly selected yes, then pulled up his grimoire page, scanning the list of available spells until he found the new additions:



Lay hands on any enemy and trigger Hex-Touch; any creature with an Intelligence score lower than the caster is Cursed! for the duration of the spell. Hex-Touch inflicts a -10 against (1) Attribute Score—Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Intelligence—of the caster's choice for the duration of the spell! If the enemy dies while Cursed!, caster receives an additional 10% Experience! Hex-Touch can be inscribed in a second level, third level, or fourth level spell slot. Inscribing Hex-Touch at higher-level spell slots increases the duration of the Curse! Second level spell duration, 10 minutes. Third level spell duration, 1 hour. Fourth level spell duration, 8 hours.



Those who would dare lash out at the Hexorcist best be ready to taste the sting of Cursed! retribution. The caster emits a 30-foot-radius aura, which moves with them for the duration of the spell and affects all allies in the area. Enemies take $.5n$ Damage (where n equals character level of the Attacker) when they deal physical melee damage to those protected by Hex-Aura. Hex-Aura is a level 2 spell and can only be inscribed in level 2 spell slots; Duration, 2 minutes.



Hexorcists are wily, cunning, and just as willing to embrace Curses as dish them out! You Curse! yourself, causing your Infernali Magick to absorb damage instead of your Health for the duration of the spell! But Hex-Armor also inflicts a -5 against your Constitution score for the duration of the spell! Hex-Aura is a level 2 spell and can only be inscribed in level 2 spell slots; Duration, 10 minutes.



Roark nearly cackled in mad glee. This new class fit him as perfectly as a custom-cobbled pair of boots. All three new Cursed! based spells would be deadly effective in their own way, and the bonuses from the class itself were impressive. He closed out of the Skills section, pulled up his character screen once more, and distributed his point allotment—twenty in total, since he'd leveled up twice thanks to his tussle with Splat. He dropped ten points into Intelligence, six into Dexterity, two into Constitution, and the remaining two into Strength.



Character Overview			
Name:	Roark	Level:	26
Gender:	Male	Player Class:	Hexorcist
Type:	Troll-Hybrid (Defiler)	Alignment:	Infernali
Current Experience:	2,150	Next Level:	37440
Health:	642.5	Infernali Magick:	1440
H-Regen / 5 Sec:	100.95	Magick-Regen / 5 Sec:	68.75
Attributes:		Stats:	
Weapon Damage:	84	Strength:	39
Attack Damage:	552	Constitution:	52.9
Base Armor:	60	Dexterity:	76
Armor Rating:	415.8	Intelligence:	119
Movement Rate:	1.25 x Speed of Opponent	World Stone Authority, Greater Vassal	3 / 4
Critical Hit Chance:	20%	World Stone Authority, Lesser Vassal	49 / 75
Critical Hit Damage:	(+) 200%	Undistributed Stat Points:	20
Troll Special Skills:		Player Special Skills:	
Rapid-Regen		Spellcraft (Class Skill)	Lv. 5
60% Resistance against normal weapons		Bladed Weapons (Melee Skill)	Lv. 7
Stunning Blow; 17.5% Chance / Hit		Weapons Specialty: Rapier	Lv. 4
Infernali Shield; Jotnar Spell		Calligraphy (Trade Skill)	Lv. 3
Infernali Torment; Jotnar Spell		Blacksmithing (Trade Skill)	Lv. 6
Infernali Invigoration; Jotnar Spell		Tailoring (Trade Skill)	Lv. 5
Infernali Temptation; Jotnar Spell		Enchanting (Trade Skill)	Lv. 6
Troll Leadership Lv. 3		Enchanting Specialty: Cursed!	Lv. 5



Brilliant.

Supremely satisfied, he closed out of his character page and crouched down beside the altar, pressing his hands against the gore-splattered surface, calling up the Overseer's Grimoire. The floating book appeared in the air before him, and he turned to the familiar Floor Design page, scanning the new options. Here, he had four hundred points to play with as opposed to the hundred available on the first floor.

The traps caught his eye first. Though it seemed that Splat had favored pit traps over all else, there were poisoned explosions, chests that turned into ravenous Infernal monsters when opened, cubes of gelatinous material that would hold the triggering party fast while suffocating them, disorienting miasmas, and a multitude of other brutal deterrents. Far greater diversity than he had access to as the first-floor Overseer. He rubbed his hands together and set to work.

After some playing with the tunnel system—tweaking it to achieve maximum efficiency and subtracting the redundant passages—he removed the pit traps between the third-floor nave and his new fourth-floor throne room. It would be a waste to accidentally take out his own allied Trolls. Those changes left him with a decent hundred and thirty-one points. Roark spent the first fifty lining the tunnels closest to the fifth floor with nasty surprises for Azibek's supporters. They would pay a hefty butcher's bill for any incursions now.

With that done, he turned to the room options. A grin broke across his face as he added an Alchemy laboratory in a little out of the way tunnel for Zyra. When it appeared on the layout, he filled the miniature rendering with shelves of ingredients and tables covered in flasks, beakers, mortars and pestles, and flame pans.

Next, he added a barracks of sorts. Infernal chimeras didn't seem to sleep, but he added beds anyway, so the Trolls under his leadership would have a place to relax, and coupled each one with a storage chest for their treasured belongings.

After that, he added a series of training grounds, which sprouted from the central tunnel system like the roots of a sprawling oak—melee combat here, stealth there, archery and ranged weapons in

another—and filled them with the necessary dummies, targets, and equipment.

With all the necessities taken care of, he had just fifteen points left. He selected the tunnel where Zyra's new Alchemy lab sat and added himself a study just across the way. The last five points went to bookshelves and a desk. It was small, but more than enough space to suit his purposes. After all, how much room did a man need to read?

Roark accepted the changes and closed out of the Overseer's Grimoire. Zyra was leaning against a nearby wall, paging through her Alchemy tome. He crossed over to her.

“How is it?”

“Deadly,” she said, a sinister enthusiasm in her dusky voice. “I love it.”

Roark pasted a thoughtful frown on his face. “Set it aside for a moment, will you? I have something I need your opinion on.”

He led the Elite Reaver out of the throne room, through the tunnels. Though she'd put the book away, Zyra seemed enthralled with thoughts of malicious poisons and potions. She didn't speak as they walked, and Roark didn't make any effort to draw her out. It would be better if she were distracted.

“Here,” he said as they came to one of the freshly installed doorways. He gestured for her to precede him inside.

Zyra stopped on the threshold as if she'd been hit with a Paralyze spell.

“Is this …” Her voice came out an awed whisper.

“Yours? Yes.”

She took a hesitant step forward, her dark fingertips tracing a rack of flasks, then turned to inspect a shelf filled with various flowers and chemical salts. She tested the weight of a pestle. Lit a tiny fire pan beneath a beaker and watched the teal liquid inside boil.

She looked like a street urchin given her first real present—utterly beautiful and yet somehow faintly sad. Roark's heart ached in his chest watching her.

“I'm hoping you'll keep us stocked with more Health potions and virulent poisons than our enemies can possibly combat,” Roark said,

stepping into the laboratory behind her. "It's just another scheme in my endless conniving."

Zyra whirled as if only just now remembering that he was there. Before he could move to defend himself, the hooded assassin disappeared in a curl of inky black smoke and reappeared at his side. Her dark hand clasped his with a ferocity that said everything she couldn't.

CHAPTER 33

CHAIN OF COMMAND



Well, this was simply *disastrous*. This whole dungeon situation was spinning wildly out of control. Over in the Vault of the Radiant Shield, he now counted twenty-three prime anomalies, all led by a modding player called “Lowen.” They’d captured three floors, which was no small feat considering the difficulty tier of the Vault of the Radiant Shield, though there was at least one small silver lining there: no secondary anomalies. Assuming Randy could figure out how to quarantine the prime anomalies—which, admittedly, he hadn’t accomplished yet—he could lock down the entire dungeon.

No, the bigger threat was the Cruel Citadel, which Randy had taken to calling the *Rogue Dungeon* around the office. There was still only the single primary anomaly, Roark the Griefer, but the secondary anomalies were spreading like wildfire. This Roark had corrupted over half the dungeon with his bad code. Changing scripts, altering floor plans in unconventional ways, even recruiting more NPC skill trainers. And now he’d captured the fourth-floor Overseer position. And he’d done it at an exceptional speed by bending the game mechanics in a way they were never made to bend.

The modder had even managed to unlock a new class. *Hexorcist*? What?

At this rate, he would capture the entire Cruel Citadel in a matter of weeks at best, and when he did, the entire dungeon would become a secondary anomaly. And then what? Would the virus spread? Randy pursed his lips and shook his head. He had no idea.

He'd never seen anything like this. There was simply no precedent for it.

"Mr. Shoemaker," said the receptionist, a young man in a dark suit named Berkley, "they're ready for you in the conference room."

Randy stood and nodded. "Thank you." He absently adjusted his pocket protector, straightened his notes, then triple-checked that he had the holobutton in his pants pocket. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders as though preparing for a battle on the rolling grasslands of the Whispering Steppe. He could do this. He mustered every ounce of courage and marched toward the conference room, shoving his way in through the heavy mahogany doors barring his way.

He gulped audibly, courage immediately melting away as he swept his gaze around the room.

The entire far wall was endless glass, offering a spectacular view of the towering San Gabriel Mountains cutting across the skyline like jagged teeth. In the center of the room was a long rectangular table, all sleek glass and chrome. And around that table was ... well, *everyone*. Everyone that mattered anyway. Danny, the vice-president of Marketing, sat off to the left, smiling his easy smile, hands laced behind a head of well-coiffed black hair. To the right was Susan Span, the head of HR, whipcord lean and wearing a black pencil skirt and a creamy blouse.

The head of every single department was present and accounted for, and they'd even called in the top brass. There, Paula Menchaca, the CFO. Near the head of the table, Asif Kamal Totah, COO. And at the very end of the table wearing smart black slacks and a navy shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, was Michael Silva, CEO and majority shareholder at Frontflip Studios. Michael had thinning hair, cut short, a strong jawline, and eyes as hard and cold as cut diamonds.

Frontflip Studios may have been a "casual" place to work, but even a glance at Mr. Silva revealed he was *not* a casual man. He was a shark. One who swum in the waters of business and ate lesser prey without a moment's hesitation.

“Welcome,” Mr. Silva said, a chilly smile filling his face. “I’m told you’ve been our lead engineer on the Dungeon issue.”

“Erm. Well. Yes,” Randy said, shuffling forward, letting the doors swing silently shut behind him. “I suppose that is the case, sir.” He took a deep breath, steadying himself, going through the words he’d rehearsed in his head. “I’ve been working with Customer Service and a handful of other devs and engineers to understand the issue at hand and try to mitigate the effects until we can find a way to eliminate the problem entirely.”

“And how close, exactly, are we to eliminating the problem?” Silva asked, his voice low and pleasant, though there was a hint of threat lingering just beneath the words. *You are costing me money, this had better get fixed. Fast.*

“Well.” Randy shifted nervously from foot to foot and cleared his voice. “Not close at all, sir. In fact, we are no closer than when this first started. At all. The situation is actually ...” He faltered, pushed his glasses up. “Much worse,” he finished weakly, before launching into a rushed analysis of both dungeons, especially noting the spread of anomalies in the Cruel Citadel.

“Dammit, Charles,” Mr. Silva snapped at Randy’s immediate boss, the lead team coordinator for all of Hearthworld’s software engineers. “I thought you said we were getting a handle on this. This”—he waved a hand at Randy—“isn’t getting a handle on things. This is a giant clusterfuck of epic proportions. This could kill us. You, Charles, are killing us with your incompetence.”

Charles opened his mouth, ready to defend himself.

Mr. Silva raised a hand, and with a glower cut Charles’s excuses off before they ever left his lips. “Just give me a moment to process,” Mr. Silva grunted. He frowned, forehead creased, fingers now steepled. “I’ve read through the reports,” he said after a beat, “and frankly, I don’t even understand *how* these low-level Trolls are causing such damage. I’ve been reading reports about players getting killed by creatures one-third their level. Can someone *please* explain that to me.” Not a question.

No one spoke.

Finally, Randy cleared his throat. "Yes, sir, I can." He edged up to the table and dropped his holostick on a sleek black pad buzzing with faint blue light on the edges. An InfiniTab Office Pro. Immediately, a 3-D image resolved in the air. Roark the Griefer in the flesh. "This is the primary anomaly in the Cruel Citadel. We believe he is a gamer. And he's been spreading corrupt code to the other creatures in the dungeon." Randy paused, sniffing. "It shows up as line of code called 'World Stone Vassal Authority.' At any rate, it allows those infected to gain unauthorized player skills, trade skills, even classes in some cases. It also allows this modder, Roark, to alter the fundamental script.

"You see, sir, floor Overseers are governed by our Paragon Radiant AI system, which allows them to 'think.' To make complex choices, set quests, and govern the creatures below them in the hierarchy. In beginner dungeons the scripts are very simple. Mobs don't work together. They engage based on aggro range. They don't think. But even low-level creatures can provide some challenge since their abilities scale based on their opponent. Well, what this Roark has done is quite ingenious really. He hasn't actually made the mobs more difficult, he's just altered their scripts. They are *thinking* and *fighting* like the highest-tier mobs in the game. Using team dynamics, squad tactics, even traps. And that alone makes them far deadlier than their actual level would suggest."

The 3-D image changed, the air suddenly filled with video captures of the Trolls of the Cruel Citadel working together.

In the first clip, a Changeling darted through the legs of a rog in heavy plate mail, hamstringing him from behind while a pair of Thusrss advanced in lockstep, using shields and spears to harry the hero from the flanks. From behind them, Reavers with bows launched deadly volleys of arrow fire at a mage in swishing robes who appeared at the top of a winding staircase.

The scene shimmered, replaced by a replay of a Troll scampering down a stony hall in retreat, luring an overconfident thief into a deadly pit filled with poisonous spikes.

Another shift. Roark was back on screen, barking out orders from behind a file of armor-clad Thusrss while casting spells from a

grimoire that floated above his left palm.

Mr. Silva waved a hand through the air and sighed. "Fine. So these Trolls are all acting out high-level combat scripts. The question is, why haven't you just shut it down? Booted this Roark from the game. Reset the damned dungeon even?"

"Frankly, we've tried, sir," Randy replied, feeling a touch more confidence. "But any piece of anomalous code ... well, we can't touch it." Randy shrugged and spread his hands. "And the prime anomaly himself is effectively invisible. As far as I can tell, he doesn't even properly exist inside the game. And it seems likely that this Roark is going to capture the Dungeon Lord position, and when he does, there's no telling what might happen. Whether this infection will be contained to the Cruel Citadel or whether it will spread beyond. My best suggestion, sir, is to sequester both of the corrupted dungeons. Simply prevent players from going there. We can't affect the corrupted mobs, but we can make these areas restricted zones."

"Good. Yes. That." Mr. Silva clapped his hands together, a wide smile spreading. "That's a pragmatic approach I can get behind. Cut these dungeons off while we find a way to fix the problem."

"Sir, I think that might be premature," came a new voice, slick and oozing confidence. The voice of a salesman. Danny Lane, the vice-president of Marketing. He stood, drawing every eye in the room. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and fit. He had on creased khakis, a light charcoal chambray dress shirt, and a pair of suede brogues. "Not to downplay what Mr. Shoemaker—it is Mr. Shoemaker, isn't it?" Randy's face burned. Danny knew his name, their offices were right across the hall from each other. He was just acting like a big shot in front of the board. "What Mr. Shoemaker is saying, but I see opportunity here. Yes, we have received a number of customer complaints, and obviously we want to fix this, but let me just throw out a few numbers.

"Seven percent. That's the increased log-in rate among existing users since these two new dungeons went rogue." Randy seethed inside. He'd invented that term, Rogue Dungeon, and he'd shared it with Danny! The man even had the audacity to shoot him a wink.

“Nine and a half percent. That’s the increase in number of new subscriptions sold. To break that down shotgun style for the lay people in the room—those are the types of numbers we expect to see when we release an *expansion*.”

He paused, voice dropping low. “And this is free. This is a viral campaign, one that we couldn’t even hope to replicate. People are talking. *Everyone* is talking. As far as I’m concerned, this is money in the bank. Now should we figure out how to contain it? Of course. Obviously. But why cut off the golden goose before she’s done laying eggs? The number of complaints aren’t hurting sales, and so far this infection hasn’t really affected any of the players. I think we can spin this. Lean into it. Get in front of it and leverage it to our advantage.” He smiled, big and broad and cocksure, then sat back and re-laced his hands behind his head.

The room was deathly quiet.

“A nine and a half percent increase in new subscriptions?” Mr. Silva asked.

“Nine and a half, sir.”

Mr. Silva rubbed at his smooth chin, eyes distant. “Okay. We try to contain this thing, but we lean into it while we work behind the scenes. No restrictions. Let these modders run. But you”—he thrust a finger straight out at Randy—“if the Cruel Citadel does fall to this Roark, I want you in there. Boots on the ground, so to speak. Charles, if that happens, he’s authorized for unlimited overtime. Put him in one of the Deep Dive PODS. Trick it out. Full admin powers. Whole nine yards.”

For the first time since entering the conference room, Randy felt a flutter of something other than tightly controlled fear. He felt *excitement*. A Deep Dive Pod with full admin power? That was ... significant. A dream, even.

“Of course, sir,” Charles replied, shooting Randy a sidelong glance. “We’ll make it happen.”

“Good,” Mr. Silva growled. “Now go fix my game!”

CHAPTER 34

HANGING OAKS



Roark's first official act as fourth-floor Overseer was to appoint a new first-floor boss—Druz, the Elite Thusr who'd helped him convince the first wave of Azibek supporters to switch sides. She was a strategist at heart, a natural leader, and she took over the griefing rotation with gusto. He'd also used his World Stone Authority to make her a Greater Vassal, ensuring she would be loyal to the cause. Though she couldn't seem to get the hang of calling Roark by his name rather than Lord Overseer.

Before selecting Druz, Roark had briefly considered making either Zyra or Kaz the Overseer, but quickly decided against it. They were simply too valuable in his honor guard, and as much as they deserved such an exalted position, he needed Trolls he could trust without question at his side. Zyra never would've taken the post anyway, seeing it as a position ripe for being assassinated rather than assassinating others. And since Kaz had just evolved yet again, becoming a level 16 Thusr Behemoth, he was far too powerful for the post. Though as a Behemoth—nearly thirteen feet tall with blue-black skin and fists bigger than Roark's head—Kaz was a rival for Wurgfozz the Sadistic on the second floor, the softhearted Chef wanted nothing to do with overseeing. No, Kaz was happiest toiling away in his kitchen and would only be wasted on a throne.

The cycle of training, griefing heroes, and fighting other Trolls went on much as it had before, though Kaz, Mac, and Zyra moved down to the fourth floor with Roark, continuing their shifts leading the defense against the Azibek supporters who made it past the traps.

More often than not during the attacks, at least one loyalist would turn coat and kill another, begging for a place with the allied Trolls of the floors above. Roark postulated that the Mugwump Trolls usually waited until they were on the fourth floor to betray Azibek because they knew trying to do it while surrounded by Dungeon Lord fanatics was a death sentence. Zyra thought it was most likely they were putting on a show, making certain a member of the honor guard or Roark himself saw their defection so there could be no question as to their loyalty. This, she claimed, was to trick Roark into letting his guard down around them.

With more Mugwumps swelling their ranks every day, the barracks Roark had added to the fourth floor filled up quickly.

Surprisingly, Griff asked for a place in the new barracks as well.

“Spent most of my life in the arena barracks with the other fighters,” the grizzled old man said, shrugging. “Never felt quite right havin’ a room all to myself. Besides, Mai’s settled in now, and she don’t need me around as much as she once did, if you catch my meanin’.”

Roark did.

Though Kaz never skipped out on his shifts below, the Behemoth spent most of his time on the first floor in the kitchens. And when Kaz wasn’t upstairs, Mai had a way of appearing downstairs.

“When my Alchemy’s leveled enough, I’m going to mix a potion that lets me vomit at will,” Zyra told Roark as they watched the giggling lovebirds across the throne room.

Theirs was a strange relationship to be sure—the sheer, physical logistics of it boggled Roark’s mind—but both seemed happy, so who was he to cast stones? Still … “They are a bit much, aren’t they?” he agreed.

“I’m going back to the lab,” the Dread Reaver said, turning on her heel.

“I’ll walk you.”

Roark made to follow—he had a few hours before he took over for Kaz waiting for the next attack, and he wanted to finish sorting through the books in his new study—but a calloused hand the size of a buckler grabbed his arm.

“Roark!” Kaz’s eyes were nearly glowing with excitement. “Roark has to hear what Mai learned today in the market!”

Zyra threw a mocking wave over her shoulder and disappeared down the tunnel to the Alchemy lab and study. Roark watched her go with a mix of envy and disappointment, then turned back to the Behemoth Thusr and the buxom cook.

“All right, let’s hear it.”

“Tell Roark, Mai, tell him!”

“I am, hold your horses,” Mai said, patting the air with her pink hands. “Well, I was chatting with Variok up in the marketplace, and I come to find out that Variok’s been trying to skirt the Legion of Order. Got into a bit of bad business with their ilk—something to do with knockoff gems—and now he’s needing a place to lie low. So naturally, I tell him about the Dungeon. He says he might even consider your offer. But then he goes on about how he’s a man of great culture and what have you. Says he couldn’t *possibly* come here. Unless, of course, he has the best food and accommodations.”

At Mai’s side, Kaz danced from foot to foot, grinning.

“This is the good part,” he assured Roark.

“So, I tell him,” Mai continued, settling her fists on her wide hips and lifting her brows imperiously, “I say, ‘We’ve got a chef on his way to becoming a Gourmet. What do you think of that?’ And what he thinks is, ‘Variok will sign on if there is a Gourmet in the citadel,’” she said, doing a passable imitation.

“What’s all the excitement?” Griff asked, wandering in from the barracks tunnel, short sword in hand.

“Another possible relocation from Averi City,” Roark said. “A merchant named Variok.”

“Pheh,” the weapons trainer muttered, swinging the sword up to rest on his shoulder. “Can’t stand the elf. Anyone what smiles that much is sellin’ something faulty.”

“He’ll come in handy selling off the extra weapons from griefing,” Roark said. Though truth be told, he liked haggling with the aggressively cheerful merchant.

Griff held out his battle-notched short sword to Roark. “Think you can repair this? All this trainin’ is takin’ its toll on the old gal.”

Roark nodded, taking the blade from the grizzled trainer.

“Wait, that’s not the end!” Kaz waved his hands at Mai. “Tell Roark the best part, Mai!”

Mai nodded. “So, I says to Variok, ‘All our Gourmet’s got left in his quest is to find some white truffles and chocolate orchid bean pods —’”

Griff snorted. “Beans growin’ on a flower? Sounds like some farmer’s been pullin’ your leg, Kaz. Stick to the truffles. Those’re real as you or I.”

Kaz was beside the trainer in a heartbeat. “Griff knows truffles, too?”

“Aye. I grew up huntin’ the blasted things with my potbellied boar. Canniest little beast you ever saw. He could root ‘em up right out of the dirt.” The trainer stopped suddenly, lifting the scarred brow over his eye. “What d’ya mean, ‘too’?”

“That’s what Variok was on about,” Mai said. “He’s got a regular who brings him truffles from the Traitor’s Forest—”

“Where does Griff think Kaz will find the rare white truffle?” the Behemoth Thusr asked, leaning in until his nose nearly touched Griff’s, his eyes as wide as tea saucers.

Mai crossed her thick arms under her breasts, clearly annoyed at being forgotten.

“Well, now, they’re just an accident of nature, aren’t they,” Griff said. “You find ‘em in amongst all the black truffles.”

“About one to every ten thousand?” Roark asked, sensing the emergence of a pattern.

“About that, aye.” Griff nodded, scratching his scarred, bristly chin. “Why? Ain’t that what your precious elf merchant said? ’Cause if he told you different, he’s playing an angle.”

Mai rolled her eyes as if Griff were her doddering old father. “You and elves.”

“Bah! You know how they are.”

Kaz seemed to have forgotten his lady love and Griff were even in the throne room.

“Macaroni is a canny beast,” Kaz said, turning to Roark, eyebrows raised in a question. “Doesn’t Roark think so?”

Roark stored the short sword in his Inventory to repair later.

“What do you say, Mac?” he asked the distortion wandering the ceiling. Despite his evolution—and significant size increase—the little monster still had no problem clinging to the ceiling, which absolutely baffled Roark. Hearthworld’s physical laws didn’t seem that different from those of his home world. It had to be part of Mac’s innate magick.

Mac chirped gleefully, then dropped onto the empty altar with a *thud*, making himself visible as he landed. That answered that.



THREE HOURS LATER, they were far south of the Cruel Citadel, at the edge of the Traitor’s Forest, following Mac while he rooted around between the trees and in the underbrush. Kaz hovered over the Young Turtle Dragon, delightedly inspecting every one of the little mud-covered balls as they came out of the earth before declaring them “another common black truffle.” The silver lining was that these at least were edible—unlike the coquelicots—so it fell to Roark to harvest them, stowing them away in his pack for later use.

As they searched, Roark remained on guard with his rapier and dagger out. He didn’t trust this place. The silence felt wrong. Too heavy. Moonlight filtered down through the leaves in bright silver beams. The branches overhead moved to unfelt breezes, making the moonbeams dance and shift like the mistwraiths that haunted the seaside villages of Traisbin. And everywhere, lengths of tattered rope hung down from the branches. It made the skin down the nape of his neck crawl.

“Kaz, do you know anything about this place?” Roark asked, batting another tangle of rotted rope out of the way as he passed.

“Kaz knows there are white truffles here,” the Behemoth Thusr said with burning conviction. “Kaz can *feel* it.”

Roark eyed a shifting moonbeam. It almost looked like a woman. Then again, it almost looked like nothing, too.

Ahead, Mac had begun sniffing at the foot of an ancient oak. A hanging oak, the people of Korvo would've called it, with that thick branch jutting out. A tattered rope swung from it, swaying in a breeze that Roark couldn't feel.

"I meant something more along the lines of why these ropes are everywhere," he clarified.

"Ropes?" Kaz knelt beside Mac, watching eagerly as the Turtle Dragon pushed his lizard-like nose into the dirt and rooted around. "Kaz hasn't seen any ropes."

Roark turned in a circle, counting just the ones he could see from where he was standing. Six, seven, eight, nine ...

"There are a dozen of the bloody things within spitting distance. Maybe if you—" He broke off abruptly as he turned back around to Kaz and Mac.

They were gone.

The loamy ground Mac had been digging up lay undisturbed. But Roark knew his friends had been at the foot of that ancient oak just a moment ago. The hanging oak.

"Kaz?" Roark took a few steps, searching the nearby trees in case there were two that looked similar enough to mistake.

Except now every tree was a hanging oak. Each one with a noose dangling from that jutting branch. Not rotted and tattered rope anymore, but newly woven and ready to give some unlucky soul an Ustari necklace.

His eyes were playing tricks on him. It was the way the moonlight kept shifting. That was the only possible explanation.

"Macaroni!" Roark shouted. They were here somewhere, he'd just wandered a bit too far and lost sight of them. He turned in circles, scanning the trees. They couldn't be far away, he was sure of it. "Kaz!"

Someone was whispering, but they stopped as soon as Roark stopped shouting. He thought the sound had come from just over his shoulder, but when he spun around to find its source, he nearly walked headfirst into a noose.

The stench of rotting flesh filled his nostrils, and Roark realized the noose dangling from the hanging oak was mottled with dried

bodily fluids. Shreds of putrid flesh and clumps of hair were caught in the fibers, as if a corpse had hung in it for weeks before rotting enough for the head to fall off and the body to drop.

“This is some sort of spell. An illusion.” He looked around for signs of the mage or creature that had cast it. “Show yourself!”

This time the whispering continued for a breath after Roark fell silent, then died off. He strained to pick out the words, but he couldn’t understand what it was saying. Had it been a woman’s voice?

Something moved in the corner of his vision, a bulky shape moving at a weird clip. His head whipped around to follow it, but the thing disappeared behind the trunk of another massive hanging oak before his eyes could focus. He caught a glimpse of gray, then it was gone. Nothing walked out on the other side of the tree.

A breeze sent goosebumps prickling down Roark’s back and arms—the first breeze he’d felt since walking into this forest—and made the branches overhead creak and groan.

The groans sounded almost human. Or post-human, perhaps. The groan of a putrefying cadaver sighing out trapped gasses over the vocal cords.

Roark felt a presence behind him—huge, hulking, and evil beyond imagining—just before the sound of shuffling footsteps reached his ears. He spun around, rapier at the ready.

Nothing but an ocean of moonlit forest, punctuated by swaying nooses. Roark swallowed hard, forcing the motion through a dry throat and trying to fight down the dread swelling in his chest. He could hear the whispering again, just under the clanging hammer of his heart. The whispering was close, but he still couldn’t make out any of the words. His rapier arm gave an involuntary shudder and the short hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Something was in this forest with him. A horror so deep he couldn’t begin to comprehend it. The longer he stood there, the more convinced Roark became that he was staring the thing down, but his mind refused to see it. Whatever this horror was, it was so terrible that his mind was covering it with nothing but empty forest and swinging ropes.

“She’s here,” a voice whispered in his ear.

Roark whirled around, so terrified that he forgot the dagger in his off hand and hacked wildly *dalla spalla* with the rapier. He couldn’t see anything, but he felt the resistance against his blade with every chop. The shining edge came away stained with the blood of the unseen horror.

Motion out of the corner of his eye. Something grabbed the wrist of his dagger hand. A noose. He tried to jerk away, but the rope held fast. The fraying fibers dug in, tearing up the ghostly pale skin of his wrist. Panicked, Roark slashed at the rope with his rapier. As soon as he cut through the first rope, a second latched onto his arm in nearly the same place.

A heavy mass slammed into his ear, leaving his head ringing and his feet stumbling. The invisible horror.

The whispers were a constant susurrus now, filling every corner of his mind. How could he have ever thought they sounded female? They were evil given voice. A deep, churning madness pitched so low that it could only be felt in the deep places of the soul—but never understood. Never.

Another noose wrapped around his calf, biting into the flesh like teeth.

In the right corner of his vision, Roark’s filigreed Health vial flashed green.

He tried to turn and hack at the noose poisoning him, but it just dug in tighter and started shaking him back and forth. More ropes twined around his arms and chest until he could barely move his hands or arms. He would’ve cast Infernal Torment or another of his written spells, yet with his hands bound by the implacable ropes, his magick was less than useless. Besides, what would he have cast it upon? The trees? The nooses themselves? In a last-ditch effort, he tried biting at the ropes, but to no avail. They dragged him to the ground, holding him down for the invisible horror to feast on. He fought and kicked and cursed, but a cold weight settled on his chest and stomach, forcing the air out.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t escape. He was going to die here, caught and held fast like a fox in a snare.

A sticky tongue slapped against Roark's cheek.

"... to stop! It is Kaz and Macaroni! Please, Roark, can't you hear Kaz?"

A bearded lizard's head covered in muddy dirt hovered an inch from Roark's face. For a moment, Roark panicked, uncertain what sort of creature had him in its grasp. That is, until the beast blinked its bulging eyes slightly out of time with one another.

"Mac?"

"Roark?" Kaz's voice was rough with desperation and right in Roark's ear.

"It's me." Roark tried to move, but found he was still trapped in place on the ground. Not only was Mac sitting on his chest, but a pair of dark blue, thickly muscled arms were wrapped around his stomach, pinning his arms to his sides. "Let me go, mate."

The arms didn't budge.

"Say something to prove that Roark is himself again," Kaz demanded. "Something only the sane Roark would know."

"But something only I would know automatically precludes you from knowing it, Kaz."

The arms squeezed the air out of Roark's lungs.

"Fine." Roark winced. "The first food you ate was skewers in the Averi City Marketplace, your battle cry is 'For salt,' and you're interested in Mai for more than leveling up your cooking."

The blue arms squeezed once more, but this time Kaz gave a cry of relief. "Roark is all right again!"

Finally, the Behemoth let Roark go. Mac waddled off his chest and up the side of a tree. Roark rolled up to his feet, favoring his right leg as searing pain throbbed through a deep gash just the size and shape of a Turtle Dragon's maw. Another wound in his stomach wept blood and an unidentified clear fluid. The liquid in his slowly refilling Health vial was bright green rather than red.

"Did Mac poison me?" Roark asked, retrieving his dropped rapier and dagger and putting them away.

Kaz shuffled to his feet.

"Roark was acting so strangely," he said, looking down at the ground. "Talking about ropes and hanging oaks, and then he started

yelling for Kaz and Mac as if he couldn't see right in front of his face. Kaz tried to get his attention, but Roark kept yelling." Kaz shrugged. "Then he started slashing Kaz and Mac with the rapier. Kaz was afraid Roark would kill him and Macaroni both."

"I'm sorry, mate." Roark slapped Kaz on the back. "Thanks for stopping me. You did the right thing."

A tremulous grin broke out across the Behemoth's face and his huge blue shoulders relaxed.

"Truth be told, Kaz was more worried that Roark would damage them," he said. He strode over to the base of a gnarled oak and gathered something from a natural bowl in its roots. He turned around and held his filled hands out to Roark proudly.

Muddy little puff balls. They didn't look any different from the "common black truffle" Kaz was dismissing earlier, but Roark ventured a wild guess anyway.

"White truffles?"

"White truffles!" Kaz crowed, cackling like mad.

A breeze shivered through the branches, but didn't touch Roark's shaggy hair or the black feather plumes of Kaz's antlered headdress. The low rattling of the leaves almost sounded like a feminine whisper.

"Good," Roark said. "Let's get the bloody hells out of this place."

CHAPTER 35

IT'S A TRAP!



A plate-mail-wearing hero slipped through the gaping hole between a pair of Thusr Knights, hamstringing the closest one with a slice of one Steel Natagama.

“No, you two have to come in at the same time,” Roark said, trying not to sound as frustrated as he felt. He sidestepped the level 4 hero’s wild swing, then ran him through unceremoniously with the rapier. The last of the hero’s red bar drained away and he crumpled to the floor. Dead. Roark absently cast Infernal Invigoration on a level 5 Changeling who’d taken a glancing blow during the tryst, healing him to full health, then turned back to the Knights. “If you don’t cut him off in tandem, the heroes will be able to slip past you like he just did.”

The squad of high-level Trolls stared at him as if he were speaking some unheard-of language.

Roark sighed and rubbed at his temples. He’d come upstairs for a shift grieving—he could use all the levels he could manage before he challenged the Dungeon Lord—but instead, he’d spent the last few hours trying to teach the newest band of Mugwump Trolls how to work together. The hulking Knights, gangling Champions, and weird Shamans didn’t seem to be getting any closer to grasping the concept.

“Another raiding party!” the Changeling, now positioned at the top of the stairs, shouted down. “Eight of them, levels 15 to 24!”

Roark nodded and the Changeling disappeared into the shadows behind the crumbling staircase.

“Everyone set up again,” Roark told the group. “We’ll take this from the beginning.”

Luckily, with the notoriety the citadel was gaining these days, the stream of heroes to practice on was nearly endless. That last party had been low-level compared to what had become the norm. Roark hoped a tougher band of opposition would force these Trolls to come together. That or die. Death, especially in this world, could be an excellent teacher.

The first hero into the antechamber, a mage in flowing black robes, raised his fist over his head and shouted out a word like thunder. The citadel shook as if an earthquake had hit; lightning flashed overhead, then fiery hail rained from the ceiling. The small burning stones sizzled against Roark’s skin, raising red welts wherever they hit and eating away at his Health vial. With his Regen rate, the hail wasn’t fast enough to be lethal to him, but it was painful enough to be annoying and would almost certainly kill the Changeling if it went on unchecked.

Roark wrote a quick dispel in his Initiate’s Spell Book and triggered it, cutting off the fiery hail mid-storm. Then he signaled the archers—a pair of Reaver Champions set up on either side of the antechamber facing the stairs.

The Champions loosed their arrows, but the mage ducked back into the doorway, trading places with a massive Necroknight—[GrumpyAlpaca]—decked out in black scale mail etched with glowing green runes. The archers let fly another volley, but the bolts rusted as they closed with the Necro, crumbling into dust when they hit her mail. GrumpyAlpaca charged. The two Thusr Knights who’d let the level 4 hero from the previous band slip between them raised their weapons—a wicked-looking morning star spiked with curved talons from an unknown beast and a massive battle-notched scythe—and prepared to meet the Necro’s attack.

Before Roark could signal the three Shaman planted around the room, one hurled a caerulean Slow Spell at the Necroknight just as another shot an ice javelin at her. The javelin shattered inches from the Necro’s armor. The caerulean light hit full force, however, slowing her charge to half-speed.

“Her armor’s impervious to physical weapons, but not magick,” Roark called to the Shaman favoring the icy spikes. “Try a plague or health-draining spell.”

The Shaman scowled, but gave a curt nod and fired a burst of green at the sluggishly charging Necroknight. This plague spell slipped through the armor’s enchantment, quickly wicking away red from the Necro’s Health bar.

The black-clad mage was back, calling out another thunderous prayer at the ceiling. One of the Shamans hurled a fiery whirlwind at the caster. The mage threw up both hands, conjuring a shield of white light that absorbed the attack.

An arrow hissed through the air and thudded into Roark’s shoulder.

[2x stealth multiplier!]

A handful of red liquid from his filigreed vial drained away. Roark’s eyes snapped up to the doorway, searching for the source, but caught only a shadowy haze before it disappeared again.

“Assassin!” Roark warned his Trolls, still scanning the myriad pools of shadow.

He didn’t want to be pulled into this battle, that would serve no one, but he certainly didn’t feel like acting the part of a pincushion to these would-be killers. He cast a level 2 Hex-Armor spell. Cold power settled around him like a heavy cloak, sinking down through his skin and deeper into his bones. He felt momentarily weaker—the spell extracting its price and temporarily reducing his Constitution by 5—but the sensation quickly vanished as a shield like glimmering crystal surrounded his body like a second skin.

Another barrage of arrows sailed through the air, several slapping into Roark’s Hex-Armor, only to bounce away harmlessly as they depleted a small portion of his Magick. An excellent addition to his arsenal.

Several more arrows found a home in the gut of a nearby Reaver Shaman.

“Ooooh! The *heroes* have an assassin in their party!” She dropped to a crouch and disappeared in a curl of inky smoke.

Not the hottest coal in the fire, that one. Roark shook his head and turned back to the fight.

The Thusr Knights were trading blows with the fearsome Necroknight, GrumpyAlpaca. The plague spell had eaten away a small fraction of the Necro’s health, but it was wearing off, and the Thusr Knights’ two-on-one advantage was mitigated by her enchanted armor. Their weapons didn’t disintegrate as the arrows had, but they weren’t dealing out damage from their dual Flame and Ice enchantments, either.

Across the chamber, the mage and a Shaman hurled elemental whirlwinds, balls of lightning, and deadly javelins at one another as fast as they could conjure them. Though the Shaman was five levels higher than the mage, they seemed equally matched, each raising shields or countering attacks before the spells could land. The other two Shamans were engaged with a second enormous opponent, a massive level 20 Ronin Arcanist whipping around a flaming chigiriki and shooting spells from a carved wand in his off hand.

At the top of the stairs, a level 18 Executioner—[DeathBySnuSnu]—wielding an enormous axe was making quick work of the hail-damaged Changeling. Though the Changeling was trying to retreat to the safety of his group, the Executioner had cut off the lumpy little creature’s access to the stairs, stealing away his only viable escape route. As Roark looked on, the Changeling glanced down the side of the crumbling stairway, obviously trying to decide if he could survive the jump.

Either none of the griefing party noticed their smallest member’s trouble or none of them were able to get free long enough to help.

Roark scowled. He tried not to step in on these fights unless absolutely necessary—the more Experience the recruits got griefing the better—but this time it couldn’t be helped. The Changeling had fought and scratched his way to level 5. Roark didn’t want those hard-earned levels to disappear, both for the Changeling’s sake and the sake of the overall strength of his army.

He cast another round of Infernal Invigoration on the Changeling, then pulled free his rapier and dagger and sprinted across the chamber and up the stairs. He caught movement in the corner of his eye, then felt an invisible shoulder bounce off him as he passed, but paid it no mind. It was either the Reaver Champion or the Reaver Champion was about to deal with it. He raced up the stairs, undeterred.

A chuckle filtered down from the Executioner as he cut off the Changeling's escape route again. The hero swiped his axe in a broad arc, nearly taking the small blue head off at the shoulders, but the Changeling ducked and rolled away. It was almost as if the Executioner were toying with the tiny Troll.

Roark reached the top just as the Executioner swung his axe overhead, trying to chop the Changeling in half. Roark plunged his Kaiken Dagger into the Executioner's kidney. The Executioner howled with pain, his axe burying itself in the flagstones where the Changeling had been. While he tried to wrench it free, Roark attacked with the rapier, *riverso* and *mandritto tondo*, opening yawning bloody slashes across the Executioner's ribs and back and carving away at the hero's red Health bar. With the movement bonuses Enchanted into the blade, Roark looked like a blur, and he planned to take full advantage of that.

As powerful as the rapier was, Roark knew it wouldn't have a chance against the heft and solidity of the axe. The moment the Executioner freed it from the staircase, the odds in close combat would shift drastically away from Roark's favor. Unless ... unless he could land a Hex-Touch.

Roark feinted left then darted right, driving his closed fist into the side of the Executioner's head, triggering the dastardly new Curse! Roark focused on the attribute he wished to curse—Constitution—as stomach-churning power, like raw sewage, rushed out through his knuckles and into the man's body.

The Executioner lurched and stumbled, swaying on uncertain feet. "What the fuck, bro? What did you just do to me?" he shouted, eyes bulging.

"I evened the odds, mate," Roark shot back with a grin.

“Now!” a voice shouted, slashing Roark’s triumphant moment short.

Roark cursed. He knew that voice. PwnrBwner_OG.

A trio of heroes—none of them the High Combat Cleric in question—charged into the antechamber from the shadowy recesses of the doorway. Too late, the Executioner’s actions made sense: he hadn’t been toying with the Changeling, he’d been *luring* Roark into a trap. An ambush, cleverly set by Roark’s greatest Hearthworld enemy.

One of the heroes—a woman with a pair of gleaming kukris—stepped in and mercilessly chopped off the Changeling’s head, ending the little blue creature on the spot.

Roark backpedaled, covering his face with his arm.

As soon as the Changeling hit the floor, its corpse exploded in a shower of gore and bone spikes of various sizes.

The Executioner yelped as the spikes imbedded themselves in his shins, groin, chest, and throat. His Health bar flashed a sickly green as the corpse’s diseased blood poisoned him. He dropped backward on top of Roark’s Kaiken dagger, dead.

But Roark didn’t have time to enjoy the Experience gained from the Curse-killing.

The new trio of heroes advanced on him, their movements precise, well-rehearsed. It seemed Roark and his Trolls hadn’t been the only ones practicing. One of the heroes swung a pair of gleaming kukris, another a flail, the third a heavy warhammer—forcing Roark back down the stairs one step at a time. He battled back the best he could, parrying their attacks, but unable to regain his ground.

Over their shoulders, Roark caught sight of their leader. Now a level 26 High Combat Cleric, PwnrBwner carried a colossal blue-black mace radiating wicked, razor-sharp flanges shaped like sapphire flames.

“I wondered where you’d slunk off to,” Roark shouted up at the High Combat Cleric, trying to affect an air of nonchalance in spite of the three thugs he was struggling to keep at bay. “Beautiful mace. I’m looking forward to disenchanting it, too.”

“Why don’t you just code yourself in one, you modding prick?” PwnrBwner_OG sneered. “Afraid you’re going to break the game? Or do you just not want anything that a more skilled player could loot off your ugly-ass corpse?”

Roark smirked. “Based on your record so far, I’m not that worried either way.”

Pain like a bright red poker lanced through Roark’s side. He winced. The thug with a kukri had managed to score a hit. Carrying on a conversation while fighting three opponents—contained though they were by the width of the stairs—wasn’t the easiest activity he’d ever engaged in.

“You like that?” PwnrBwner_OG gloated. “These’re my new boys —”

“Hello!” the feminine thug snapped.

PwnrBwner pointed his blue-flame mace at her. “Don’t start with me, Irena, you know I mean that shit as gender-neutral.” He grinned back down at Roark. “We’ve all been on the wrong end of your bullshit cheating, modder, and we’re here to put a stop to it.”

“Yeah,” the female thug, Irena, agreed. “Hearthworld is the last mod-free haven, a throwback to the glory days of gaming, and you’re *fucking it up!*”

Roark pulled back suddenly, opening his stance to *invitio*. Irena took the proffered bait and lunged with her kukris flashing. Roark dodged a deadly slice from the warhammer-wielding thug to his right, then carved Irena across her cheek with his rapier. She screeched in fury, then lunged again, leaving herself open to another thrust, this one *imboccata*.

A flash of motion overhead drew Roark’s eye as Mac dropped down from the ceiling, plummeting toward PwnrBwner.

But at the last second, the High Combat Cleric stepped back and gripped his mace with both hands.

“Not today, Gojira!” PwnrBwner swung the mace. Its blue-flamed head connected with Mac’s shell with a sickening crunch. Mac tumbled off the side of the crumbling staircase, landing below with a meaty slap. “I know your tricks, dickweed.” He paused, eyeing Mac’s evolved form. “Though I’ll admit, I wasn’t expecting whatever the

fuck that is. Still, I'm not gonna fall for any of that shit again." He offered Roark a wicked grin, his eyes cold and hard and full of murder.

Roark narrowly avoided a swipe of the flail, then drew a deep red furrow across the wielder's wrist, just in front of his bracer. Down below, it looked as if Mac were struggling to get up.

"Is Roark in danger?" Kaz. He must've heard the commotion from the kitchens and come running.

"Holy shit," PwnrBwner muttered. "It's Evolution city up in here."

"Why is no one helping Roark?!" Kaz thundered, surging forward.

"See to Mac!" Roark shouted down, his gaze still fixed firmly on his nemesis.

Irena took advantage of Roark's momentary distraction to plant one kukri just under his ribs. The weapon stuck like a red-hot fire poker and pain surged through his body. His Infernali Magicka absorbed the damage, though it was eating through his power at an alarming rate.

Infuriated, Roark lashed out with his free fist. Her nose snapped under his punch and her hand slipped off the kukri's handle. A solid hit, though it was a shame he'd already used Hex-Touch on the Executioner, DeathBySnuSnu. Before she could recover, Roark jerked the kukri out of his side. He wasn't trained in the kukri, but its small size compared to the length and reach of the rapier made it perfect for the Off-Hand Combo attack.

Roark whirled, slicing into the woman's upper arm, throat, and defensively thrown hand before she could counter. PwnrBwner's other two thugs hacked at Roark, but his entire focus was on removing Irena from the fight. The last sliver of her red Health bar flashed out a warning. She grabbed for a Sufficient Health Potion, but Roark chopped into her arm with the kukri, forcing her to drop the concoction, then lunged, piercing her chest with a *stoccata di quarta* thrust of his rapier. She shrieked and tumbled from the staircase in much the same way Mac had. Except she was dead.

Thunder boomed overhead. A jagged bolt of blue-white lightning streaked out of the ceiling and slammed into Roark's chest. For a

moment, he saw nothing but pink. His serrated teeth crashed together as his muscles all seized at once.

[You have been Stunned. Dexterity reduced by 26% for 26 seconds.]

[You are burning in Rajthorne the Mighty's Purifying Flame. (2 burning damage x caster's Divine Favor level)/second for 10 seconds.]

When Roark opened his eyes again, he was lying on his back at the foot of the staircase. His Infernali Magick was completely empty along with half his Health vial, and the red liquid inside was dropping by the second. Blue flames engulfed his vision, searing the flesh on his bones. His hands were empty, his rapier gone.

“Pretty baller, right?” PwnrBwner taunted from somewhere nearby. “Where’s your fancy cheater’s spells now?”

Roark could’ve slapped himself. He’d gotten so caught up in the back and forth with the High Combat Cleric that he’d forsaken his magick grimoire, which still had a number of spells waiting for him. Spells that didn’t require Infernali Magick to utilize. Back in his home world, magick was a powerful force, not lightly tossed around. It was so natural to fall back on his fighting prowess instead of resorting to this world’s magick, which was much more reliable and readily available than his own—though far more restricted.

“Eat a nutsack, loser,” the Cleric snapped.

Roark rolled away from the direction of PwnrBwner’s voice, fumbling a Sufficient Health Potion from his Inventory as he did. A whiff of air ruffling the blue flames covering his body told Roark that he’d just missed having his face ripped off by the Cleric’s new mace. He bolted the sickly sweet health brew, then tossed down the bottle. As his filigreed Health vial refilled itself, warmth and vitality flowed into his limbs, chasing away some measure of the pain from the flames.

Roark pulled out his Initiate’s Spell Book and wand, blinking until he could see through the blue fire. First, some pre-written damage control, then to put this spoilt brat playing war back in his place.

But before Roark could fire off his first spell—a level 3 Acid Bath—at PwnrBwner_OG’s feet, a volcano of pain exploded in his lower back. He spun, prepared to douse his attacker instead, but found nothing but a puff of inky black smoke awaiting him.

The telltale sign of a Reaver Shadow Stalking.

Behind Roark, PwnrBwner cried out, “What the fuck?”

Roark whirled around and fired off the Acid Bath. But PwnrBwner wasn’t the only one to splash down into it. The pair of Thusr Knights joined him. One thrashed the High Combat Cleric with his wicked-looking morning star. The other splashed and fought through the bubbling acid, slicing at Roark with his battle-notched scythe. Roark fired a level 1 Fireball at the bastard.

Across the chamber, Kaz howled in fury, the sound accented by the clash of steel on steel.

“Death!” the softhearted Brute Thusr cried. “Death to the SALT-HATING TRAITORS!”

CHAPTER 36

OUTNUMBERED



Freezing pain exploded in Roark's shoulder as the sharp end of an ice javelin protruded from his chest, covered in his blood.

The blue fire from PwnrBwner's Obliterating Lightning disappeared immediately, counteracted by the ice, but Roark's movement slowed to a crawl.

At a glacial pace, Roark turned, wand ready to fire off a level 2 Chain Lightning, but before he made it halfway around, a dagger landed in his back. The Shadow Stalking smoke hadn't even dissipated before he felt another blade plunge into his chest.

Unfortunately, his Hex Armor had lapsed, so every blow ate through another chunk of his rapidly diminishing Health vial.

The Shaman shot another icy javelin at Roark. His Infernali Magick had recovered to a quarter during the course of his hellish beating, so he had enough power to conjure an Infernal Shield. The spike smashed against the violet barrier with a sound like breaking glass. He cast Chain Lightning. The Shaman tried to dodge, but the level 2 spell came with a 50% attraction to moving targets. The Shaman flipped in midair and landed on her face.

Another strike from the Champion landed in the ball of muscle in Roark's shoulder. Coming from behind, it missed his Infernal Shield entirely.

"Bloody bitch," Roark cursed, his charred lips cracking and spewing blood. He had to find a way to slow the Champion before she killed him.

He fumbled a quill and inkpot from his Inventory and scribbled out a spell in a level 1 slot, casting it the moment he finished writing it.

The floor beneath his feet turned into a deep pit of sucking mud fifteen feet across, and it would stay that way for thirty seconds. Where the mud pit and bubbling acid bath met, the substances frothed and sizzled.

The Reaver Champion skidded to a halt, mired in the muck. Not wasting a moment, he inscribed a level 1 immunity to fit, casting it on himself.

[Target is unaffected by sucking mud for thirty seconds.]

Roark swapped his spell book for the Bow of the Fleet-Fingered Hunter, a quiver full of arrows suddenly resting against his back. He backpedaled across the sucking mud as if it were solid flagstone and fired one arrow after another at the trapped Reaver Champion, winnowing away at her red bar.

A cry arose from the acid bath. The corpse of one Thusr Knight had fallen on PwnrBwner_OG, trapping him underneath. Immediately, the Knight's Cursed Kite Shield called down a cloud of flesh-eating beetles on the struggling High Combat Cleric. The buzzing of their wings filled the air with a droning hum as they tore into the Cleric.

"You cocksuckers!" PwnrBwner screamed. The beetles hadn't been enough to kill him, but his Health bar was flashing out a critical warning. "I'll be back!"

"We're counting on it, mate." Roark fired an arrow into the side of PwnrBwner's skull, killing him instantly.

A second later, a pair of ice javelins slammed into Roark, one lodging in his useless right wing and pinning it to his back, the other going through his thigh. Movement speed dulled by the spikes, Roark returned fire at the Shaman too late, his arrow bouncing off the wall where she had been.

Wasted effort. He had to take out the Champion before the timer on the sucking mud pit ran out. Just as he was nocking another arrow, his hands and arms moving at a slug's pace, the acid bath disappeared, depositing the corpses of PwnrBwner and the Thusr

Knight on top of him onto the stone floor. Roark loosed his arrow, watching it arc across the pit and sink into the Champion's gut. He drew again.

Pain sliced diagonally down his back and cut away a tenth of his already low filigreed Health vial. Roark craned his neck to find the other Thusr Knight stood at the edge of the sucking mud, using his huge arms and long-handled scythe to reach Roark at the center.

Before Roark could turn and draw his bow, Kaz slammed into the Knight like a battering ram, his dual-hand scythes dealing out mighty doses of Fire and Ice with every blow.

Another ice javelin landed in Roark's chest. He cursed the family line of every poxy Shaman in the citadel effusively as he adjusted his aim with maddening slowness and fired at the gangly wench. She snickered and dodged his arrow in that weird scuttling gait all the Reaver Shamans seemed to share. A glance around the antechamber confirmed that between them, the three Shamans had managed to take out the remaining heroes from PwnrBwner's raiding party. They were deadlier than they'd been letting on during the afternoon of griefing. Luring him into a false sense of security.

He fitted another arrow to his bow and fired just ahead of the one who kept shooting him with ice javelins. This bolt landed true, but shaved away only a minor fraction of the Shaman's health.

The now-familiar explosion of pain in his spine let Roark know the Champion had finally slogged her way through the sucking mud close enough to stab him again.

This wasn't going to work. He and Kaz couldn't take down all five of these Azibek supporters alone. But he couldn't see Mac anywhere, and there were no Trolls loyal to him nearby. The closest were probably cooking with Mai in the kitchens or training with Griff, and Roark didn't want to involve either of them in this. Trolls bent on taking him down wouldn't have any compunctions about slaughtering the human outsiders he'd brought into the citadel.

Roark fired off another arrow with ponderous slowness. It struck the Shaman across the chamber from him at the same moment her ice javelin impaled his bicep and bone, icy-hot pain radiating up and down the limb.

[*Your left arm has been injured! You cannot equip two-handed items, cast two-handed spells, or equip single-handed items, spells, or spell books in your left hand for 30 seconds.*]

“Damnation!” Roark hissed.

In the corner of his eye, his filigreed Health vial had dropped to less than a quarter of the red liquid remaining. He couldn’t even cut a blood cantrip into his arm without draining away the last of his Health and killing himself. At least if he died, he wouldn’t lose any levels since he’d hit 26 not too long before. That was the single silver lining to this outhouse slog.

But the diminished Health triggered a flash of inspiration. Roark returned the useless bow to his Inventory and grabbed the Lash of the Waning Blood Moon. The boon he’d received from Azibek what seemed like a lifetime ago.



Lash of the Waning Blood Moon

Damage: 29 - 36

Range: 20 ft

Durability: 63 of 66

Level Requirement: 4

Dexterity Requirement: 16

Constitution Requirement: 20

Whip Class Weapon – Enchanted

When wielder’s Health drops below 25%, wielder goes into a blood rage, dealing 2x damage to opponents while taking 50% damage.



As soon as Roark had the whip in hand, a pulsing bloody red aura exuded from his ghostly pale skin. A fury like he’d never felt before filled him. Where he normally felt rage as a cold, deadly simmer just under his skin, this was blindingly hot, molten metal rolling through his veins, a complete forsaking of all reason and calculation.

The lash shot out, its five half-moon blades whistling and tinkling through the air, and slammed into the Reaver Champion's cheek and forehead. They tore away, taking half the Champion's face with them, leaving behind a grinning, leaking mess.

More ice javelins sank into Roark's gut and back, obviously fired by multiple Shamans, but he barely felt their frozen touch. He whipped the lash at the Champion again. She tried to duck and roll, but the sucking mud pit held her fast. The lash tore away a chunk of her shoulder, dropping her Health bar into the flashing zone. One more hit and she would be finished.

Roark cocked back his arm and slung the lash at the Champion. The blades tinkled against one another musically as they described a perfect arc through the air. The mud pit vanished. The Champion leapt to her feet, diving inside the reach of the five-tailed whip, and sprinted at Roark, daggers raised and ready to kill. Roark jerked at the lash's handle, ripping the tails back toward himself and the Champion. The half-moon blades sank into her back with meaty thuds, but the impact drove her into Roark. Her daggers tore into his chest and damaged left arm, draining away all but a sliver of the red liquid in his filigreed Health vial. It sat in the corner of his vision, flashing frantically.

But the lash had done its work and done it well.

The Champion slid down Roark's chest, dead. Roark spun around, determined anger filling every corner of his mind, pulsing in time with the bloody aura surrounding him, in time with his flashing Health vial. Some faraway part of his mind tried to tell him to do something about that, but the majority of him paid no attention. It was time to kill some traitor Shamans.

Roark whipped the lash at the cackling, gangly Shaman in the corner. The blades cracked and slammed together at the end of their reach, just shy of slicing off the Shaman's nose.

“Behind Roark!” Kaz shouted, desperation in his voice.

Still slowed by the multiple ice javelins he'd taken, Roark tried to throw up an Infernal shield behind him with his injured arm rather than turn around, but a line of text disrupted the spell.

[*Your left arm has been injured! You cannot equip two-handed items, cast two-handed spells, or equip single-handed items, spells, or spell books in your left hand for 11 seconds.*]

Understanding the message was almost impossible through the haze of anger. Before he could finish reading it, a Spray of Fire slammed into his back, courtesy of another Shaman. His Health wavered on the edge of death, and Roark felt outrage pulsing through his veins at the prospect.

Sufficient Health Potion.

The single clear thought managed to break through the blood rage enveloping him like a cloud. He grabbed his final bottle of the disgusting concoction out of his Inventory, raising it with galling lethargy. Ahead, he saw the javelin-firing Shaman cock her arm back, a blue glow building in her palm. He wasn't going to get the potion to his lips in time to beat her spell. The gangly arm shot out, ice javelin whistling through the air at his chest. He tried to dodge, but knew he was never going to make it out of the way before the javelin landed and finished him off.

“No!” Kaz shouted, diving in front of Roark.

The icy spike impaled the Brute Thusr, tearing away the last bit of red from his Health bar instead of Roark's. Kaz slammed into the floor, skidding a bit before coming to a halt at Roark's feet, his wide onyx eyes glazed over with death.

Roark downed the Sufficient Health Potion, refilling his filigreed vial to nearly half. The bloody aura disappeared as his injuries healed themselves.

Just beyond the curve of the potion bottle, he saw the Shaman rearing back for another shot. Mac appeared out of nowhere, leaping off the wall behind the Shaman and driving his scorpion-tipped tail directly into her throat. At the same moment, a puff of inky smoke erupted beside the Turtle Dragon and Zyra stepped out of it, dicing the gangly Shaman with her poisoned blades. Together, she and Mac danced through the Shaman's Health as if it were nothing.

Roark left them to finish off that one and turned back to the Reaver who'd shot the Spray of Fire at him. With his left arm mended, he could access his Infernal spells once more.

Briefly, he considered pulling out a cursed head and blasting the Reaver to pieces in one fell swoop. But no. That was too quick. Too painless.

As the slowing effect of the last ice javelin wore off, Roark whipped the Lash of the Waning Blood Moon at the scuttling Shaman. Its many blades wedged in the Shaman's back, and Roark yanked it toward him, jerking her from her bare feet. As she slammed into the floor, Roark poured Infernal Torment into her. Plum-colored flames licked through her indigo flesh, and she rolled around the flagstones screaming. The purple in Roark's Infernal Magick vial drained as he pumped the spell into the Shaman, but he didn't stop or break eye contact with the turncoat until her corpse lay perfectly still and silent.

"Griefer, behind you!" Zyra's leather-wrapped hand flashed out, a pair of the flechettes he'd made her flying past Roark's side.

Roark spun, following their flight and whipping the lash around with him. The flechettes imbedded themselves into a wall of nothingness, followed by Roark's whip as it wrapped around the invisible thing. Blood and gore splattered as the whip's blades imbedded themselves in unseen flesh.

A reedy male voice screamed, and a level 19 Deadly Cutthroat suddenly appeared at the center of the whipcord. Roark scowled and burned this one alive in Infernal Torment, too. A few moments later, the Cutthroat's body dropped to the floor, crackling merrily with the final tongues of plum-colored flame.

The last of the heroes and the traitors were dead.

CHAPTER 37

SAGE ADVICE



“Well?” Roark turned to Zyra, gesturing from Kaz’s fallen corpse to the bodies of Azibek’s supporters strewn around the antechamber. The result of his Feet of Clay quest. “Are you going to say you told me so?”

Her hood shook slowly from side to side. “It’s not any fun to kick someone while they’re down if they’re already kicking themselves.”

Mac bumped against Roark’s leg, nearly knocking him down, and his sticky black tongue shot out to lick Roark’s hand. The Turtle Dragon nudged Roark’s hand with his noseless face until Roark scratched at the neck behind his scaly head.

Roark took a deep breath and blew it out.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” he told Zyra. “How did you know? Your shift downstairs isn’t up for another few hours.”

“I was on my way up to bring you these.” She tossed him a trio of newly mixed Modest Health Potions. “Macaroni found me and practically dragged me up the stairs.”

“Canny beast,” Roark mumbled, thumping Mac affectionately on his padded side. He stored the potions, then nodded at Zyra. “Since you’re already upstairs, care to help me loot these?”

“Better than going back down,” she said, stooping by the Shaman she and Mac had killed. “Azibek hasn’t thrown anything at us for hours. Probably waiting to hear back from his team of assassins.”

They spent the next several minutes combing through the corpses. The heroes had left behind an assortment of things, from herbs to Enchanted Daggers to PwnrBwner’s Gauntlets of Waxing

Strength. There was even a Carved Ebony Wand with an assortment of second-, third-, and fourth-level spell slots. Roark's guilty conscience briefly considered passing the wand on to another Magick-favoring Troll, but ultimately decided he couldn't afford the luxury of guilt while he was leading this war. He would keep the Ebony and pass on the Plain Maple Wand instead, he decided as he moved to the next corpse.

The enemy Trolls didn't seem to have much more than the weapons and armor Roark had given them, and for some reason this made the cold fury in his gut roil. Did he even have any right to be mad at the poor bastards? If there was such a thing as poverty among Infernal chimeras, then these high-level Trolls were living in the thick of it. Killing him had just been another attempt to survive down here. As Griff had said, they didn't call it the Cruel Citadel because it was a nice place to settle down and raise a family.

When the final corpse was looted, Zyra straightened up and slapped her hands together as if to clear away unwanted dust.

"Coming back downstairs, Griefer? I could walk you to your study."

"I doubt I need an escort," he said without thinking. "Azibek can't have had time to send up another team of assassins already."

Zyra's hood dipped as if she were staring down at the floor. "Obviously any one of the Mugwumps could be an assassin waiting for their orders. But if you'd rather get killed on the stairs or finished off in the tunnels, then by all means, in your infinite Jotnar wisdom, walk alone."

Was it just his imagination or did she sound defensive? The razor's edge usually in her voice was gone and in its place was something almost flustered. Even ... embarrassed?

By the time Roark realized her offer to walk with him hadn't had anything to do with her usual paranoia, she was already breezing toward the corridor to the throne room. Idiot. He could've kicked himself.

"Zyra, wait."

She stopped in the doorway. "Yes, *Lord Overseer?*"

“I have some things I need to take care of up here first.” Roark found his gaze drawn back to Kaz’s still corpse. “Otherwise, I would’ve taken you up on your offer. I could always use your protection.”

Her rigid shoulders lowered a bit at that.

“Next time, then,” she said.

“Definitely.”

After the hooded Reaver disappeared downstairs, Roark headed to the smithy with Mac in tow. Kaz would respawn in two hours, Roark knew. This wasn’t forever-death, but it was a death his friend had suffered on his behalf, and the thought ate away at him. With all the Blacksmithing, Enchanting, and Tailoring levels Roark had accrued, it seemed beyond reason that Kaz—a Brute Thusr fully outfitted in armor Roark had made—had been killed. There had to be a solution, and Roark didn’t intend to leave the smithy until he’d found it.

He was still there an hour later when Griff popped his head in.

“Been lookin’ for you,” the grizzled old trainer said, sidling into the hot chamber. “About my short sword ...”

“Right.” Roark pulled out the battle-scarred blade. “I wasn’t able to grind out any of the notches, but I did manage to Repair and Improve it to Faultless quality.”

Griff took the sword, smiling. “I think she looks her best with a few scars. We’ve lasted this long, her and me, and we ain’t gettin’ any prettier. We show our age here and there, but we keep on a-kickin’.”

Nodding, Roark turned back to the Gauntlets of Waxing Strength he’d taken from PwnrBwner_OG’s corpse and selected *Destroy this item to learn its enchantment*. Unlike the Unique Rose Mace of Thorn Tethers, the gauntlets’ Enchantment was not Divinely aligned. With the sound of breaking glass and a flash of golden light, Increased Strength appeared in his mystic grimoire under Enchanting Skills.

[Congratulations, you have leveled up your Enchanting Trade Skill to Level 8! You may now learn Enchantments from Indestructible and

Bestowed weapons!]

It was the notice Roark had been waiting for. He pulled out the Lash of the Waning Blood Moon, tossed it onto the Enchanting table with all the gentle care and reverence befitting a gift meant to tie him to a bloody tyrant, and triggered the sigils that usually destroyed items for their Enchantment.

This time, however, the sound of breaking glass was replaced with the ring of a hammer on an anvil. Golden light flashed and the Enchantment for Blood Rage appeared in his grimoire.

Finally feeling as if he were making some progress, he pulled out the enormous pair of Faultless Obsidian Natagamas he'd forged. Their black hooked blades caught the firelight and sparkled threateningly. Then he selected the pair of Flawed Opals he'd saved back—one from griefing and one from a destroyed katana. They enhanced Damage-based Enchantments, perfect for the Blood Rage, which allowed the wielder to take half damage while inflicting two times as much damage per hit whenever their Health dropped below a certain level.

With the engraver's awl, Roark worked the containment script into the handle of each natagama, then added a hash-marked crescent, a rune called *Aryu*. Combined with the opal and set into the weapon, *Aryu* would multiply the efficacy of Blood Rage. Roark chiseled the setting for the opals, then engraved each divot with the binding rune, *Yasuc*. Then he pressed each opal into its setting until the flash of amber light let him know the gem and weapon had become a single item, inseparable outside of complete destruction of either the gems or the weapon.

He held up one natagama to inspect his work.



Faultless Obsidian Natagama of the Rage Blackout

Damage: 43 - 59

Durability: 63 of 66

Level Requirement: 10

Dexterity Requirement: 28
Constitution Requirement: 42
Blade Class Weapon – Enchanted

When wielder's Health drops below 15%, wielder goes into a blood rage, dealing 2x damage to opponents while taking 50% damage.



“Fifteen percent?” Roark cursed under his breath. By the time Kaz got down to fifteen percent Health, the reduction in damage would hardly help him. There was nothing for it. He would just have to level some more and try again later. He tossed the hooked blade back down on the Enchanting table, thinking he might as well get those opals back.

“Somethin’ on your mind, Griefer?”

Griff’s rough voice startled Roark out of his tunneled focus. He hadn’t realized the man was still there.

“You just seem to be a Troll on a mission,” the old fighter said, shrugging one shoulder. “Might be that sharin’ the big idea around would make the work go easier.”

A denial was on the tip of Roark’s tongue.

“Mai said Kaz would be respawnin’ after a while,” Griff continued before Roark could speak, skewering him with his one good eye. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with that, now would it?”

With a sigh, Roark ran a hand through his sweat-matted hair. He didn’t want to explain this to the grizzled trainer—wasn’t even sure he knew how. And yet it felt as if Griff might be the only one who might be able to understand. Suddenly, his mind seized upon something the old man had said what felt like ages ago.

“Did you know Mai’s husband very well?”

Griff scratched his whiskered jaw. “We were never close, but he was a good lad. Did his best by her. That’s all I coulda asked of him.”

“But he died. Forever.”

“Aye, it’s true, but a man can’t hold that against him.”

Roark shook his head. “What I mean is … Have you had any other friends who’ve died forever?”

“A fair few,” the trainer said, cocking his head suspiciously.

“Where I come from—originally—there are no respawns,” Roark said, stumbling over the words as he tried to collect his thoughts into some semblance of order. “Not for anyone. Every death is forever. I’ve seen more than a few people I cared about murdered. Hells, my whole family. And after them, my first—” Danella’s sharp blue eyes flashed through his mind, accompanied by the word for all the ecstatic, childish feelings he’d had for the golden-haired thief. He traded it for something less melodramatic. “—my friend. Eventually, I got smart enough to stop making friends or forming any kind of attachments other than ones I could leverage to get closer to killing the man who’d caused all this death.”

“Cause if you don’t have nothin’, you can’t have nothin’ stolen away,” Griff offered.

Roark nodded. He wished the old man would look somewhere else for a moment. It felt as if Griff could see too much of what Roark wasn’t saying.

“Kaz is the first friend I’ve had in years.” Roark looked down at the natagamas gleaming in the firelight. “He’ll respawn. This time. But what if next time he doesn’t?”

Griff pursed his scarred lips and moved his jaw as if he were chewing this over.

Finally, he asked, “Think you coulda saved your family, Griefer?”

“No.” Roark had never had any illusions about that. He’d been a child, untrained and vastly outnumbered, lucky just to escape with his life.

“What about your friend?”

“If I’d been with her, yes.” From what he’d learned after finding her, Danella had been hung for pickpocketing an Ustar captain. Together, the two of them had done plenty worse than that and always gotten away safely.

“So now you think if you can fancy up a weapon strong enough, you’ll be protectin’ Kaz just in case he runs into something that can kill him forever-dead. Well, let me tell you somethin’ all us old folk know.” Griff’s eye seemed to stare into both of Roark’s as he grabbed Roark’s shoulder with one scarred, gnarled hand. “You can’t

craft a weapon strong enough to stop death. You can shut people out all you like, but that don't work, either. There'll always be somebody like Mai or Kaz come along and screw up all your smart plans of being a one-man army. It's just their nature. You gotta learn to protect 'em when you can and let 'em go when it's their time."

Roark frowned.

"That wasn't what you were wantin' to hear," Griff said, slapping him on the shoulder. "But I ain't here to tell you pretty lies, Griefer. It is what it is. The sooner you accept it, the sooner you can get on with learnin' to live through it. Because let me tell you somethin' else all us old folk know: endin' up alone ain't worth the price, but the Mais and Kazs out there are."

After a few moments considering this, Roark nodded.

"Azibek is one thing I can protect them from. I just have to figure out how." He raised an eyebrow at Griff. "I don't suppose you old folks know any secrets about how to defeat a Troll several times my level in single combat?"

Griff tugged at his bristly chin. "Given the level difference, seems smarter to avoid single combat at all costs. Ain't there any way around fightin' him one-on-one?"

"Not that I've seen yet," Roark admitted.

"That'd be the way to do it," the old man continued, staring off into the middle distance. "In the arena, if I was up against somethin' too big to defeat alone, I'd get an opponent to team up. At least 'til we killed the bigger threat. Then we'd go back to choppin' one another in half when it was dead."

The first opponents to come to Roark's mind were the Trolls of the lower floors. But outside of them accepting the Feet of Clay quest, there was no way to use them against Azibek. Really, could they even be considered his opponents? Some of them might be loyal to the Dungeon Lord, but for the most part they were just following orders because they were expected to. No, a true opponent was someone who could think for themselves. Someone who wouldn't give up after one failed assassination attempt—or a dozen.

Someone like PwnrBwner_OG.

Roark grinned.

“Griff, you’re a bloody genius. I should’ve asked you the day you joined the citadel, but would you consider becoming my Greater Vassal? There aren’t many inherent benefits, but I’ll double your share of what’s looted and forge you—”

“I’m a simple man, Griefer. I got a roof over my head, three square meals a day, all the fights my old bones can handle, and more gold comin’ in than a simple man knows what to do with. But I can tell you what I don’t have.”

“Name it,” Roark said. “If it’s within my power, I’ll get it for you.” The Lyuko traveler in his blood railed at the idea of leaving an offer so open-ended, but he needed Griff on his side.

“A day’s gonna come when you’re done here, when you decide it’s time to pick up and leave,” Griff said. “And I want to come with you. See what else there is.”

Roark hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s something I’ll be able to do. The magick that got me here is finicky and dangerous. And even if I could bring you along, where I’m going, every death is forever-death.”

“At my age, death and danger ain’t that much of a deterrent. The only thing that looks really bad once all your old friends and light-o’-loves are gone is livin’ forever. Remember what I said about the price of bein’ alone?”

“When I do go back to my home world, it will be to do the same thing I’ve been doing here,” Roark said. “Fighting a war to kill a tyrant.”

Griff shrugged. “I’ve fought for gold and fame and glory. Freein’ the oppressed seems as good a reason as any of those. Better even.”

Roark shook his head. He had to disabuse the grizzled trainer of any notions he might have of altruistic motives.

“I’m not in this for noble reasons,” he said. “It’s entirely self-centered. I want to see a tyrant pay for what he’s done, but more than that, for the things he took from me. If I live long enough to do that, I don’t have any illusions about his underlings letting me survive. It’s not something I want to drag anyone else into.”

Griff sheathed his repaired short sword and rested one hand on the hilt.

“You said to name my price, and I named it,” the old man said stubbornly. “You’re welcome to argue as long as you feel like, but I won’t change my mind and I won’t negotiate. If you promise to do everything within your power to take me along when you go, then I’ll be happy to become your Greater Vassal.”

The arena veteran held out a calloused hand crisscrossed with old scars to seal the agreement.

“Fine,” Roark said. He took it. “I promise.”

“Then I accept your offer,” Griff said.

Through the leather armor on Roark’s chest, the World Stone pendant turned ice-cold. Tawny light flared from the stone and from inside his palm. When he let go of Griff’s hand, the glowing imprint of his hand remained for several seconds before disappearing.

“That’s it?” Griff asked, looking down at himself skeptically. “I don’t feel any different.”

“Maybe you will after your first act as a Greater Vassal,” Roark said. “I need you to get all the floor Overseers together. I have a plan to kill Azibek, but we need to act fast.”

CHAPTER 38

DEATH WISH



When Kaz respawned, Roark and Zyra were waiting for him in the kitchen, both because they knew it was the first place the Brute Thusr would go and to fill the growling holes in their stomachs.

As soon as Kaz saw Roark, his blocky face broke out in a huge grin, and he raced across the room. In his Defiler form, Roark was the same height as the Brute Thusr, but Kaz was as wide as a barn, every inch of it muscle, and he had no trouble at all scooping the leaner Roark up into a rib-cracking, wing-crushing hug.

“Roark survived! He showed those Azibek loyalists the futility of attacking the future Dungeon Lord,” he said ecstatically. “Kaz was worried that stopping the ice javelin wouldn’t be enough.”

“No, mate, you saved the day again.” Roark slapped Kaz on his beefy shoulder as the Behemoth Thusr set him back on the floor. “I don’t know how I would ever get any leveling done without you.”

Kaz beamed like the sun at noonday.

“Best sit down.” Mai bustled over with a bowl of stew and plopped it on the rough-hewn table in front of Kaz. “You’re like to be exhausted what with respawning and all. I’ll just get you a loaf of bread to go with.”

“Kaz would never say no to Mai’s bread.” The Behemoth Thusr winked one eye so visibly that his whole head moved. “Kaz would have six or seven loaves a day if he could.”

Mai’s cheeks flushed and she giggled as if he’d said something exceptionally funny.

"Well, now, be careful what you wish for," she said, tweaking his nose. "I just so happen to know a few herbs that can help with that, I do."

Now Kaz was the one laughing, his big shoulders shaking as he watched the buxom cook wander off to get that bread.

From the corner of his eye, Roark caught Zyra pretending to vomit. He bit back a smirk, but only just.

"Listen, Kaz," he said, turning on the bench to face his friend. "While you were gone, I picked up a couple new books for you. Skill tomes to level up your Cartography."

Roark dropped the pair of them onto the table.

"Why Cartography?" Kaz asked, cocking his huge head to the side. "Could Roark not find any cookbooks? Kaz loves reading cookbooks, and one of them might have contained the secrets of chocolate orchid bean pods."

"Bean pods aren't vital to taking down Azibek." Roark pushed the books closer to Kaz. "I need you to read these and level up your mapmaking. I've got an important mission that only you can carry out for us. Whether we win or lose this war is about to depend in large part on your Cartography Trade Skill."

"What will Kaz do?" he asked.

"Read first, then I'll let you in on it."

Kaz frowned, fat fingers drumming on the tabletop. "Fine."

Roark had plenty of time to help himself to a second bowl of stew while the Brute Thusrp pored over the Cartography tomes. Kaz fidgeted quite a bit while he read, shaking his tree-trunk-sized leg under the table, flicking the page corners, and taking deep breaths only to sigh them out again moments later.

The smallest noises served as excuses for the Behemoth Thusrp to look away from the text. If Mai set a jar of sugar down or one of the Troll apprentice chefs scraped the side of the pot while stirring, Kaz had to find the source of the noise and go inspect it. Roark and Zyra took turns dragging him back to his seat. And more than once, Kaz happened to glance up at just the right time to see Mai glancing his way. Though he didn't leave his seat those times, getting the Behemoth refocused after those saccharine eyelash-batting contests

was almost enough to shatter Roark's patience. Eventually, he had to ask the apprentices and the young widow if they could leave the kitchens for a bit and stationed Zyra at the door to keep any would-be passersby out.

Finally, Kaz slammed the last book shut. "Kaz is finished, and he leveled up his Cartography two times!"

"Excellent job, mate," Roark said, coming back to the table and dropping into the seat beside the Troll. "Now that you've raised your Cartography to level 3, I need you to go down and have a look at Azibek's floors. You're going to make a map of every shortcut and back door. When Zyra took us down to meet Azibek after I became the first-floor Overseer, there was a secret passage that let us bypass the bulk of Azibek's Keep and let out directly into his throne room. I'm sure he's moved it, so I need you to find where he's put the new one."

Kaz's onyx eyes widened to twice their regular size. "But every Troll in the citadel must know that Kaz is loyal only to Roark."

"We're going to change their minds about that by taking a page from the Dungeon Lord's book," Roark said. "Kaz, I need you to kill me."

The Behemoth Thusr stood up so hard and fast that the oak bench flipped over backward. Only Jotnar-fast reflexes saved Roark from spilling unceremoniously onto the floor.

"Never!" Kaz thundered, his deep voice booming off the walls of the kitchen. "Kaz would never!"

"You have to, mate. If you kill me, you'll complete Azibek's *Memento Mori* quest, gaining Experience, gold, and his Lingering Blessing—"

"Blood rewards!" Kaz spat as if the words burnt his tongue. "Kaz doesn't want them! Kaz wouldn't touch them!"

"It's the only way," Roark insisted. "I need those maps to defeat him, Kaz, and you need the quest complete to get down there and back without getting killed. I'm counting on you."

"But why Kaz?" the softhearted Brute whined, wringing his hands. "Why not Zyra? Zyra loves killing things."

“True as that is, an assassin is the first Troll they’d suspect of deceit,” Zyra said. “We spend our whole existence perfecting the art of treachery. No one would ever suspect you, though, big guy. You’re too ...”

Roark glared at her.

“I was going to say *open*,” she said. She reached inside her hood, cupping her chin. “Though *good* or *honest* both seem apt as well. You’re not paranoid enough to watch the allied troops for signs of skullduggery while Roark’s respawning. Or heartless enough to punish the ones you catch as harshly as they deserve.”

Roark turned back to Kaz.

“Even if you were and we could send Zyra, she doesn’t have the Cartography skill. It’s got to be you.”

“But even if Kaz kills Roark, they will not believe. They will know it is a ruse. What will Kaz tell them when they ask about such terrible treachery?”

“Easy,” Roark shot back. He’d known this objection would come up and had already thought of an excuse. “When they ask why you turned coat, you can tell them it’s because I passed you over and gave the first-floor Overseer position to someone else. You felt slighted. That is a motivation any Troll could understand.”

Kaz let out a low whimper and grabbed his face with both hands. Beneath the coarse hair covering his indigo skin, he looked ashen.

“Come on,” Roark said. “We’ll do it down in the tunnels during the next attack Azibek sends up, that way you’ll have plenty of witnesses to defection.”

“But—but—but Roark is Kaz’s best friend!”

Roark lowered his voice and leaned closer to the Brute. “That’s why I’m asking you, Kaz. I can’t trust anybody else with this.”

Zyra stepped up beside Kaz and rested a hand on his broad arm. “If it makes you feel any better, big guy, I can poison him before you start so he’ll die faster.”

Roark smiled thanks at her from just outside Kaz’s vision.

“I’ll respawn in no time, Kaz. You’ll see.”

The Behemoth Thusr trembled and spluttered, but finally his expansive shoulders slumped and he hung his massive head in

defeat. Fat tears spilled from his black eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

“Fine. Kaz will do it.” His voice was ragged as broken glass. He scrubbed at his cheek with the back of one huge hand and sniffled. “Kaz will kill his best friend.”

CHAPTER 39

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES



Roark spent the next few hours in the maze of tunnels closest to the fifth floor, waiting for the next attack from below. He could hardly drag a word out of Kaz now that the Behemoth had agreed to go along with the plan. Zyra, on the other hand, seemed a little too cheerful. Roark couldn't decide whether this was because the Dread Reaver liked the idea of turning Azibek's strategy around on him or because she was excited to watch Roark get murdered. Mac was nowhere to be seen. Roark had specifically sent the Turtle Dragon up to the third floor with Grozka, knowing the bloodthirsty beast wouldn't hold back if he saw Roark attacked.

Finally, the *whoomph* of a fiery explosion and shouts of pain let them know that an enemy Troll had found the pressure plate just ahead. In a moment, Azibek's supporters would round the corner and be right on top of them.

"Shall we?" Zyra said, fiddling with the leather wrappings around her hands and wrists. Roark knew she was exposing the stickdeath needles in the palm of her hand, readying them to administer the poison to Roark before Kaz turned on him.

Roark snuck a glance at the sick-looking Behemoth Thusr at his side. Kaz's hands shook as he pulled out his Obsidian Natagamas of the Rage Blackout and turned to face Roark.

The Enchanted blades shimmered with a fiery red not reflected from any light source in the tunnels. Respawn or not, Roark's heart sped up at the thought of being chopped to death beneath those curved blades. The smith in him knew that they had been perfectly built to provide all the force of an axe swing at only half the weight. In

addition to cleaving his muscle, they would crack the bone beneath. Which was to say nothing of the additional burning and freezing damage he'd imbued them with.

Azibek's troops rushed around the corner, giving a floor-shaking battle cry when they saw Roark, Kaz, and Zyra ahead.

Roark pulled his rapier and dagger, setting himself into a modified *seconda* guard, a defensive stance, as if there were nothing on his mind but repelling the enemy forces. If any of those enemy forces took the time to look closer, however, Roark hoped they would take the tension in his shoulders to be fear of the battle rather than anticipation of a scythe to the back.

A spring-loaded spear trap slowed a few of them down, but the rest fought their way through.

“Now or never,” Roark said to Zyra.

The hooded Dread Reaver nodded, then raked her palm down Roark’s forearm, giving his hand a squeeze before crouching and disappearing into a puff of inky black smoke. Roark couldn’t tell whether the sudden warmth he felt was an effect of the poison or Zyra’s silent gesture of reassurance.

His filigreed Health vial flashed green.

[You have been Poisoned!

Initial Damage: -50% Health

Damage Over Time: -16 HP/sec for 2 minutes

Drink an Antidote to stop the effects.]

Time seemed to slow. Sweat broke out across Roark’s forehead and dripped into his eyes. The tearing and prickling of a million tiny thorns ripped through his veins as the poison spread in time with the stuttering of his heart.

Just ahead, Zyra laid into the leading Troll, a Thusr Knight, dancing in and out of puffs of smoke and slowing their charge.

“Now, Kaz,” Roark hissed without looking back at his friend.

The barest hint of a whimper escaped Kaz’s throat, almost lost in the chaos of the battle raging around them.

“Come on,” Roark said. His muscles felt tight enough to snap. “Before Zyra dies, too. She’s counting on you, Kaz. We both are.”

A scream equal parts anguish and fury tore free of Kaz. The sound made the hairs on the back of Roark’s neck stand up. He tried not to brace himself for the blow, but couldn’t help it.

The first natagama landed like a meat cleaver in a hog leg. Roark’s knees buckled and his left arm dropped to his side, limp, as the blade sheared through his left wing with pitiful ease, cracked his shoulder blade, and snapped his clavicle. White-hot agony radiated out from the wound, and a generous portion of the poisoned green liquid in his Health vial drained away. A notice that he couldn’t use his left hand for two-handed spells or weapons appeared, but Roark dismissed it without reading.

Thankfully now that Kaz was committed to this course of action, the Behemoth Thusr didn’t falter. The second blow chopped into the back of Roark’s neck, followed in quick succession by a third, fourth, and fifth. The pain was enormous, narrowing Roark’s vision down to a claustrophobic shaft of blurry images, but he forced himself to turn around as if to fight back. This was vital to convincing Azibek’s troops that the assassination was real.

Roark lunged inside Kaz’s measure, swinging his rapier in his favored *dalla spalla* attacks, all from the shoulder. One of the slices landed—Roark felt the resistance of flesh—but Kaz avoided the rest and continued to carve away at Roark with his dual natagamas.

As the strikes drank up his Health, Roark watched the blood fly from Kaz’s curved blades with detached fascination. Soon, his filigreed vial was flashing out a warning. Roark spun into a clumsy version of the Off-Hand Combo, nearly tripping over his own numb feet. Somehow, he managed to plant his Kaiken Dagger in Kaz’s thigh as he fell.

With a huge overhand arc, Kaz’s curved blade chopped into Roark’s skull just over his right ear. Roark felt himself tumble across the floor, his arms and legs flailing in an undignified flouting of basic physics, then blackness closed in. As he died, it occurred to him that he’d lost count of how many times this made.

Unknown ages later, Roark heard the driving war music of a Hearthworld death swell around him. Then suddenly, it wavered and faded into nothingness.

Light and heat flooded his senses, but instead of the usual Infernali and Malaika battling through the skies above the volcano, he found himself staring into a burning city. Flames consumed the brightly colored houses and shop fronts as heavily armored Ustars swept through the streets, putting to bloody death the panicked citizens.

Korvo.

His home was burning. His people were being butchered. And all he could do was look on as they died, without a physical form to fight back or even a voice to scream in frustration.

The scene shifted to the base of the mountains. Without the surrounding terrain and the remnants of the walls, Roark wouldn't have been able to tell the smoldering rubble was Graf Manor. As he watched, Ustari troops sowed the earth where his family manor had once stood with salt.

Then he was in a torture chamber that Wurgfozz would've adored, staring at the overweight innkeeper Bran, a member of the Rebel Council. Bran wailed in agony as one of the Tyrant King's Investigators led a young girl in the bloom of youth into the room. Roark recognized her as Bran's eldest daughter. While the innkeeper begged and pleaded for his child's life, the Investigator shoved the girl into a blackthorn bed and began to close the viciously spiked lid.

Without any corporeal body, Roark knew the feeling of nausea was only an extension of his imagination. But the knowledge that this was his fault wasn't his imagination. The members of the *T'verzet* had warned Roark not to make an attempt on Marek Konig Ustar's life while he was in Korvo. They had predicted retribution unlike any the Butcher of Korvo had mustered so far, and they had been right. Roark had failed, and now the Tyrant King was destroying everything in his fury. He had escaped, but he'd left his home and the innocent people of Korvo behind to suffer in his stead.

Though the bloody images faded to black, Roark knew he would be seeing them in his nightmares from now on.

“Someone had to pay for your crimes,” a bored aristocratic voice agreed from the darkness.

Roark’s blood—nonexistent for the time—couldn’t rage and burn, but fantasies of bloody, violent, and lingering deaths exploded through his consciousness at the sound of Marek Konig Ustar’s voice. Awful, appalling things he would do to the Tyrant King if Marek didn’t leave what few people of Korvo remained in peace.

“It’s too late for them,” Marek’s disembodied voice said. “You sealed their fate when you snuck into Graf Manor, boy.”

Revenge, then, Roark thought. If he couldn’t have one, he would settle for the other.

“Not terribly noble of you, but an understandable sentiment,” Marek drawled. “If I were you, however, I would be thinking about the rest of Traisbin. I have the manpower to raze it one town at a time, torturing and murdering and salting the earth as I go. And if you think I’ll just visit these horrors on just the centers where I believe the Rebel Council to have taken refuge before, you’re wrong. I’ll kill every one of my subjects. They mean nothing to me. I’ll pay out the cost in blood so many times over you’ll drown in it if you ever set foot here again. Or ...”

Hope leapt eagerly at the carefully dangled bait. Roark hated himself for responding to it just like the tyrant must have known he would.

“Or,” Marek continued, “you can deliver the World Stone safely to my envoy, Lowen, and all of this unnecessary destruction and death can be avoided. I won’t even ask you to turn yourself over to him.” The tyrant chuckled. “You can stay wherever you are and rot for all I care. Hand over the World Stone, and you’ll go free. That’s a better offer than anyone’s ever gotten from me before, boy. You would be wise to take it.”

From everywhere and nowhere at once, the sound of driving war music swelled again. Roark thought he could almost see the golden text that usually appeared just before the darkness turned to the bustling marketplace, though it was too far away to be sure.

“The sooner you accept my offer, the fewer people die,” Marek said, his voice fading. “Hand over the World Stone while you still

can. My patience is not infinite and already my servants assemble. It is only a matter of time before I win this little game we play one way or another ..." Then it was gone.

Throngs of people crowded through the Averi City streets, chatting and shopping, oblivious to the bloody war Marek had just declared on his own subjects. Roark saw their laughing faces and carefree motions as grotesque and infuriating. He had to get back to Traisbin and end Marek Konig Ustar once and for all.

But as Hearthworld's unique version of death flew him through the marketplace, the cold fury in Roark's mind began to ebb, and some measure of reason returned.

How could he be certain any of what he'd seen had been real? Marek couldn't even have spoken to him without powerful magicks. Those same mages who would've helped the Tyrant King find a way to contact him could have woven the scenes of torture and pillaging to drive him to taking drastic action without thinking. He doubted Korvo had survived untouched, but there was also a chance Marek hadn't completely destroyed it. That the entire conversation had been concocted to send him running home like a chicken with its head cut off.

There was no way to know for sure, and before Roark could come to any conclusions, the marketplace vanished in a swirl. Blackness surrounded him. A single bloodred word appeared in the void:

Respawning...

CHAPTER 40

CHAMPION



Roark respawned on top of the altar in the fourth-floor throne room, wearing nothing but the World Stone Pendant and a dirty loincloth. A quick check of his Inventory showed his Initiate's Spell Book was still at hand. Like the World Stone, it was soul-bound and couldn't be removed from him even in death. He selected the tome and his quill and inkpot. The palm of his left hand tingled as it appeared, levitating open above his hand, and he inscribed a spell in the first level 4 slot.

Whether they'd been real or fabrication, the images of torture and destruction had lit a burning urgency in Roark's bones. He didn't have friends in Traisbin to protect. He didn't have family. The only thing tying him to that world was the desire to see Marek dead, to make the bastard pay for his crimes. His thirst for revenge had brought hell down on the innocent bystanders of Korvo. Meanwhile, he'd been transported to Hearthworld safe and sound, where he'd brought the same fight to a new tyrant. Azibek.

He would have to kill one to get to the other, and the longer he waited, the stronger both grew. It was time to see this done.

But he wasn't going into any fight without as many dirty, underhanded tricks in his pocket as possible.

The spell he'd been writing took, shifting and changing until it appeared in the tome along with its specifics.

[Congratulations, you have inscribed Guiding Light in the Initiate's Spell Book!]

Guiding Light can be cast (1) time per inscription!

Effect: Creates a ball of light that leads caster to a specific location, item, or being.

Guiding Light does not work on locations, items, or beings behind locked doors or gates.

Cooldown period between casting Guiding Light and re-inscription: (2) hours!]

Roark grinned. He hadn't been certain the seemingly arbitrary laws governing Hearthworld's magick would let him inscribe a tracking spell. Now to see if it would let him cheat further. He turned to one of his level 3 slots and started writing again.

A moment later, this spell took as well.

[Congratulations, you have inscribed Beast of Burden in the Initiate's Spell Book!]

Beast of Burden can be cast (1) time per inscription!

Effect: Target's carrying capacity is increased by (100) for (60) minutes.

Cooldown period between casting Beast of Burden and re-inscription: (2) hours!]

The slapping of sticky feet pulled Roark's attention out of the spell book. When he looked up, Macaroni was running across the throne room's dirt floor—almost galloping on his thick legs—mouth open as if in a wide smile. Mac's sticky black tongue shot out and smacked against Roark's chest, almost jerking him from his feet as it drew back in.

Roark laughed.

“Glad to see me, then?” He knelt and grabbed the creature's beaked, reptilian head, wooling it around and scratching both sides heartily. “Do you want to go on another quick jaunt outside the citadel?”

Mac chirped excitedly, whipping his lethal scorpion-like tail back and forth.

Roark gave him a last scrub about the head and neck, then stood back up.

"We'll pick up my things from my corpse on our way out," he said, turning toward the tunnel that led toward the fifth floor.

"Any interest in telling your paranoid assassin where you're going?" A curl of smoke followed Zyra as she stepped out of the shadows.

"Where we're going," Roark said. "My paranoid assassin is coming with me. We're going to need all the carrying capacity we can get. I'd take Griff and Mai, too, but someone's going to have to stay here and watch the floor."

"Carrying capacity?" she asked.

"For the last pieces of our dirty trick. As many as we can carry."

Roark started down the tunnel with Mac trundling along by his side, but a sudden realization stopped him. He turned back to Zyra. He'd been so preoccupied he hadn't really *noticed* her.

She was taller, willowier. Her armor had grown a variety of spikes, barbs, straps, and pouches, and somehow shrunken back down to mere scraps, revealing an extremely impractical amount of skin. Though he couldn't complain about the view, he would have to see if he could craft her something more functional. Her skin was now a shade of blue so dark it glowed with radiant darkness, save for the places marred by glimmering silver tattoos of power, which looked like trapped moonbeams. The white ringlets spilling from inside her hood made for such a stark contrast against it that they seemed to vibrate.

"You evolved?"

"Not long after I got back to the Alchemy lab." Zyra held up one hand before her hood as if to study it. She spread her fingers and her black claws extended from the tips with a metallic scrape. "I can see why you covet the Trade Skills so fervently—easy levels." She dropped her hand. "I think Champion Reaver suits me. I thought about going the way of the Shaman, but decided against it. Not nearly stabby enough for my tastes."

Roark opened his mystic grimoire to her character page. With her evolution, she had earned a new ability—Death Scratch, which

allowed her to apply poison to her newly extendable claws for use in unarmed combat.



Champion Reaver Overview	
Name:	Zyra
Level:	21
Type:	Champion Reaver
Current Infernali Points:	1,570
Next Level:	39,270

Attributes:	
Health:	747
HP Regen / 5 Sec:	73.5
Weapon Damage:	75
Attack Damage:	721
Base Armor:	62
Armor Rating:	338
Movement Rate:	2 x Speed of Opponent
Critical Hit Chance:	22%
Critical Hit Damage:	(+) 250%

Special Skills:	
Rapid-Regen	
60% Resistance against normal weapons	
Shadow Stalker and Smoke Screen	
40% Resistance against Poison and Disease	
Death Scratch (Poisoner Upgrade)	
Alchemy (Trade Skill) Lv. 3	



“Good.” With a thought, he shut the book. “We’re about to end this war, and I don’t want you losing any more levels than you have to if the plan goes horribly wrong and you die.”

“To quote the Lord Overseer of the fourth floor, I don’t intend to die.” The teasing lilt in her voice made it clear that there was a smile hidden in the depths of her hood.

Roark paused, canting his head at her as he studied the hood. There was something ... *off* about it. It lay wrong, too high and awkwardly perched.

“There’s something wrong with your hood,” he said after a beat. He took a step forward, hands extended, intending to adjust it.

She slipped backward, hands instinctively shooting toward the hood. “Yes. About that. My final evolution came with one other change.” She faltered, fidgeting with the edges of the hood, trying to get the material to rest correctly. “Horns,” she finally finished. “Reaver Champions, apparently, aren’t meant to go hooded.” Though it was clear she was trying to sound flippant, her voice was tinged with anger and worry.

“I could fix it for you,” Roark offered. “We wouldn’t even need to head over to the forge.” He opened his Inventory and pulled out a set of shears and a sewing kit—a staple of his Tailoring Class—used to make simple adjustments and repairs while out in the field. He couldn’t improve the cloak, but he could at least alter the hood enough to accommodate for her new horns.

She shifted uncertainly, taking another step away, and Roark realized why she was so hesitant.

“I won’t say a word about what I see,” he promised. “I swear it on my everlasting soul.”

A handful of heartbeats passed in silence.

Then she stuck one black-clawed finger in his face. “If you tell anyone what I look like, Griefer—*anyone*—I’ll coat everything in your world with contact poison and spend every breath in my lungs laughing at you as you go for respawn. Understood?”

Roark nodded. He didn’t show it on his face, but his gut roiled in hungry anticipation. Just what was she hiding under there?

Slowly, almost timidly, she lowered the hood.

The breath caught in Roark’s chest. He’d been expecting her to have some hideous deformity, but just the opposite was true. She was beautiful. Or maybe *cute* was the more appropriate word. A round face, with smooth cheeks punctuated by adorable dimples and a slightly upturned nose that was rather pixy-like. Her skin was dark and flawless—her white ringlets framing everything in—and the only oddity at all was her mismatched eyes, one emerald, the other an arresting purple. Striking, really. Rising from her mass of white curls were a pair of recurved horns, which shone like polished ebony.

Roark stared, realizing he was doing it, but unable to stop. He was simply flabbergasted.

“I don’t understand,” he finally choked out. “You’re … You look …”

“Like a human,” Zyra growled. “Puny and weak. No more intimidating than Mai or Griff. Do you have any idea how hard it is to coerce other Trolls when you look *edible*? Impossible. If you value your life or my ability to push around your subjects and do what needs to be done, Lord Overseer, then no other soul in this dungeon can ever know.”

“Strange,” Roark said, fighting the urge to smile. “You’d think an assassin with this much to hide would stop calling the one Troll who can expose her Lord Overseer like he asked.”

Zyra’s mismatched eyes narrowed, and she held up a hand, extending her claws with a metallic *sshing*.

Roark chuckled. “Joking.”

As she retracted her poisoned claws, he moved around behind her and went to work with shears, needle, and thread. In no time at all, there were two perfect holes in the hood, which would accommodate the sleek horns sprouting from her head. A few snips and stitches and the hood was ready to go. He’d need to touch up his handiwork later on, once he had access to the equipment at the forge, but yes, this would do fine for now.

“All done,” he said, stepping away.

With a quick snap of fabric Zyra settled the hood back in place, her face hidden in the shadows once more, her horns poking up.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

“Think nothing of it,” Roark said as he ducked into the tunnel. “Now, let’s get moving, shall we?”

Zyra took a step into the shadows, then appeared beside him in a puff of inky smoke, while Mac scampered up the wall and followed from overhead.

“Did Kaz make it downstairs?” Roark asked.

The Champion Reaver’s hood dipped as she nodded. “The loyalists didn’t seem to have any misgivings about accepting him once they saw the kill. Especially after he fed them your little explanation. They’re nearly as trusting as you are.”

“There’s a difference between trusting and willing to gamble with your life,” Roark said.

“I’m not talking about your stupid quest, Griefer. I’m talking about trusting Kaz with this vital mission. Trusting outsiders like Mai and Griff to train us.” Zyra took a step closer, until she was nearly pressed against his side, then tapped his bare throat with one claw. “Trusting assassins like me to get close enough to tear out your throat with their poisoned claws.”

The smell of deadly coquelicot blossoms bloomed in Roark’s head and the spot where she’d touched his chest burned, but he couldn’t tell whether that was from skin contact with the poison or just an internal reaction to her touch. Griff’s talk of weighing the price of loneliness and his certainty that people always found a way through your defenses flashed through Roark’s mind.

“It’s worth the risk,” he told Zyra, glad to hear that his voice didn’t sound strained. “In fact, I’d like it even better if you got closer, but I understand that you’re afraid.”

This last stopped the Champion Reaver in her tracks.

Roark kept walking, unable to suppress the self-satisfied smirk at tripping her up. Then he snapped his fingers as if he’d just remembered something.

“Paranoid,” he called over his shoulder, pretending to correct himself. “I forgot you prefer to call it paranoid.”

If Zyra had anything cutting to say to that, it was lost in a gurgling growl from Mac. The Turtle Dragon had found Roark’s bloody, hacked-apart corpse in the tunnel ahead. Roark bent to retrieve his gear from the lifeless form. The quest they were about to head out on wasn’t his, but he damn sure meant to see it finished today.

CHAPTER 4I

THE MIGHTY GOURMET



Four hours later, Roark, Zyra, and Mac returned to the citadel with each of their Inventories filled to capacity. They moved at a crawl down the staircase, through the antechamber, and down the stone corridor to the kitchens. Despite the cool, damp air belowground, Roark was sweating and his breath came heavy from the exertion. In the lower portion of Roark's vision, the same thin white letters flashed over and over again:

[You are overburdened. Movement speed reduced by 50%. To restore movement speed, drop or sell some items from your Inventory.]

He had used all of his spell slots casting Beast of Burden on himself, Zyra, and Mac, and the last spell had run out while they were still a mile from the citadel. It had been a bloody long walk from there.

"Welcome back," Druz said, tossing them a cheerful wave from the midst of a grieving party. "Kaz has been looking for you, Lord Griefer. He said to send you straight to the library when you got back."

Roark shook his head. Black spikes of sweat-soaked hair slapped against his forehead, and a salty drop rolled into his eye. He scrubbed at it with his sleeve, but didn't stop moving forward. If he did, he would never get moving again, he'd have to unload right there, and that wasn't part of the plan.

“Kitchen,” he wheezed at Druz. “Tell Kaz. Meet us.”

With a shrug, the first-floor Overseer turned to the closest Changeling and jerked her head toward the corridor leading to the library. The scrawny blue Troll trotted off to find Kaz while Roark headed the opposite direction, through the great hall toward the kitchens.

At Roark’s side, Zyra panted. “Can’t even Shadow Stalk when I’m overburdened. Ridiculous.”

“Almost there,” Roark said.

Just ahead of them, Mac seemed to be listing side to side under the extra weight. The formidable Turtle Dragon bumped into the wall of the stone corridor and scraped along it, then tottered back to the left and bumped into that wall.

When they made it to the kitchens, Mai was leaning headfirst into a barrel, feet nearly off the ground. With a shimmy of her legs, she tipped herself backward out of the barrel and stood up with the last of the apples in hand.

“What mischief are you lot up to?” she asked, quirking a knowing eyebrow as she examined their bent backs and sweat-soaked forms.

Roark didn’t bother answering. He, Zyra, and Mac began emptying their Inventories as quickly as they could manage. Soon cream-colored orchids with lush green pods covered every surface. They even had Mai replace her barrel’s top so they could cover it with the sweet-smelling plants.

The clunk of heavily armored boots echoed in the hallway.

“Roark, Kaz has ...” The Behemoth Thusr’s voice trailed off as he stepped into the kitchen and saw the hundreds of thousands of orchids. His eyes went as round and wide as saucepans. “Vanilla orchids.”

“Hopefully not just vanilla,” Roark wheezed, once more swiping an arm across his brow. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of using a spell to trace your ingredients earlier. It wouldn’t show us which one was the chocolate orchid, but it led us to the patch. We picked the whole thing just to be safe.” Just like with the crocuses and the truffles, they all looked alike to Roark. “Somewhere in here should be at least one chocolate orchid.”

“Roark found these … for Kaz?” the mighty chef whispered, his huge bottom lip trembling.

“Not just me, mate. Zyra and Mac, too.”

Over by the keg in the corner, Zyra saluted the Behemoth Thusr with the flagon of ale she’d just drawn herself, then went back to drinking it down.

Kaz looked from her to Mac and back to Roark, taking a faltering step in each direction, as if he weren’t sure which one to hug first.

“Later.” Roark gestured to the sea of orchids. “Go on, finish your quest. Become the first Troll Gourmet and make us all proud.”

Fat tears rolled down Kaz’s cheeks.

“Yes.” He sniffed hard, then nodded, a wide grin on his face. “Kaz will make you so proud.”

Kaz moved through the kitchen, stooping to examine every bloom and pod with reverent care. Mai watched in awe, the apples in her hands forgotten, as the mighty chef sniffed and prodded and studied. It seemed he went through every single plant twice, moving from one end of the room to the other and then back, even employing his old crocus trick of licking the occasional petal.

Roark was just starting to relax when Kaz let out a strangled cry. The Brute stood up from his crouch beside the hearth, one of the cream-colored flowers with its attached cluster of bean pods held triumphantly overhead.

“Chocolate orchid bean pod!” Kaz crowed. Mai gasped and clapped her hands with excitement. “Roark found a chocolate orchid bean pod!”

“No, I found a hundred thousand flowers that all look exactly alike,” Roark said. “You looked through them and found the one you needed. It was all you, Kaz.”

This time there was no forestalling the hug. Kaz scooped Roark up in his huge arms and shook him back and forth like a dog with a shank of meat.

“Well, what’re you waiting for?” Mai asked, beaming. “Finish it!”

Kaz set Roark down, then with a shaking breath, carefully placed the chocolate orchid’s bean pod cluster into his Inventory.

The low rumble of a kettledrum filled the room, then a blinding white light flashed in front of Kaz. His customary feathered headdress vanished, consumed by the light, and was replaced by an off-white chef's toque, protruding up like a drunken chimney. Above the protruding hat appeared a new nameplate: [Kazko the Mighty Gourmet]

A brown burlap sack appeared on the bed of orchids covering the rough-hewn table, alongside a thick leather-bound volume edged in gilt and a mammoth warhammer with two heads, both ends flat and covered in squared spikes like a butcher's meat mallet.

“The Legendary Meat Tenderizer,” Kaz whispered.

As he ran his fingers along the hammer’s handle, red sigils danced across its surface. Roark recognized the runes for absorbing stolen Health and for accelerated swing speed. He leaned in to get a closer look at the weapon’s details.



Legendary Meat Tenderizer

Unique, Legendary

Damage: 76 - 106

Durability: Indestructible

Level Requirement: 10

Strength Requirement: 36

Maul Class Weapon – Enchanted

+25% Swing Speed

+25% Absorb Damage Done as Health

Touching any food item with the Legendary Meat Tenderizer includes a 5% chance (x Cooking Trade Skill Level) to raise item’s stat boosts to Gourmet level.



Roark closed out of the information to find his friend had already moved on to the book.

“*The Hell’s Kitchen Guide to Gourmet Troll Cuisine by Jordan Bamsey.*” Kaz flipped it open, riffling through page after page of

intricately illuminated recipes. “So many Gourmet Foods. The White Truffle-Infused Bread of Life, Hearty Buzzfish Caviar Stew, Saffron Meat Pies for Thought, the Death by Chocolate Experience—Kaz will start cooking right away!”

“Before you do,” Roark interrupted. “About your trip down to the lower floors ...”

Kaz reached into his rune-covered obsidian breastplate and pulled out a fistful of wide scrolls.

“Kaz mapped them in the library where there would be less distraction,” he said, shoving them at Roark, then turning back to his cookbook. “He even gained a level from making them.”

“Did you run into any trouble down there?”

Kaz’s face was bent to the recipes, his nose nearly touching the pages.

“Kaz,” Roark said, raising his voice.

The mighty Thusr jumped and looked up from the recipes. “Hmm?”

“Did anyone realize what you were up to, looking through their corridors and secret passages?” Roark asked.

“No, no. Kaz was very nonchalant, so casual. None of Azibek’s supporters suspected a thing,” he said, turning back to his book. He nodded vigorously and tapped a page with one claw-tipped finger. “Kaz has all of those ingredients. This is what Kaz will make first.”

Roark began to roll the maps out on the table, but Mai bustled over.

“You’re crushing perfectly good vanilla orchids,” she scolded him, scooping the flowers delicately into her apron. “And at four gold apiece! It’s not any cook off the street what can afford such niceties, I’ll tell you that much. Glory, the pastries we’ll have!”

Once Mai had cleared the table of the orchids, Roark spread his maps across the rough-hewn surface and leaned over them, studying the perfect layouts of the fifth and sixth floors. Kaz had done a beautifully thorough job. Every passage—secret and otherwise—every shortcut, and every room had been painstakingly marked on each floor.

“Is this what I think it is?” Roark asked, leaning in closer, examining the chutelike passageway coming out the back of the fifth floor behind the Keep.

Kaz glanced over.

“Yes. It is the tunnel connecting the Keep’s throne room to the outdoors,” the Behemoth Thusr said, returning to his book. “A Reaver Shaman told Kaz that heroes use it if they defeat Azibek. Heroes don’t like going back through all the floors just to leave the citadel, oh no.” He shook his head.

“And where does it come out?”

Kaz waved a hand vaguely over his shoulder. “The graveyard outside the bailey.”

The last pieces of the puzzle snapped together in Roark’s mind. That tunnel would save him a whole floor’s worth of work.

“All right,” Roark said, gathering up the maps. “Kaz, how soon can you begin crafting Gourmet foods?”

The Behemoth Thusr’s eyes shined. “Kaz already has already found two dishes he has all the ingredients for. And one dish called Burning Heart Chili that he can almost make. Kaz has everything but Fire Wren Flakes.”

“I can run to the marketplace and get you a pouch from the spice seller,” Mai offered brightly. “Won’t take me but two shakes of a kelpie’s tail.”

“Excellent. You two get started on that.” Roark turned to the Champion Reaver finishing off her ale. “Zyra, are you rested?”

“And back in top form.” She dropped her empty flagon on the table and wiped a bit of foam from her lips with the back of one hand. “What’s my assignment, Lord Overseer?”

“I need you to run messages to Druz, Wurgfozz, and Grozka,” Roark said, heading for the door. He glanced back at the beefy Turtle Dragon hanging over the dancing flames of the cook fire. “Mac, if you’re hoping to curl up on the throne with me, this might be your last chance. Once this plan’s in motion, I won’t rest again until I’m Dungeon Lord or dead.”

As if he understood, Mac skittered out of the fireplace and up to the ceiling, following Roark and Zyra out into the corridor. The

smaller distortion of a female Stone Salamander passed him going in the opposite direction, but Mac wasn't distracted from his purpose. He only turned and watched her go for a moment before catching up.

On the way to the throne room, Roark outlined the plan for Zyra.

"It's certainly efficient," the Champion Reaver said when he finished. "But what if he suspects what you're doing?"

"Which one?" Roark asked.

"Either." She shrugged. "Both."

"They won't."

Zyra fiddled with her hand wrappings, but didn't answer.

As they rounded the final corner and walked through the open portcullis into Druz's empty throne room, Roark looked sidelong at Zyra's hood. Without the benefit of seeing her face, he couldn't tell whether her silence was doubtful or contemptuous.

"It'll work," he insisted.

Zyra stopped where she was and turned to face him. "He's a level 46. Azibek. Or he was when I left, anyway."

With a start, Roark realized she was worried. Worried that he couldn't defeat Azibek and she'd thrown her lot in with the wrong Jotnar? Or worried that he would be killed, forever-dead? Strangely, he found himself hoping it was the latter.

"Then the sooner I take him down, the better," Roark said as if there couldn't possibly be any other outcome. "Before he finds a way to gain any more levels."

Zyra stared at him for a moment longer, then turned toward the stairs down to the second floor to carry his message to the other Overseers. Without another word, she stepped into the shadows and disappeared, leaving behind a curl of inky black smoke.

Roark shut his eyes, focusing on the memory of the man he'd once been, and triggered his Infernal Glamour Cloak ...

CHAPTER 42

ONE-EYED UNICORN



Roark von Graf sat in the One-Eyed Unicorn, a popular tavern in Averi City, drinking alone and anonymous for the first time since he'd come through the portal into Hearthworld. Just a regular man, no visible talons or glowing tattoos or fanglike canines to prove the contrary. There was something comforting about wearing his true face, even if he'd had to resort to a glamour to get it. Though he had to sit with his back to a wall to make sure no serving maid or passerby bumped into his invisible stunted wings. But so far, none of the heroes or tavern staff had given him a second glance.

Higher-level heroes frequented the Unicorn, downing drinks and rehashing their latest quests, most of them well within Roark's earshot. While he sat patiently awaiting his true prey, sipping a flagon of ale, he was also able to catch up on the local gossip about the Cruel Citadel and the Vault of the Radiant Shield. Depending on whom one listened to, he and Lowen were either friends and partners who'd come to Hearthworld to ruin its economy or hated enemies trying to take over as much of the land and chimeras as possible before going to war with one another.

There was also talk that while the Griefer had altered the usual business of the Cruel Citadel by changing the actions of the chimeras already stationed there, the Vault's changes were taking place in the chimeras themselves. From what Roark could gather, it seemed the Divine creatures native to the Vault had once been tiered like the Trolls—albeit much higher levels—but now were almost all at their highest evolution. Even the most powerful parties were unable to make it through a single floor without being killed.

It was troubling information. Could Lowen have somehow found a way to magically evolve the chimeras under him? Or could he have given them all a relatively simple quest stocked with Experience? A few heroes spoke of “devs” and their capricious temperaments, implicating them in the changes and dismissing Lowen and the Griefer as more of the same. Though Roark hadn’t come across any reading about these devs, he wondered whether they were the common-knowledge gods or demons of Hearthworld, and therefore the natural scapegoats for any sort of disagreeable misfortune. In Traisbin, something as insignificant as inclement weather was often blamed on mischief-making demons or a vengeful deity.

Was it possible that Lowen had found a Divine spell that forced one of Hearthworld’s devs to do his bidding?

Roark had been in the Unicorn for the better part of an hour, brooding over this new information and sipping at his drink, when the High Combat Cleric he’d been waiting for finally stalked in.

PwnrBwner_OG wore the blue-black set of scale mail under the heavier flame-crested plates of the pauldrons, cuirass, bracers, and greaves that he’d worn during their last confrontation, but now tongues of azure fire circled his shoulders and helmet like a guardian presence. Perhaps the Cleric had unlocked a property of his flaming armor since dying. He’d raised himself to level 28 since their last meeting, and was being followed by a party of heroes nearly as high — [KellieTheDeathless], a level 24 Elemental Warlock, a hairy, musclebound level 21 Bloodfury Savage named [Mike_T_Boarkiller], and a level 23 Druid Scout called [JohnJon].

The group settled at a table not far from Roark’s and gave their orders to the serving maid. Ales, meads, and a glass of mulled wine for KellieTheDeathless.

The serving maid nodded agreeably to each of the heroes until JohnJon ordered a Hog’s Head Stout.

“Now, love, ya know I can’t get ya that,” she said, wagging a finger at him. “You ain’t near the legal age for drinkin’ in your country or mine. How’s about a nice cuppa warm milk instead?”

The other heroes snickered as JohnJon slumped in his seat.

“Just bring me a cider,” he grumbled.

She tickled the Druid Scout under the chin, then bustled off toward the bar.

“What, do you think if you ask often enough one of these times the NPCs won’t notice your account settings?” KellieTheDeathless said.

“I changed the age last week!” JohnJon crossed his arms over his vine-tooled armor. “It should’ve let me.”

“The admins probably flagged you,” Mike_T_Boarkiller said. “You’ll never get a beer now, even after you do turn twenty-one.”

“Can you idiots focus?” PwnrBwner snapped, slamming down a gauntleted fist on the wooden tabletop. “You’re all going to have to step up your game before we go after the Griefer. That slop in the Barrow of the Damned isn’t gonna cut it. And when the hell is Kevin supposed to be here?”

KellieTheDeathless looked up and to the right, her eyes blurring for a moment as she read something Roark couldn’t see.

“He has to walk his pug, but then he’ll be back on.”

“Jeez.” PwnrBwner’s brows drew low over his eyes. “Tell that little tard he’d better be logged in as Gazebo_Goatee this time or I’ll gank him myself.”

“I’m not your secretary, ass. Message him yourself.”

The serving maid returned with their drinks, first collecting their gold, then passing the cups and flagons around.

After she left, Mike_T_Boarkiller turned to the heroes at his table.

“Think they sell any potions here? I’m all out of Health.”

“Yeah, if you want to pay like ten gold apiece for a crap lowbie potion.”

The Bloodfury Savage sucked his teeth and shook his head. “Screw that.”

“Either cough up the gold or go back to the marketplace,” PwnrBwner snapped. “We’re leaving as soon as our doofus Blessed Paladin gets here, and none of us is lending you anything. We’re going to need it.”

“I just sat down, dude!” Mike_T_Boarkiller threw up his hands.

PwnrBwner took a gulp of his mead, then slammed his flagon down. “I didn’t ask you for your life story, Mike, I told you how it was

gonna be. If you didn't want to roll with us, you shouldn't have answered the message. We didn't spend all day grinding so we could *not* go kill that Griefer taintwipe. So, if you're gonna wuss out on me, tell me now so I can get Irena to replace you."

"Fine!" With a frustrated grunt, Mike_T_Boarkiller shoved his chair out, downed his drink, and then tromped out of the Unicorn, presumably to go buy cheaper Health potions somewhere else.

Spotting his opening, Roark slipped out of his chair and over to the party.

"Did you lot mention the Griefer?" he asked, nodding at PwnrBwner. "That bellend from the Cruel Citadel?"

"Yeah," JohnJon said, wiping a bit of cider from his upper lip. "We were just—"

"Talking about how nosy assholes should mind their own business," PwnrBwner snapped, turning back to his drink.

"Oh, for frick's sake." KellieTheDeathless rolled her eyes. She smiled at Roark. "Ignore Scott. He's a pathological dickhead." She paused, eyeing his nameplate. The Glamour Spell had allowed him to change even that, hiding him under the banner [Rebel_of_Korvo]. "So, you got screwed over by the Griefer too, huh?"

Roark took the empty chair next to her, ignoring PwnrBwner's narrowed glare.

"That poncy bastard killed my whole party," he said, pasting a scowl on his face. "I just respawned, but none of my mates will go back in with me for our gear. Cowards."

PwnrBwner snorted. "No wonder. I wouldn't party with a level 15, either, unless I wanted to be instakilled."

"You are kind of low," KellieTheDeathless said, twisting her wineglass by the stem. "Why do you want to go back in now, anyway? You need to turn out a few dozen levels before you take on the citadel. Then you might live long enough to get your gear back."

"I can't wait around," Roark said, allowing desperation to creep into his voice. "Didn't you hear? That Griefer just took the fourth-floor Overseer's seat. He's almost impossible to get to now—"

"Oh yeah, good idea," PwnrBwner drawled. "Go in there now that he's holed up four levels down!"

Roark glared at the High Combat Cleric. “Except there’s another way in. A secret entrance that leads right into the back of the fourth-floor throne room. A decent party could take him by surprise, kill him before he knew what hit him—but only if they get to him now, before he moves on to take the fifth floor.”

PwnrBwner was paying attention now.

“Oh yeah?” he asked. “Where is it?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday,” Roark said, shaking his head. “I’ll lead the way in, but I’m not handing that information over so you can stab me in the back and take him on yourselves. Half that quest belongs to me. If you can’t accept that, I’ll find some mercenaries who can.”

“What quest?” KellieTheDeathless asked.

Roark found the heroes at his table suddenly much closer than they’d been a moment before, all leaning forward and giving him their undivided attention. Even PwnrBwner.

“You don’t have it yet?” he asked as if he didn’t believe them. He took a long pull of his ale for dramatic effect, then set the flagon on the table. “There’s a Grief the Griefer quest going around. Word of mouth, with a major Experience and gold payout.”

Around the table, three pairs of eyes lost focus as they read through the quest details Roark had set before leaving the citadel.



Grief the Griefer

It’s time the Griefer felt the sting of defeat. Any hero fed up with this troublemaking Troll should join in the fun.

Objective: Strike a killing blow on Roark the Griefer as many times as possible.

Reward: 650 Experience, 650 Gold, Flawless Cursed Weapon and Armor

Restrictions: Killing blow must be struck on Roark the Griefer’s native floor in the Cruel Citadel.

Note: Experience and Gold awarded will be doubled for each additional kill completing the quest.

The enemy of my enemy is my ally ... for now...



“I mean, it’s not much,” JohnJon said, disappointment obvious in his voice.

Roark’s gut clenched at the words. He’d placed the quest on himself, baiting his trap, but unfortunately, there were strict reward restrictions, which he hadn’t been able to find a way around.

“But it keeps doubling,” PwnrBwner said after a tense beat. “And if you really do have a back way into the throne room, we can skip all the fighting beforehand and go in fully charged with all our Health potions. Take down the Griefer, wait for him to respawn, take him down again before he can retrieve his gear—oh shit, I bet I can find a potent contact poison to bitch-slap him with when he tries to get his stuff back!” The High Combat Cleric laughed, a manic glint in his eye. “Accept quest.”

Roark felt an invisible weight fall from his shoulders and managed to keep the smug grin off his face as PwnrBwner_OG turned to him.

“Well, what’re we waiting for?” PwnrBwner stood up so hard his chair nearly tipped over. “Let’s go kill this skidmark.”

“What about Kevin and Mike?” KellieTheDeathless protested. “You said we’d wait for them.”

“Message them to meet us at the citadel.”

“Do I look like I work for you?”

“Balls!” the Cleric snapped, throwing his gauntleted hands into the air. “Fine! I’ll do it myself just like I do everything else in this stupid guild! You”—PwnrBwner pointed at Roark—“level 15. I don’t want you holding us back. You got any character more OP you can work with?”

“All I’ve got is what you see here,” Roark said before tipping back the last of his ale. He set his empty flagon on the table with a bang and stood up. “But trust me, I’m more powerful than I look.”

CHAPTER 43

BOSS RAID



Roark shot a level 1 Fireball at the oncoming Shambling Revenant, destroying the remainder of its Health bar and dropping it to the ground. Though he didn't feel good about slaughtering the cemetery full of walking corpses outside the citadel's walls, participating in clearing the area was necessary to maintain his cover as a hero.

"That was the last one," Gazebo_Goatee called, sheathing his Shining Zweihander. The Blessed Paladin, Roark had learned from the heroes' conversation on the way to the citadel, was another of the dark elf Dude_Farkowitz's faces. Apparently, it was normal for heroes in Hearthworld to have more than one form. They moved between them to avoid the long respawn times.

"A fireball?" PwnrBwner_OG sneered, twirling his Unique Blue Flame Mace in his hand. "If that's the best you can do, you're gonna get one-shotted down there."

"I'm saving my good spells for the Griefer," Roark replied, leading them to the mausoleum with the cracked stone door. "Why? Were those Revenants a challenge for you?"

The Cleric scowled. "I don't hold back like a scared little bitch."

"Of course not." Roark grinned. "You barrel in full-force like an idiot with no self-control."

"Oh my God, if I have to listen to any more of you girls sniping at each other, I'll murder you both," KellieTheDeathless snapped, pushing past Roark into the darkness. A low snicker came from the shadows off to the right. JohnJon, their Druid Scout. "Where's our door already?"

Roark followed her inside, PwnrBwner on his heels. A moment later, Gazebo_Goatee and Mike_T_Boarkiller had crowded into the tiny crypt as well. Tight fit.

“Here.” Roark gestured to a stone sarcophagus. He leaned into the lid, pretending to be unable to open it. After a few moments’ struggling, he gave up and stood, ducking his head out of feigned embarrassment. “Well, my Strength’s not exactly—”

“Step aside, Fifteen.” PwnrBwner grabbed the corner of the lid and shoved it off. With an indignant yelp, KellieTheDeathless jumped aside to keep from being crushed. The High Combat Cleric pointed down into the dark tunnel below. “JohnJon, you’re up.”

The Druid Scout muttered an incantation. A ball of light flared to life over his head, then he climbed over the lip of the sarcophagus, arrow nocked and ready in his vine-covered bow, and dropped.

And continued dropping until he hit a sloping dirt floor cut into the earth.

“Whoa,” the Scout said, his voice echoing up from below. “No traps, but watch that first step. It’s a doozy.”

“All right,” PwnrBwner said, looking at the rest of them. “I want Mike and Kevin behind JohnJon ready to draw aggro. Kellie and me next—and you better have your Star Showers ready to go this time, Kel—then Level Fifteen bringing up the rear where he won’t get instadead. Let’s move.”

Roark put on an offended scowl until the rest of the group had dropped into the tunnel, then he grabbed the lip of the sarcophagus and vaulted in behind them. According to the countdown in the corner of his vision, he had one hour, twenty-nine minutes, and counting until his Glamour Cloak wore off, revealing not only his true level, but his true identity to these heroes. Kaz’s maps hadn’t given an exact length to these tunnels, but Roark planned to have accomplished this plan before time ran out.

They followed along behind JohnJon’s flickering ball of light, the only sound the clanking of their own heavy armor, boots, and weapons echoing back to them. Here and there, the ground was littered with skeletal remains, and overhead tree roots as well as sunken tombstones and the broken bottoms of wooden coffins hung

from the ceiling. Every now and then, Shambling Revenants lunged at them from shadowy clefts in the muddy walls, but a few blows from Mike_T_Boarkiller's warhammer and a mishmash of Elemental Warlock spells from KellieTheDeathless ended the undead creatures quickly and efficiently.

Around a sharp turn, the passageway wound back toward the citadel, sloping steadily downward. The coffins and roots disappeared as they traveled deeper into the earth, and no more Revenants appeared. They splashed through a swiftly flowing brook and passed a shrine laden with a stack of human skulls and a wreath of deep blue flowers.

Roark had just realized the floor was leveling out when JohnJon called back in a low voice, "We got a door! No obvi mechanisms trapping it, no locks, no magick. Looks like your standard pull-chain."

PwnrBwner hefted his mace and cast a spell with his off hand. Roark felt a flood of power rush through his veins.

[You have been Galvanized! Constitution is increased by +10 for 2 minutes!]

"All right, let's go," PwnrBwner said impatiently. "Pull the chain already, JohnJon."

Mike_T_Boarkiller giggled. "That's what I told your mom to do with my chain."

"Did she make you pay extra, too?" KellieTheDeathless asked, eliciting a snort from Gazebo_Goatee.

"Always does," Mike said.

"Ha ha, guys!" PwnrBwner snapped, the venom in his voice cutting through their laughter. "This is the perfect time for everybody to become comedians—when we're trying to sneak up on that shithead Griefer! Open the fucking door."

At the front of the heroes, the Druid Scout pulled the chain, its links rattling and clanking. With the grating scrape of stone against stone, the crude door slid down into the floor, revealing a small knoll of softly glowing grass and the rear of the Keep.

Roark followed the heroes' party out into the ambient light of the fifth floor's forest of enormous glowing mushrooms, the grass chiming musically beneath their feet and shimmering violet.

"This is the fourth floor?" Gazebo_Goatee asked, head craned back to look up at a towering bioluminescent fungus.

"No, this is the end of the third floor," Roark lied with convincing ease. "The fourth-floor throne room is through there," Roark said, pointing out the faintest outline of a door, just barely visible in the aging stone and mortar walls of the Keep. He recognized it. This was the entrance Zyra had used when she first brought Roark and Kaz down to meet Azibek. He edged past Mike_T_Boarkiller and felt around until he triggered the catch. With an audible *click*, the door swung open.

Roark stepped aside, gesturing for PwnrBwner to precede him. "Level 28s first."

But the High Combat Cleric turned back to his party.

"Kellie, I want you to lay down your Meteor Shower AoE as soon as we step inside, targeting the Griefer. Kevin and Mike, come at him from opposite sides and whale on him while JohnJon and I DPS. Meanwhile, I'll keep you guys buffed and stuffed." He shot a glare at Roark. "You try not to crap your Pull-Ups while the big boys work. And see if you can't find something better than a Fireball to shoot at him."

Roark smirked. "I'll see what I can come up with."

"Everybody got what they're doing?" PwnrBwner asked.

There was a chorus of agreements and heads nodding.

"Then let's go kick some ass."

Roark let the heroes file into the dark corridor first. When they were all inside, he leaned around the corner and fired off one of his pre-inscribed spells—a level 2 Beacon—in the general direction of the fourth floor. If Druz, Grozka, and Wurgfozz were in position, they would see the sparkling flare.

The signal sent off, he slipped into the gloomy, sloping passageway behind the heroes. At the front of the group, the Druid Scout had cast another glowing orb and was feeling for the catch.

Click.

The panel slid aside, revealing Azibek's opulent throne room flickering with firelight. From every corner of the room, piles of jewels and gold glittered, reflecting the dancing flames. In the corner sat a huge ornately carved chest thrumming with Infernal power. The Troll High Court—a conglomeration of the highest-level Trolls in the citadel—were scattered about the room, decked out in a collection of Unique robes, leathers, and armors.

At the head of it all, on the enormous throne, sat the Dungeon Lord himself, a colossal grey-skinned Jotnar Exarch, a long-bladed Infernal scythe etched with runes resting across his lap. Azibek the Cruel cut an intimidating figure even sitting as he was. Roark felt a thrill of fear course down his spine as the Dungeon Lord's eyes settled on him.

"What the hell is this?" PwnrBwner snapped, his grating voice cutting through the throne room like a knife. "That's not the Griefer."

Azibek's eyes narrowed. For a moment, Roark was certain the Dungeon Lord could see through his Glamour Cloak, through his very skull and into his mind, the plan laid bare. Then Azibek launched himself up out of his seat with a wordless battle cry that shook the Keep and swung his Infernal scythe, scattering the heroes.

"Where's that AoE, Kel?" PwnrBwner yelled, circling toward the Dungeon Lord's right. "And where are my tanks? Is this you idiots' first raid?"

KellieTheDeathless shoved the end of her gnarled staff at Azibek. With a sudden downward rush of hot air, chunks of fiery rock appeared overhead and battered the throne room, shattering craters into the flagstones where they hit. A few slammed into the Dungeon Lord and members of the Troll High Court, but Azibek shrugged off the damage and leapt at her.

With a resonating shout, Mike_T_Boarkiller rushed the Exarch. A bloody, pulsing aura surrounded the Bloodfury Savage, and his already overlarge muscles doubled in size. His warhammer slammed into Azibek's left flank just as Gazebo_Goatee attacked with his Blessed Longsword from the right.

The Troll High Court seemed to have overcome their outraged shock and were flooding into the battle. Roark hurried to cast Hex-Armor on himself in case he had to intervene. Weakness stole through his body as a portion of the Constitution PwnrBwner had shored up bled away—the price of the spell. Icy cold sank into his muscles, chilling him to the bone as the glimmering crystal armor covered him.

But a moment later, the throne room's immense heavy wooden doors burst open, admitting Grozka, Wurgfozz, Kaz, Zyra, Mac, and a legion of allied Trolls. They spread throughout the throne room, battling the Troll High Court and backing them into a corner away from the heroes and Azibek.

His plan back on track, Roark pulled out his quill and inkpot. He dodged a mighty blow from Azibek's Infernal scythe, then ducked under a brilliant flash of white thrown by PwnrBwner. Dropping to his knees, he hurriedly scribbled out a hex on the step in front of the Dungeon Lord's throne.

[Would you like to Hex this surface? Yes/No?

Note: For every Hex you inscribe, Cursed! will extract a share of your Infernali Magick equal to your Enchanting level x .5 your character level.]

Without hesitation, Roark selected yes. His purple Magick vial dipped slightly, but his Regen went to work immediately refilling it. As the hex took, the inscription glowed wine-purple, and the letters ran into strange angular runes as the hex stretched to size. Amethyst light flared at the edges, then faded to near invisibility.

A leaf-fletched arrow bounced off Roark's Hex-Armor, extracting a large portion of his Magick rather than his Health.

“My bad!” JohnJon yelled, the Druid Scout sprinting away from the blade of Azibek's Infernal scythe as he nocked another leafy shaft and fired it at the Dungeon Lord.

Rather than turn on the Druid, Azibek beat his huge, leathery wings and lifted into the air.

“Look out!” PwnrBwner shouted, backpedaling. “Here comes his boss attack!”

While they were distracted, Roark darted twenty feet away from his first hex and dropped down, inscribing another and accepting it without a moment’s hesitation.

The throne room floor rocked beneath his feet, throwing Roark onto his ass. An agonized shriek split the air to his left. When Roark glanced over his shoulder, Azibek was slinging ruby liquid from the blade of his scythe and Gazebo_Goatee’s headless corpse lay in a pool of blood on the floor, plum-colored tongues of Infernal fire licking up from his limbs. Mike_T_Boarkiller was still hammering away at the Dungeon Lord, but only a handful of Azibek’s Health bar had disappeared.

From the far corner, KellieTheDeathless cast a Whiteout, showering Azibek and the Bloodfury Savage with swirling snow so thick that Roark couldn’t see either of them through it. A split second later, PwnrBwner_OG shouted out a thunderous prayer to his Divine god, Rajthorne the Mighty. Lightning struck the center of the Whiteout. With a series of gusting flaps, Azibek’s wings blew away the blizzard, and the Dungeon Lord swooped toward KellieTheDeathless.

Roark shook himself out of the fascinated trance and moved on to the next available surface, a wall outside the twenty-foot minimum. He hoped not to need so many hexes, but better overprepared than underprepared—especially when forever-death was on the line.

He’d just ducked down to inscribe another hex when a hairy mass slammed into him from behind, smashing him face-first into the ornate chest. Red drained from his Health vial, and Roark realized his Hex-Armor had lapsed. At his feet, Mike_T_Boarkiller groaned as his own red bar flashed out a warning. It seemed Azibek had knocked the hero across the floor.

Roark disentangled himself from the Bloodfury Savage and recast Hex-Armor on himself. All his level 2 spell slots had been inscribed with Hex-Armor and Hex-Aura in preparation for this fight. Then Roark grabbed Mike_T_Boarkiller under the arms, set him on

his feet with a strength that should've been out of reach of a level 15, and shoved the Savage back into the midst of the battle.

From just beyond Azibek, PwnrBwner_OG caught Roark's eye.

"I'm gonna get you for this, you lowbie jizzrag!" The Cleric fired a fountain of blue-white lava from his fist at the Dungeon Lord, filling the throne room with the hissing crackle of sparks and smell of molten slag. "After this boss, you're going down! Gonna PK your ass until you rage quit!"

The lava ate away at Azibek's Health, but Roark didn't stand around watching it drop. He launched himself back into inscribing. He wasn't certain how much longer he had before the battle ended, but he didn't want to be caught only half-finished.

Roark chanced a glance toward the back of the throne room as he sprinted for his next hexing surface. It looked as if several of the Troll High Court had been taken down by his allied Trolls. Using Kaz's maps had allowed his most powerful friends and allies to bypass the majority of the fifth-floor defenses, piling into the throne room virtually unscathed. As he watched, Zyra and Kaz sliced and hacked away at a Jotnar Soul-Cursed named Zul. Grozka and a trio of Behemoths were taking apart an Elemental Thusr under the nameplate Lazjin, and Wurgfozz, Druz, and Mac were tearing into a wiry Reaver Shaman named Verisk with help from Wurgfozz's honor guard.

So far, so good.

With an earth-shaking boom, Azibek landed right beside Roark. A quarter of the purple liquid drained from Roark's Magick vial as the Hex-Armor absorbed the damage. Roark dropped to the floor and rolled away as Mike_T_Boarkiller ran in, screaming his ululating battle cry.

The battle cry quickly turned into a howl of pain as Azibek's Infernal scythe cut the Bloodfury Savage in half.

Roark dashed off the next hex and accepted it.

One surface left to go.

And one hero left to go.

It seemed when he hadn't been looking, the Dungeon Lord had finished off KellieTheDeathless. Now only PwnrBwner_OG stood

against the massive Jotnar Exarch, firing lava from one hand and blinding fountains of sparks from his Blue Flame Mace.

Azibek's wings beat at the air, dragging him toward the High Combat Cleric.

Roark darted to the wall adjacent to the throne and inscribed his final hex on the last available surface. This hex completed the enormous trap he'd carefully constructed around the perimeter of the room. Time to finish this.

Azibek's roar and PwnrBwner's furious prayer rang off the walls of the throne room. PwnrBwner was clinging to life by a mere handful of Health. One more blow from the Dungeon Lord would kill him. For his part, Azibek wasn't doing much better. It seemed his fight with the heroes had taken its toll, and less than a quarter of his Health bar remained.

As the Dungeon Lord and High Combat Cleric faced off with one another, Roark stood up from his final hex and pulled out a cursed severed head. Neatly positioning himself in full view of both PwnrBwner and Azibek, he dispelled his Glamour Cloak.

"You!" screeched PwnrBwner, his face going livid purple inside his black helm.

"Me." Roark jerked the nose ring from the severed head, triggering its curse, then lobbed it at the furious Cleric.

CHAPTER 44

TO THE VICTOR GO THE SPOILS



PwnrBwner_OG thrust his free palm at Roark, unleashing a slurry of molten rock. But too late. As Roark sidestepped the lava fountain, the severed head slammed into the High Combat Cleric's flaming paudron, exploding in a shower of bone spikes and gore. Roark pulled another from his Inventory and hurled it, this time clipping PwnerBwner and catching Azibek in the blast radius, taking out a chunk of the Dungeon Lord's life. Brilliant.

Red-faced, PwnerBwner whirled, trying to figure out who to fight. The enraged Dungeon Lord or the sneaky Griefer running circles around him, hurling cursed heads.

Azibek looked equally confused, but finally settled on PwnrBwner as the greater threat.

That served Roark's plans well. He grabbed another head, this one cursed with a noxious fog, and lobbed it in between the two clashing foes. A toxic yellow miasma rolled out and up as the head hit and burst with a wet *splat*. PwnrBwner's HP bar flashed green, though Azibek was frustratingly unaffected. Still the cloud momentarily distracted the Dungeon Lord, and the High Combat Cleric struck—a wicked bolt of holy lightning arcing out from his weapon, eating through another chunk of Azibek's Health.

The Dungeon Lord flapped his massive wings, dispersing the cloud, and lashed out with his Infernal scythe. PwnrBwner threw himself into a blazing-quick roll. Fast, but not quite fast enough. The scythe clipped his leg, only a glancing blow, but one that sent tongues of purple flame licking up from the wound and brought the man to the edge of death.

Roark grinned and struck again, launching a simple level 1 Fireball at the Cleric. Under any other circumstances, the attack would've been completely useless. These, however, were anything but normal circumstances.

PwnrBwner howled like a madman as the Fireball hit and his Health bar plummeted to zero. The irony of the kill was not lost on Roark, and he reveled in the Experience points from what should have been Azibek's kill.

Azibek landed on the stone floor with a teeth-jarring boom. His deep chuckle silenced even the pitched battle between the Troll High Court and Roark's troops.

"Of course," Azibek said, folding his leathery wings behind his back. "The ambitious little Changeling Overseer, scheming his way to the top. Be careful that your next move doesn't overreach itself."

Roark ignored the taunting, forging ahead before the battered Exarch healed himself.

"Azibek the Cruel," he said. "I challenge you for Dungeon Lord of the Cruel Citadel."



Sic Semper Tyrannis

You have challenged Azibek the Cruel for the right to rule over the Cruel Citadel as Dungeon Lord!

Objective: Kill Azibek the Cruel in single combat.

Reward: Become the new Dungeon Lord of the Cruel Citadel, command and deploy Keep mobs, create and alter the layout of the Keep, gain access to the Dungeon Lord's Blessings, 50,000 Experience

Failure: Die at the hand of Azibek the Cruel in single combat.

Penalty: No respawn.

Restrictions: No outside assistance, no Health potions may be used.

Accept quest? Yes/No



With a thought, Roark accepted the terms of the challenge. The page disappeared, showing him an unsurprised, unimpressed Dungeon Lord.

“I accept,” Azibek growled, his glinting onyx eyes focusing once more. Rather than flying into an immediate attack, the Exarch rested the butt of his Infernal scythe on the floor and looked down his long grey nose at Roark. The distance was nowhere near as great as it had been when Roark was a mere Changeling. “Do you recall what I told you when you became Overseer? I told you to have a care to rein in your ambition lest it be your downfall.”

“And I told you I knew my place,” Roark said. He cast Hex-Aura on himself, Magick trickling from his filigreed purple vial as a hair-thin sphere of amethyst encircled him like spun glass. He pulled his rapier and raised the slender blade in a clear invitation. “I’m willing to bet my life I was right. Are you?”

Azibek smiled, revealing fangs as long as a man’s hand, and hefted his Infernal scythe. His leathery wings unfolded and stretched wide like the hood of a cobra trying to intimidate its foe.

“I suppose you want me to attack, stepping into your sphere and causing myself damage in the process?” the Dungeon Lord guessed, raising one pale brow. It wasn’t exactly how Hex-Aura worked—Azibek would have to deal physical melee damage to Roark to trigger the Curse—but it was close enough. “No, I don’t think I’ll do your job for you today, little Changeling.” He opened his arms wide. “To the challenger goes the first move.”

Roark scowled. He’d hoped to end this without actually coming to blows with the Exarch. Even with only a tenth of his HP remaining, Azibek was nearly double his level and had taken the Jotnar’s fighting specialized evolutionary path rather than the spell-slinging Infernali. There was no way that in fair, single combat Roark would manage any better than PwnrBwner. But Roark didn’t intend to fight fair. He would just have to force Azibek to make the moves required to finish this duel.

His eye caught Kaz’s terrified black gaze across the room. For once, the Thusr chef wasn’t holding Mac bodily to stop the bloodthirsty beast from intervening. The Turtle Dragon’s bearded

mouth was wrapped around the wiry forearm of the Reaver Shaman, seemingly stopped just before snapping the bone in half. Zyra stood clutching a Cursed Longknife in each hand, her poisoned claws extended.

“Well, little Changeling pretender?” Azibek’s taunt was loud in the absolute silence of the throne room. “I’m waiting.”

Roark’s fist tightened around the rapier’s hilt. He swallowed hard. There was only one thing to do.

He turned on his heel and ran.

A moment of stunned silence followed him, then booming laughter as deep as the rumble of tectonic plates shifting. Roark vaulted over the ornate chest and crouched down behind it.

The rhythmic whoosh of air and snap of leather let him know that Azibek had taken to the wing again.

“Seven hells,” Roark cursed under his breath. This would never work if he couldn’t force the Dungeon Lord’s feet to the ground.

Roark pulled his quill and inkpot and set to work writing a hasty paralysis hex on the back of the ornate chest as fast as he could. As he inscribed the last letter, he stood.

[Would you like to Hex this surface? Yes/No?

Note: For every Hex you inscribe, Cursed! will extract a share of your Infernali Magick equal to your Enchanting level x .5 your character level.]

Roark stared through the lines of text at the Dungeon Lord, who hovered over the nearly invisible amethyst rune on the floor.

“Did you find your courage back there?” Azibek chuckled. “Don’t be afraid, little Changeling, I’ll make your end fast.”

The Dungeon Lord swooped at him, swinging his Infernal scythe in a death blow. At the same time, Roark scooped the ornate chest from the floor and confirmed the hex, hurling the enormous box at the diving Jotnar Exarch.

Weakness coursed through Roark’s veins as Cursed! extracted its price from his Magick vial. The letters he’d inscribed on the chest

twisted and spread until they covered nearly the entire back panel, bending and blurring into the form of a deadly rune. Amethyst light flared the moment before it slammed into the Dungeon Lord's scythe and arms.

[*On impact, any single opponent becomes instantly paralyzed for 15 seconds.*]

A brilliant blue flash blazed through the throne room. Azibek's wings stopped beating and his body froze in place—a giant, hideous statue hanging in the air.

And then, Azibek dropped like a brick onto the hex Roark had inscribed on the floor.

When the Dungeon Lord's Paralyzed form hit the rune, it triggered the first explosion. Roark threw up his hand, casting an Infernal shield to protect himself. Huge chunks of debris fell throughout the throne room like rain, sending the crowd of watching Trolls running for the door. The wreckage from that explosion triggered the remaining hexes so painstakingly inscribed around the throne room, crushing Azibek's Paralyzed body beneath tons of rubble.

From behind his violet barrier, Roark watched the Dungeon Lord's Health bar flash a critical warning, then empty completely.

Roark's mystic grimoire appeared before him, open to the page marked *Quests*.



Congratulations! You have completed the quest Sic Semper Tyrannis!

You may ascend to the throne as Dungeon Lord of the Cruel Citadel!

To accept position as Dungeon Lord, take a seat on the throne.

To reject position as Dungeon Lord, leave the Keep without taking a seat on the throne.

Warning: If you leave the Keep without accepting the position as Dungeon Lord, you will not be able to return and accept later.

Warning: If you accept the position as Dungeon Lord for the Cruel Citadel, you will automatically be removed as Floor Overseer of the fourth floor.



Roark closed the grimoire and looked to the throne. Only the steps in front of the carved stone seat had been destroyed by his hex; the throne itself was still intact. On closer inspection, he realized the throne's back was a carved set of onyx wings that curved down into the armrests flanking the seat. He stepped over the crater and sat on the Dungeon Lord's throne.

[Congratulations! You have ascended to Dungeon Lord of the Cruel Citadel!]

All hail the new Dungeon Lord!

From the Dungeon Lord's Throne, you may command and deploy Keep mobs, create and alter the Keep's layout, purchase resources or upgrades for the Keep, and access the Dungeon Lord's Blessings.]

He glanced at the ribbons marking pages in the Dungeon Lord's Grimoire. It was similar in many ways to the Overseer's Grimoires, but in addition to the *Floor Design* and *Troop Management* pages, there was also a page marked *Blessings*. It was a list of the Blessings he could bestow as Dungeon Lord—Fleeting, Lingering, and Eternal. Beneath that was *Boons*, a section on the benefits of granting other Trolls gifts as Azibek had done with the Lash of the Waning Blood Moon.

Roark barely noticed when a reptilian head and scrabbling scaly legs forced their way behind his back, followed by a smooth-plated shell. He scooted forward to the edge of the throne while Mac settled in, curling scaly legs and tail around Roark's sides. Roark leaned back against the bloodthirsty Turtle Dragon as he continued reading.

It seemed all boons had properties unknown to the receivers—the weapons couldn't deal damage to the Dungeon Lord, the armor

would fail if the wearer was attacked by the Dungeon Lord, and the jewelry lost its stat bonuses when in the Dungeon Lord's presence. Lucky, then, that he hadn't used the Lash of the Waning Blood Moon against Azibek.

The scraping of boots and clanking of armor sounded nearby. Roark closed the Dungeon Lord's Grimoire to find the allied Trolls leading in Azibek's High Court at sword-point.

"What should we do with these, Dungeon Lord?" Grozka asked, her raucous voice ringing off the throne room walls.

Roark found Zyra with her blade to the throat of a well-dressed Elemental. He couldn't see her face, but he felt certain that he caught her eye. Nearby, Kaz looked slightly panicked, as if dreading the inevitable bloodshed now that the battle had ended.

"I'll give you all the same choice I gave the rest of the floors I've Overseen," Roark said, standing. "Submit to me as your new Dungeon Lord or leave the citadel. If you won't do either, I'll be forced to have you executed."

One by one, the Troll High Court fell to their knees and bowed. Zyra kicked the Elemental she'd been holding hostage in the backside, but sheathed her Cursed Longknives.

Kaz stepped forward, raising one zucchini-sized forefinger tipped in a razor-sharp black talon. "Now that Roark is Dungeon Lord, may Kaz and Mai prepare a feast?"

"Nothing would make me happier, mate. Let's eat!"

CHAPTER 45

GRAND FEAST



After looting the heroes' bodies—much to the shock and horror of the remaining members of the High Court, who'd never seen such behavior from an Infernal chimera before—Roark had a few of the lower-level Trolls from the allied floors show them how to mark the bodies for griefing. Though the other heroes had seemed reluctant to come back to the citadel, there was something about PwnrBwner_OG which convinced them to go against their better judgment—perhaps some sort of Hero Leadership Skill. Roark didn't doubt the High Combat Cleric would be back sooner or later with most of his usual party in tow.

With the heroes' corpses dealt with, Grozka offered to have a group of her troops clear away the rubble and debris from the throne room. On a hunch, Roark refused. He returned to the throne—eliciting a grumpy gurgle from the sleeping Turtle Dragon in his seat—and opened the Dungeon Lord's Grimoire to the *Floor Design* page. After a few minutes tinkering with the layout of the Keep, Roark accepted the changes.

The piles of rock and rubble disappeared, the craters where the hexes had blown up refilled themselves as if they were never there, and the ornate chest thrumming with Infernal power righted itself and returned to the corner. Azibek's broken corpse was the only piece of evidence to show that there had been a battle in the throne room not more than an hour before.

Roark closed the Dungeon Lord's Grimoire, left the throne, and bent down to loot the dead Jotnar Exarch. The only things Azibek had were the Infernal Feverblood Scythe and a twisted wooden ring

the color of a fresh scab. Roark focused in on each of the items in turn, bringing up their information in his mystic grimoire.



Infernal Feverblood Scythe

Two-Handed Damage: 200

Durability: 111/120

Level Requirement: 36

Strength Requirement: 100

Dexterity Requirement: 180

Blade Class Weapon – Slow Attack Speed

Lights an Infernal fire in the blood of targets, burning them from the inside out for $+6 \times \text{character level/sec}$ Burning Damage for up to 6 seconds.

+15% chance of Decapitating target

Warning: Infernal Feverblood Scythe is an alignment-based item.

Players with a Divine alignment will take $(.5 \times \text{character level})$ Damage/sec as long as Infernal Feverblood Scythe is equipped.



Clearblood Ring

Durability: 89/96

Level Requirement: 16

Resists 100% of poison, disease, and blood-based magical attacks.



Even if he favored two-handed weapons, the scythe would be useless to him for at least nine more levels. That would go in the pile to destroy for its enchantment as soon as he made it back up to the smithy. In the meantime, he knew exactly what to do with the ring.

Roark closed out of the grimoire and glanced around the throne room. He found Zyra picking through a shelf of rare and unusual Alchemy ingredients. The Dread Reaver's hood lifted as he joined her.

"I've got a ring that will protect me from an assassin's poisoned claws now," he said, holding up the item in question.

Zyra leaned closer, inspecting it. “From the poison on them, maybe. Not from the claws themselves.”

“Just thought you’d like to know it’s safe to get closer.” He grinned and slipped the ring on. “For me, anyway.”

He caught a glint of tooth inside the hood, and when she spoke again, he could hear the smile in her voice.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Griefer.”

“Attention!” a croaky voice rang out. In the throne room’s arched doorway stood a level 2 Changeling in a sauce-splattered apron. “The Feast of Saint Kaz the Gourmet is served!”

Roark sketched a courtly bow and offered Zyra his arm. In response, she fiddled with the leather wrappings on her palm, exposing the row of stickdeath needles.

“Give it your best,” Roark teased.

The walk to the Keep’s newly added great hall was enjoyable in spite of the row of needles in his bicep, and over all too soon. Kaz and Mai and their bevy of apprentice chefs hustled around, serving plates of roasted meats, bowls of stew, colorful vegetables, hunks of fresh bread, sweet pastries, and filling flagons of ale. The fifth- and sixth-floor Trolls took some convincing, but as soon as they sank their teeth into their first bite of food, Kaz’s cooking won them over. Trolls from every floor gathered around the long tables, savoring the delicacies and celebrating the end of Azibek’s reign.

Roark ate with them, listening to Griff as the grizzled old trainer regaled them with stories of the arena, and laughing when Mac appeared on the ceiling, convincing Zyra to restart the familiar game of tossing scraps up to him and the Stone Salamanders, Hellbenders, and Reaver Bats. But all the while, in the back of his mind, Roark was turning over the threat of Lowen and the Vault of the Radiant Shield.

The celebration carried on into the night, with only one drunken brawl breaking out—and that was quickly broken up when Roark dragged Zyra away before she managed to poison her opponent.

Dawn was fast approaching when the revelers finally began to disperse, returning to their native floors, and Roark found himself alone with his honor guard and the citadel’s only human residents.

Mai was nestled in Kaz's pillar-sized arms, half asleep, and the Behemoth didn't seem in any hurry to go anywhere. Zyra lounged on the table, empty dishes and flagons knocked aside to make room for her, her head and shoulders resting on what was left of a roasted boar. If the Reaver hadn't occasionally tossed a scrap up to Mac on the ceiling or tossed back another flagon, Roark would've thought she'd passed out.

Across the table from Roark, Griff had turned pensive and quiet, staring into his ale for long stretches between sips.

"You've been quiet all night," the trainer finally said, fixing Roark with his piercing gaze. "What's on your mind, Griefer?"

"This was good," Roark said, glancing around at the remnants of the festivities. "They needed a chance to blow off some steam."

"A pleasant to-do ain't what's got you broodin', boy. Out with it."

"This was just the first war. There's another one waiting for us out there." Roark gestured vaguely toward the ceiling, meaning wherever in Hearthworld the Vault of the Radiant Shield sat manned by that horse's ass, Lowen. "And I'm afraid we'll have to start it sooner rather than later. There's another man out there from my home, and he's been gathering his army, too. Every day we wait to strike, he gets stronger."

The one-eyed trainer scratched at his bristly chin. "You're thinkin' throw the first punch and as many follow-ups as you can before he catches on."

Roark nodded.

"But we need information first. Intelligence that I can't gather even under a Glamour Cloak because this other man, Lowen, he knows my face. Both of my faces." Roark sighed in frustration and scratched the back of his neck. "I need a spy, someone he won't recognize who can get into the Vault of the Radiant shield, then report back—"

"Say no more." Griff drained the last of his flagon and stood up. "I'm your man."

"Are you sure?" Roark asked.

The old trainer stifled a rolling burp. "Ol' Griff's got a few good licks in him yet."

Roark's mind leapt to the good men and women the *T'Verzet* had lost to the Tyrant King's torturers.

"If Lowen realizes you're with me, you're not likely to die fast," he warned.

"Well, a smart man's got his ways of gettin' around that, if you know what I mean," Griff said, giving an exaggerated blink of his eye. It took Roark a moment to realize that was the one-eyed trainer's version of a wink. "I might need a bit o' rest, though. I'm not as young as I used to be. Can't feast all night and fight all day anymore."

"That's fine. It's probably best if you don't head out until nightfall anyway," Roark said.

The grizzled old arena vet excused himself, slapping Roark on the shoulder on his way out.

When he was gone, Roark turned to his best friend. The Behemoth was staring down at the cook busy snoring in his arms, his black eyes starry.

"Kaz," Roark said, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb Mai. "Could you check something in your Cartography Skill for me?"

"Kaz will check any Trade Skill for Roark," the Behemoth whispered back. "Roark is the reason Trolls can even have Trade Skills."

"See if there's a level where you can make accurate maps based on an eye witness's account."

Kaz stared off into the distance for several moments, his eyes roving over unseen words.

"Yes!" A triumphant grin stretched across his huge face. Mai stirred in his arms and he flinched, quickly lowering his voice back to an excited whisper. "At level 6, Kaz can map dungeons or cities from the descriptions of those who've visited them!"

Roark nodded, the cogs turning in his mind. Leveling Kaz's Cartography before Griff got back from the Vault would require another trip to the market, but perhaps while he was there, he could speak to Variok. Expedite the merchant's move to the citadel.

Decided, Roark stood up from the table and cast Glamour Cloak on himself, hiding his Jotnar Defiler form behind what used to be his true face.

“We need to get you some books, mate. There’s a lot of work yet to be done.”

CHAPTER 46

DEEP DIVE



Randy Shoemaker marched down the wide linoleum-covered hallway, the halogen lights overhead buzzing with frantic life.

He walked away from the work cubicles and the glass-fronted offices that were his natural environment. This was a part of the building he rarely visited—a part of the building that few people rarely visited, save for those with the very highest level of special clearance. This way lay the *VIP* lounge. The playground of directors and executives. Of people who made more in a month than he did in a year. But he *had* special clearance. Had it for the first time ever, even though he'd been a loyal employee of Frontflip Studios for years.

Randy clenched down on his ID card, soothing his jagged nerves. Yes. He had every right to be here, and his ID card—updated with a new set of permissions—said so.

Situated at the end of the hallway was a single wooden door, elegant and expensive, with a card reader set into the frame near the door handle.

He took a deep breath, readjusted the glasses on his nose, straightened his pocket protector, then finally swiped his badge. For a tense beat he was sure the light would flash red, cruelly denying him entry and proving this was all some elaborate joke played at his expense. But no. The light flashed green and he heard an audible *click* as the master lock disengaged. He reached out a quivering hand and pulled the door open, admitting himself to a paradise he'd dreamed about, but had never expected to see no matter how faithful his service was to the company.

He choked up a little as the glory of the VIP room washed over him like a tidal wave.

Plush carpets in deep grays lined the floors, while the walls were immaculately white, though accented with clean lines of gray, black, and chrome. The furniture was all white—posh and terribly uncomfortable looking, though undoubtedly expensive. The wall adjacent to the door was one giant Vidscreen, though it was currently off since the room was unoccupied. A fireplace, lifeless and cold, was built into the left wall; in front of it were a pair of white-leather club chairs and a shaggy black rug as big as Randy's living room. The right wall boasted a full bar along with a sleek chrome espresso machine, perfect for an afternoon pick-me-up.

It was nothing even *remotely* similar to the employee lounge. They were planets apart.

Frankly, though, Randy didn't care for the modern décor, nor the classy furniture.

He only had eyes for what lay at the back end of the room, behind a wall of spotless, gleaming glass. Eight Deep Dive capsules, like futuristic coffins, arrayed in a straight line. He'd been told that there was an attendant present to help the execs and influential visitors with the capsules, but the post was now abandoned. And no wonder. It was creeping up on midnight and the staff had all long since gone home, except, of course, for Randy. He was the lead responsible for fixing this problem.

A profitable problem, it turned out—at least according to Danny in Marketing—but a problem all the same.

One Randy *would* fix. Though admittedly, he hadn't made much progress so far.

The Cruel Citadel had fallen. Roark the Griefer—anomaly and possible modder—had somehow managed to depose Azibek the Cruel in single combat, despite the fact that the Dungeon Lord had been nearly twice his level. If that didn't prove this Roark was heavily gaming the system, nothing would. And worse, now that Roark had taken over, his errant, anomalous code had spread like a cancer, infecting every creature that called the Cruel Citadel home, not to

mention a pair of NPCs who had no business being in that location in the first place.

The Vault of the Radiant Shield wouldn't be far behind.

And since Randy hadn't been able to figure things out on the backend, it was time to get up close and personal. "*Boots on the ground*," CEO Michael Silva had called it.

Randy pulled open the glass door leading to the Deep Dive chamber, then made his way over to the first capsule in the line.

His fingers full-on trembled as he ran them over the smooth capsule lid. With a gentle nudge, the lid rose, revealing the hardened gelatinous muscle memory bed within. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his pulse quickened, heart laboring in his chest. This POD was a thing of beauty. He played Hearthworld, of course. He *loved* Hearthworld. Why else work for the company if not for the in-game employee perks? But he'd never played in a Deep Dive capsule. Randy had his own custom Voyage Haptic feedback suit and a Unity Framework Omni-Directional Treadmill for optimal play experience.

Well, *optimal* was rather subjective.

His rig was optimal if you weren't a multimillionaire with a hundred grand to spend on a Deep Dive capsule. This thing, this POD, was as different from his haptic rig as the VIP lounge was from the employee lounge.

He headed over to a gear locker on the left wall and quickly changed into an overly snug Voyage sensory suit, then slipped into the POD, easing himself down onto a bed of semisolid blue goop that conformed to his body. Once he was settled, it felt a bit as though he were floating, unconstrained by gravity. The capsule lid lowered on its own, and white light, utterly blinding, enveloped him. In a few blinks the light disappeared, replaced by Hearthworld's familiar loading screen, though rendered in a thousand times greater detail.

A breeze blew across the landscape, bringing the scent of charred meat and spring grass to his nose. Incredible. The haptic suits let users experience most sensations, though they were much weaker than real life—almost shadows of the real thing. Memories

playing across the nerves. But this was the real thing. Nearly indistinguishable from reality.

“Welcome, Randy Shoemaker,” the announcer’s ever-familiar voice boomed around him. “The battle awaits! Which character would you like to select?”

With a thought and a flick of his wrist, Randy brought up his original character—his most powerful character. His Arboreal Herald. He selected yes and felt power wash over him as the world spun and dissolved, the loading screen giving way to the sprawling cobblestoned streets of Averi City.

Time to figure out just who this Roark was and what he was up to. And he would have admin access to help ...



THE END
Civil War
The Rogue Dungeon Book 2

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES...



... in *Troll Nation (The Rogue Dungeon Book 3)*.

Build. Evolve. Conquer. The dawn of the Troll Nation has begun ...

Roark von Graf—former noble and hedge-mage, current mid-level mob in a MMORPG—has taken down the Dungeon Lord of the Cruel Citadel, but the battle has only started.

Lowen, right hand to the Tyrant King, has come to Hearthworld, and he is building an army of his own. Worse, Lowen and company have taken over one of the most powerful dungeons in the game, *The Vault of the Radiant Shield*. Even as a Jotnar and a newly minted Dungeon Lord, Roark is supremely outclassed and he bloody well knows it. If he's going to weather what's to come

and topple the Tyrant King, he'll have to unlock the secrets of the stolen World Stone Pendant, master his new Hexorcist class, form some very unlikely allies, and most important ... Grief some heroes. Let the games begin!

*From James A. Hunter, author of the litRPG epic *Viridian Gate Online*, and Eden Hudson, author of *Path of the Thunderbird* and the *Jubal Van Zandt* Series, comes an exciting new litRPG, dungeon-core adventure you won't want to put down!*

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James A. Hunter

James A. Hunter is a man of many talents. He's a former Marine Corps Sergeant, combat veteran, and pirate hunter (seriously). He's also a member of The Royal Order of the Shellback—because that is totally a real thing. In addition to all of that, James has also been a missionary and international aid worker in Bangkok, Thailand. His latest mission? Taking care of his two kids and writing full time. He is the author of the Yancy Lazarus Urban Fantasy series, Legend of the Treesinger, Rogue Dungeon, and the bestselling LitRPG Epic Viridian Gate Online!

eden Hudson

I am invincible. I am a mutant. I have 3 hearts and was born with no eyes. I had eyes implanted later. I didn't have hands, either, just stumps. When my eyes were implanted they asked if I would like hands as well and I said, "Yes, I'll take those," and pointed with my stump. But sometimes I'm a hellbender peeking out from under a rock. When it rains, I live in a music box.

But I'm also a tattoo addict, coffee junkie, drummer, and aspiring skateboarder. Jesus actually is my homeboy.