

Chapter 16

The trip back to the guild hall was filled with celebration and hand shakes. Brennan was quiet for the most part, but Garren and Marta were riding out the after dive high by loudly laughing and talking about the lair. Landen and Kyra laughed alongside them, listening to them joke about this kill or that block as if they hadn't been there. They quieted down as they entered the town, but walked into the guild hall with plenty of spring in their step. Marta was particularly excited to see what her new ax could do.

The guild hall worker behind the desk greeted them with a smile, leading them to a room in the back. Another worker helped them take all of the harvested materials and uncovered ore chunks, as well as the grimoire, greaves and the ax, agreeing to bring the latter two back after they identified them. The group waited quietly now, the high quickly falling flat as their bodies began to realize how late, or early it actually was. It took about thirty minutes for the worker to come back, this time carrying a sack of coins as well as the two pieces of gear

“Well your dive was alright for that particular lair, and the quality of your materials was excellent. In total you made two gold, five silver, eight steel and nine iron. The cost for identification was a steel piece each and we already deducted that.” The worker explained. “Now the ax has three enhanced swings a day, and is worth eight silver and nine steel. The greaves on the other hand, are extra protective and will help the wearer to their feet should they fall down, once a day.”

After some quick talking and math the worker set Marta up with a loan to cover the difference from her share and whatever she could get for her mace and what the new axe was worth. In the end everyone but Marta ended up making six silver, four steel and seven iron, along with a mix of brass and copper. Kyra handed five of her silver to Brennan, who slid it into his satchel.

“That was a pretty good run of that lair.” Garren said as they walked to the front entrance of the guild hall. “You seem to have good luck. I would be happy to dive a few more times if you plan on hanging around the city.”

“We will be.” Brennan answered. “We will run this lair a few more times, and the shield lair until we get a shield, hopefully something better than what Kyra has now. Have you run that?”

“I have, in fact it was the one where I met Marta.” He answered. “Would it be the same general contract?”

“Just about.”

"I would offer as well, but I'm leaving the city tomorrow." Marta explained. "I already squared a deal with a merchant to hitch a ride."

The group talked a bit more, Garren agreeing to meet at the guild the day after to run the same dungeon. After a few minutes congregating outside the hall the group went their separate ways. Brennan, Landen and Kyra headed back to the tavern they were staying at, remaining quiet for most of the time. They shared a quiet drink, cheered to success before heading to their rooms for the night.

The next morning Kyra knocked on Brennan's door, looking up and down the hallway while she waited for him to answer. When he finally did it was just a crack at first, just enough for him to peer into the hall. Seeing it was her he closed and reopened the door, this time all the way. He was holding his sword, now held by his side.

"What is it?" He asked. "I thought we were meeting up around noon."

"We are." She explained, stepping in even though Brennan had not invited her in yet. He only shook his head and closed the door behind them.

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She assured him, claiming one of the seats by a small table tucked into the corner of the modest room. "We just need to talk before then. About Landen joining the team."

Brennan nodded in understanding, leaning his sword by the door and dropping down and sitting on the corner of his bed. He remained silent, waiting patiently for Kyra to speak.

"You should tell him about everything." She finally said, her words coming out in a rush.

"What? No! Absolutely not." Brennan said, shaking his head vehemently. "No, he is a temporary teammate, I'm not telling him anything beyond what he absolutely needs to know."

"But he could be a much longer term teammate." She suggested. "The bigger team we have the better our options are."

"Kyra, we have no idea who he is. Our first interaction with him was horrible." Brennan said, his arms crossed. "He does seem to be able to handle himself pretty well, and he is good with his bow, that does not mean I'm ready to trust him with everything. Not even close."

"Then what are we going to do about everything we get?" Kyra asked, frowning now. "You're not going to... you know."

“Not until we leave, and maybe even a while after that” He answered. “It's what I've always done. It's not worth the trouble.”

“What about my shield? You already have a story lined up for that.”

“Yes, but that's just about not carrying them both around. You wouldn't be able to use any new abilities that combining the shields would get you. Or anything other equipment I combine. I had my boots for weeks before I felt comfortable using them. Granted I wasn't moving around at that point but the point stands.”

“Fine. I still think you should tell him but it's ultimately your choice.” Kyra relented, leaning back in her chair, changing the subject. “What is the plan for today?”

“Today we unwind a bit.” He said. “One of the most important things I have learned doing this is that decompressing after a dive is almost as important as preparing for the dive itself. All sorts of stress will build up otherwise.”

“Alright, how do we let off some stress?”

“We find a place that serves good food and drinks and enjoy ourselves.” He said with a smile. “We can't get drunk since we are going back into the lair tomorrow. Oh, which reminds me we need to head to the guild hall first. We need to reserve a spot.”

Not long after that Brennan and Kyra met Landen downstairs before heading out into the city. Their first stop was the guild hall, making another reservation for the next day before heading off. On a recommendation from a worker at the hall the three headed to a tavern close by, known for its good food. They were quickly seated, a waitress stopping by to take their order. Not long after their drinks were brought by with a smile. Brennan, who had ordered a fruit cider, took a long drink from his mug before letting out a sigh.

“So, did I pass your test?” Landen asked after a moment with a quirked smile on his lips. “I thought I handled myself reasonably well.”

“You did alright.” Brennan said, taking another sip as he leaned back in his chair. “You can join us for the rest of our dives here. Probably two m more dives into the one we did last night, then a few into the shield lair.”

“That's fantastic!” He said with a smile. “It will be nice working alongside people I know rather than strangers.”

Brennan nodded along, choosing to stay silent. The table followed suit until Kyra looked at Landen with a smile.

“Why don't you tell us about yourself?” She asked

“Well... I grew up in a town not far from here. My mother was a seamstress and my father was a cobbler. My father hoped I would follow in his footsteps but I fell in love with archery after a traveling hunter taught me how to shoot. By the time I was fifteen I was contributing to the house by hunting, taking down deer and other natural animals.”

Landen took a sip of his ale while Kyra listened, riveted to his story, nodding along and smiling

“When I was twenty I dove a nearby lair with my friends. It was honestly a pretty dumb idea, and they all hated it but... it spoke to me on a level nothing, not even archery, ever had.” He said, smiling as he recalled old memories. “By that time I was living alone and had hunted a few lair beasts on my own, mostly because I had to. But beating them made me confident that I could do that instead of hunting just to make ends meet. It’s been five year at this point and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Though my mother still gets worried about me from time to time. What about you?”

“My father was a harvester before I was born but retired once my mother passed,” she said. Landen opened his mouth to say something but Kyra cut him off. “I never really knew her because I was too young to remember anything about her. Anyway when she died he retired to take care of me. He sold his gear, bought some property with it and became a butcher. He taught me everything I know about harvesting. When he passed I sold the shop to one of the guys who worked for him, and headed out on my own. I wanted to put what he taught me to good use, and to see what it was all about.”

The group was quiet for a moment, letting the solemn ending of Kyra’s story hang for a while before Brennan cut in.

“Tell him your dad’s name.” Brennan suggested, shrugging when she looked at him.

“He was Carter Garner.” She said with a solemn shrug.

“Ah, of course.” Landen responded, nodding sagely for a moment before continuing. “I’m sorry I have no idea who that is.”

“It’s alright, plenty of people don’t, though plenty of people do.” She said with a small chuckle, unable to fully hide her happiness. “He was a sort of famous harvester. He wrote a book that plenty of people consider to be the primary harvester training book.”

“I see, well that certainly explains why you are so skilled, despite being new to diving.” He said with a smile before looking at Brennan. “What about your story my friend?”

“I’m an orphan. Lived on the streets for a while before signing up for one of the worst types of crews. Worked my ass off for a while, managed to strike out on my own not too long

after. Which is good because I'm pretty sure that the whole group got busted for corpse farming not long after I left. I've been doing this for around eight years. "

"Damn... well that explains why you're such a skilled fighter." Landen said, his eyes wide. "How old were you when you started?"

"Sixteen." Brennan answered. "The crew I joined didn't even ask that though. They probably didn't want to know."

The group was quiet for a while before Kyra restarted the conversation.

"What are you looking for Landen?" She asked, continuing when he looked at her confused. "I'm looking for armor, and a better shield, Brennan... Wait, what are you looking for?"

Both Landen and Brennan chuckled, the latter shaking his head.

"I'm always looking for new arrows, a better bow." Landen explained. "Basically anything that will improve my accuracy. Movement equipment would also be nice. I have my healing stone for emergencies and my bow, a few special arrows just in case, and my armor is basic lair equipment as well."

"Any diver worth their salt makes getting at least basic armor their first priority." Brennan explained. "But to answer your question I am pretty much set with gear. Between my shield, my spear and my boots I have a pretty good combination going on. With the healing stone I bought yesterday I'm satisfied with what I have. That being said, I wouldn't mind accepting new things that came up. I like being flexible and having options, so anything that fits my fighting style is something I would be interested in."

The group continued talking, chatting casually and enjoying their food. When they were done with their meals Kyra convinced the others to get dessert. They happily enjoyed some sort of berry tart that was apparently the tavern's specialty.

When their meal was finished the group headed out heading through the city, getting familiar with the layout and generally enjoying their free time. When they had had enough wandering the trio headed back to the tavern they were staying at. Between sleeping in almost until noon and the long relaxing lunch, followed by exploring the city, the sun was setting by the time they arrived.

"Our time slot is around noon tomorrow" Brennan explained, the trio sitting down in a corner booth, sharing one last drink. "I left a note with the front desk for Garren, assuming he shows up early."

"He seemed competent." Landen said, after taking a sip from his mug.

“Superstitious divers are always trouble though.” Brennan said with a sigh.

“He seemed nice enough.” Kyra said, nudging Brennan. “You're just being difficult.”

“Probably.” Brennan admitted with a shrug. “Still not used to traveling with people, having to deal with people for more than one dive at a time.”

Brennan drained the rest of his drink, nodding once as he stood up.

“I’m heading to my room.” He said simply. “We need to be ready for tomorrow and I’m still feeling a bit tired from last night.”

Kyra and Landen both said goodnight, both agreeing to head to bed soon. Brennan left the dining area and headed to his room, sliding into bed a short while later.

Chapter 17

Garren met the three temporary teammates a few hours before their reservation, sitting down at their guild hall table with a small frown.

“No luck finding a replacement filler for Marta?” He asked, looking around.

“None so far.” Brennan answered. “There was one who didn't have enough experience for me to feel comfortable with, but that’s it.”

Garren nodded and pulled out a small book, paging through it before starting to read to pass the time. About a half hour passed before and the group was starting to get nervous. They didn't have much time before they needed to head out to the lair and while they could run it with four, none of them really wanted to. At some point Landen sat up straight and looked across the guild hall, squinting a bit. After a moment he smiled.

“I think I see the perfect last member.” He said, standing out of his chair. “I’ll be right back.”

The group watched the archer as he crossed the hall to the posting board. He stopped by a woman dressed in reddish brown mage robes and carrying a metal staff before shouting at her. The woman shrieked and jumped, turning around and attempting to smack Landen with her staff. He managed to duck under it, laughing as the woman almost growled at him.

“Landen you bastard!”

After a few seconds of talking the woman gave the archer a reluctant hug, which he returned with a smile. After a few minutes of talking Landen gestured back at the table, seemingly explaining what was going on. She looked at him shocked before slapping him in the chest lightly and making her way to the table, Landen following behind her sheepishly.

“Landen says you saved him from his own stupidity?” She asked, looking between Brennan, Kyra and Garren. “Whatever you saved him from, thank you. He was never the brightest but the world would be darker without him.”

“It was nothing.” Brennan answered, standing as the woman got closer, reaching out his hand. “We ended up making some extra coin out of it anyway.”

“Yes, well the appreciation still stands.” She responded, shaking Brennan’s hand with a smile. “My name is Lilyana, but anyone who saves this oaf’s life can call me Lily.”

“Ah! This is Kyra, Brennan and Garren.” Landen said with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you Lily.” Kyra said with her own smile. “I’m guessing you two know each other well then?”

“We used to be on a team together.” Landen explained, pulling out a seat for his friend before sitting down beside her. “She was the only one on it worth a damn, mind you. I would have covered my face if you had been Damian or any of the others.”

“I would have likely done the same.” Lily responded, chuckling and nodding in agreement, leaning her staff against the table. “It wasn’t until we all went our separate ways that I realized that. But enough about the past. You said you’re looking for a filler?”

“We are, but I’m not sure what Landen is thinking.” Brennan said, giving Landen a look. “We are looking for a heavy...”

“Ah, yes I don’t look that particular part do I?” She said with a smirk. “I have a rather powerful Earthen Golem spell that can fill that role nicely. Even better is this.”

The woman reached around her neck and pulled out an intricate necklace of some sort, three stones mounted in a looping interconnected pattern. The stones were a deep green while the metal was a burnished yellow.

“This is a focus amulet.” She explained. The three experienced divers sitting at the table looked at it with wide eyes, while Kyra just looked curious.

“How did you get that?” Landen asked. “You definitely didn’t have that last time I saw you.”

“Well it has been almost two years.” She pointed out before continuing with a shrug. Basically I just got lucky. I was passing through a village and an old widow recognized me as a diver. She offered it to me for a few silver, even if she didn't know what it was. When I got around to getting it appraised I went right back to the village to offer the woman a gold piece at least but she had passed away. I paid for a pair of new headstones for her and her husband to make up for it. ”

“Okay, can someone explain what a focus amulet is?” Kyra asked.

“It's a rare and expensive piece of gear that holds an active spell so that the mage can keep casting new spells.” Brennan explained.

“Normally I would only be able to cast the golem spell because it's an active spell.” She added. “But with a focus amulet I can cast the golem spell, attach it to the amulet and cast a different spell instead of having to drop the golem, which would make it crumble to dust.”

“I've never heard of using that on a Golem though.” Garren said, as he tucked his book away. “Granted I've never actually seen a Golem either.”

“It works quite well I assure you.” Lily said with a smile. “Now which lair are you planning on running today?”

“The armor lair.” Brennan answered. “Kyra is new to this so we need to build up her equipment.”

“Ah, that explains why you want five people to run that lair then. And you have a harvester?”

“I'm the harvester.” Kyra said with a nervous smile. “I was trained by my dad.”

“She is quite good.” Landen assured his friend.

“Well then, the last bit would be the split.”

“We are being as equal as possible.” Brennan said. “Since Kyra needs armor badly, we ask that any armor goes to her. In exchange we split everything else evenly. If we find any equipment that you want you can buy it from the group for four fifths of the appraisal price, three fifths if you kill it or find it.”

“That's... Extremely fair.” Lily admitted, looking a bit surprised. “You don't usually see deals like that for established teams.”

"We aren't really established." Brennan pointed out. "Kyra and I are the only ones really together, Landen is a temporary member while we are running out of this city and Garren is a repeat filler. Besides, I was a filler for a long time. I know how crap those deals can be."

"Well I would be a fool not to agree to those terms." Lily said with a confident nod. "I assume you, Brennan, are the leader?"

"Yes, I'll be the one giving orders once we are inside the lair." He responded before standing. "Well if everyone agrees we can sign that contract and head out, our reservation is quickly closing."

It took hardly any time for the group to head to the counter and have the contract written up and signed, the agreement stored in a file behind the counter. When they were done the group made their way to one of the pick up points.

"So... if you don't mind me asking, why didn't you two stick together when your group broke up?" Kyra asked as they waited for the guild financed wagon.

"The dissolution of our team wasn't very... amicable." Landen pointed out. "I was never upset at Lily but when it happened being part of anything sounded like the worst idea in the world. I'm beyond happy that I noticed her to be honest. I surmise we will have a lot to talk about when this dive is over."

"I wanted to take a break from diving anyway." Lily said with a shrug. "It lasted about two months before I felt the itch again, but it was long enough for me to head home and spend a few weeks with family. And yes, we will."

"What are you doing in this area anyway?" Landen asked his old friend.

"Satisfying my wanderlust really." She answered with a shrug. "I was staying down in Verdan for almost a full year, but it got stale. I've been traveling around for almost a year."

The group continued to trade small talk, learning a bit about their temporary teammates. Apparently Garren was originally from the same general area as Lily, though he hadn't been there in almost ten years.

"We moved when I was twelve." He explained as they climbed into the wagon. "I remember bits and pieces of my hometown but not much else to be honest. I do remember the clock towers."

"Everyone remembers the clock towers." Lily said with a smirk before explaining to the rest of the group. "The local lord thought that if everyone could tell what time it was then we would be more productive. Every town over several hundred people has some sort of clock tower or large sundial."

“My town had both.” Garren said. “I think...”

The small talk tapered off as they entered the forest, transitioning to amicable silence as they kept their eyes on the tree line. After a short ride the cart driver dropped them off and they made their way into the walls of the lair fort. Brennan talked to the guard on duty while the rest of the team started doing their stretches.

They ended up being a bit early, which really just meant they had a slightly longer to wait than they would have had otherwise. Brennan passed the time by talking to Lily, going over her spells and abilities. The mage had a decent selection of enhancing spells, gathered over the last year or so since she had found her amulet. She had a decent selection of other spells as well, particularly earth.

“Yes yes I know. Restricting yourself to certain elements is a rookie mistake, but once upon a time I was a rookie.” She admitted with a shrug. “With my golem spell being one of the first really powerful spells I managed to get my hands on, focusing on spells of earth seemed like what I should do. I learned that lesson the hard way, before I was in a group with Landen. I’ve done my best to diversify my grimoire since then.”

With everything all set the group settled in to wait, occasionally standing back up to keep their muscles warmed up. Within two hours the previous group made their way out, celebrating and carrying their harvest. Lily nudged Landen, who had managed to fall asleep leaning against the inner walls of the fort, with her staff.

“Hey!” She yelled at him. “Get your ass up and ready to go!”

Landen started and looked up at her, before looking around sheepishly and standing quickly. He did a few quick stretches to warm back up before getting his bow and quiver in place, while Garren and Kyra chuckled at him quietly.

With little fanfare or deliberation past a few words from Brennan the group pushed through the portal. Once they all recovered from stepping into the lair they looked around, standing mostly ready inside the familiar segment. The walls looked mostly the same, though the stone was slightly darker than their previous dive. It would have been concerning had Brennan not spent so much time reading the record for this lair.

“Alright Lily, let’s see your golem.” Brennan said.

Lily nodded and opened her spell book, easily flipping through to a bookmarked page. Brown and gray circles of magic, crossed with runic lines, stars and other iconography spread out from her book, marking a circle on the ground in front of her. The earth and stone in the circle started to crack and shift, the ground shaking slightly as a massive earth and stone golem

rose. By the time the circles of magic and mana faded the rock construct was a few feet taller than Brennan. It moved with a grinding sound, taking two steps forward.

“Should I summon another?” She asked when the gray lights had completely faded.

“No, keep yourself ready to use other spells.” Brennan answered. “You Kyra and Landen are going to be our center, with me and Garren circling around you. I want your golem to be in the middle as something for you three to hide behind and hold off any lizards that charge you. If the lair beasts start getting creative or things change up I'll have you summon the second golem or we will mix up positioning.”

The group nodded, getting into the positions that Brennan described. The softer members of the team stood around the golem as it walked forward, Brennan leading the troupe and Garren trailing behind.

They made their way into the first segment, and Garren spotted the lizards first. With a call out the group reoriented, with Kyra, Landen and Lily taking cover behind the golem as two lizards dropped down from the walls. Brennan dashed closer to the charging unnatural beasts, but they were dead before he or Garren could get to them. The first dropped and slid backwards, demolished by a shard of rock slamming into it, while the other slowed and collapsed as three arrows sank into its neck and side.

“Huh...” Brennan said, standing back up straight from his dash. He nodded and looked at Landen and Lily. “Alright, that works. Just make sure you two focus on the lizards closest or most dangerous to yourselves first.”

The group moved on from the first segment, only to blow through the next four just as easily. The first trouble didn't come until after that, when the lair beasts increased in numbers and spread out. True to their temporary leader's directions Landen and Lily focused on the Lizard charging at them from behind, killing it easily. Brennan took out a lizard on his own, dashing to its side and driving a spear into its neck while Garren did the same, cutting through a bright green lizard before it could lob any acid at anyone.

“Damn, alright everyone, put on your glasses.”

The group shuffled as they pulled out their clunky but effective protective eyewear... everyone except Lily, who watched as everyone slowly realized, Landen being the first.

“Dammit.” He bit out harshly, before pulling off his own pair and trying to hand them to her. “Here, wear mine.”

“Landen, I'm not-”

“No, you wouldn't be here if I hadn't asked, I'm not letting you get blinded because I rushed you.”

“Landen put them back on.” Brennan said, chewing his lip. “We all rushed, and if anyone I should have asked if she had any.”

For a second Landen looked like he would argue, but eventually stopped trying to force Lily to take his protection. He didn't put them back on yet.

“Alright. Lily. Do you mind taking the risk?” Brennan asked seriously.

“I don't mind.” She said, looking at Landen. “Assuming you haven't gotten rid of that once a day healing stone.”

“...No, I still have it.” Landen admitted. “But why don't you take mine, I'll use the stone if necessary?”

“Because my golem still works if I'm blind.” Lily explained as if it was obvious, getting a nod in agreement from Brennan. “I'll be fine, Landen. I didn't know these were acid spitters, but now that I do I can be more careful.”

It took a bit more convincing but eventually Landen agreed to drop it and put his eye protection back on, even if he didn't look happy about it. The group gave the segment a quick look over before heading to the next one. This one had the same composition, a single acid lizard and two normal ones. It was a bit more difficult to clear as Lily played it safe and kept behind her golem, but it still went easily enough.

After a few minutes break the team pushed through into the next segment, only to stop and stare.

They had found a puzzle room.

Chapter 18

While all previous segments they had been in, including the ones from the last dive, had all been relatively natural looking, minus the repetition, this one looked completely artificial. The floor was smooth and polished, the walls some sort of carved brick, the same color that the normal boundary walls had been. The ceiling was still the illusion of open air, making this segment seem like a man made room with no roof. It was also worryingly empty.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Garren said, getting a nod or agreement from Landen. “I haven’t seen one of these in a while.”

“Yeah... It’s been a while for me too. Even longer for a random one.” Brennan said, looking around carefully. “Let’s take this slow folks.”

The group slowly stepped into the room, with Lily’s golem staying by the entrance. Kyra stuck close to Brennan as he walked along the wall in one direction, while Garren, Landen and Lily walked around the other. Brennan did his best to keep his eyes on everything he could, looking out for pressure plates, switches, hidden panels. By the team met by the blocked entrance on the other side, neither had found anything.

“That’s not a good sign.” Landen said nervously. “What kind of puzzle room doesn’t have a trigger?”

“It has to.” Brennan said. “Unless we have somehow found a new type of puzzle, there has to be a trigger. Let’s go over the walls again, then double check the floor.”

With a series of nods the group walked around the perimeter again, taking opposite sides as they had taken before. This time Brennan and Kyra made it about half way around before Landen shouted.

“Ah ha! Found something!”

Brennan turned and nodded to Kyra, the two heading over to see what their teammate had found. Sure enough, they had managed to find a brick that wasn’t stuck in the wall, rather it seemed to be some sort of button.

“Damn, that is barely even noticeable.” Brennan said, shaking his head as he leaned in to study the hidden button. “Okay everyone, We know what we are looking for, now we need to go over the walls brick by brick.”

As he talked he reached into his bag and pulled out a small bundle of cloth. He unwrapped it and handed out chunks of chalk to everyone before gently marking the one Landen had found.

Over the span of twenty minutes the team found another three fake bricks. Kyra managed to find the second one, with Brennan and Garren finding the next.

“Why don’t we just press them?” Kyra asked as they finally finished looking.

“Because there are usually consequences for trying to guess your way through a puzzle room.” Lily explained, looking around at each of the marked bricks. “Traps, extra beasts, an increase in difficulty with no reward. Hang on...”

The mage quickly walked around and counted the height of the bricks, smiling when she finished.

“They are all on different levels.” She said confidently. “It’s hard to tell because they are so far apart. My guess is that we press from the bottom layer up.”

Brennan looked around, quickly nodding. She was correct, each of the hidden buttons was on a different level. He looked around again before nodding.

“Alright. Me and Garren will get those two, Landen I want you to press that one.” Brennan explained, pointing to different buttons. “Kyra and Lily, I want you two behind the golem, pressing this one.”

The group nodded and spread out, following Brennan's directions. Garren and Brennan's buttons were across the room, while Landen was only a dozen feet away from Kyra, Lily and her golem, which had lumbered across the open room.

“On the count of three, Landen starts with his, then Garren, mine and then the last one.” Brennan said. “Ready? One... Two... Three!”

The group pushed their buttons in order, each one sliding back with a faint grinding, leaving a rectangular hold a foot deep. They were not easy to push but everyone managed, the bricks locking into place with a reverberating clunk that seemed to echo through the divers.

Before anyone could say anything a rough grinding sound started filling the segment as a pentagon shape began to rise seamlessly from the ground. It rose and rose until it was eight feet tall, easily towering over everyone.

“Damn... a multi part puzzle room?” Landen said with a whistle. “I’m looking forward to what we get at the end.”

For a moment Kyra looked confused. She opened her mouth but Brennan answered before she could even ask.

“Random puzzle rooms mean automatic rewards of some kind, and puzzles with multiple parts usually have better rewards.” He explained, slowly stepping closer to the pillar of polished stone. “It also usually means more dangerous traps and punishments if you fuck up bad enough though.”

They examined the pillar for a few minutes. It had seven decent sized circular recesses, each a few inches wide and deep. They weren’t marked for anything specific, nore was there anything inside the recesses.

“Hmmm... Anyone have any ideas?” Brennan asks, poking at the holes with his finger. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. Then again puzzle rooms aren’t really my specialty.”

“Maybe we need to find some rocks that fit?” Garren suggested. “If there aren’t any buttons then something must go in those slots.”

“Yeah... But not rocks!” Kyra said with a smile. “It’s the hearts! These holes are exactly the same size as the lizard hearts.”

Brennan frowned and looked at one of the holes, slowly starting to nod his head.

“I don’t know about ‘exactly’ but it’s pretty close.” He agreed, eventually shrugging. “Alright, worth a shot. Let’s go do some early harvesting.”

The group backtracked to the previous segment, Kyra quickly getting to work harvesting. She offered Brennan the heart for him to go try it on the pillar but he shook his head.

“No, there’s no reason to rush like that.” he assured her. “Activating one could start a timer anyway.”

Kyra nodded and continued harvesting the lizards, leaving the singular acid lizard alone for now. When she had finished harvesting and packing everything up the group left the bag behind to pick up on the way back, carrying the hearts back to the puzzle room. Brennan carried his heart to the pillar and gently slid it into one of the recesses, smiling as it fit in perfectly. A faint glow formed around the recess when it was all the way in.

“Good call Kyra.” He said, patting her shoulder as everyone else slid in their hearts, Kyra putting hers in last.

The pillar vibrated, pulsed a golden glow a single time before sinking back down into the ground. As it got lower and lower a new addition came into view, something had appeared on the top. Kyra took a step back in surprise, not expecting an intricate carved statue of one of the lizards made of stone.

The statue, which was made from the same polished stone as the floor, looked as if it was about to spew its acid, a look that the team was very familiar with by now.

“Huh... That’s interesting.” Landen said, stepping closer. “It almost looks real.”

“Not that strange when you consider the lair made both of them.” Garren pointed out, walking around the statue to examine it from different angles.

“Let’s just hope it stays a statue.” Lily said, also stepping forward.

The team inspected the statue for a few minutes before Brennan happened to catch a glimpse of something in its mouth.

“Lily, you have a spell that can make light?”

Instead of saying anything, Lily just walked over and cast a short and simple spell. Her palm began to glow brightly, light illuminating the mouth, throat and beyond. With the light it was easy to see the trough carved down into the lizard's throat, going down until curving and disappearing into its stomach.

“That looks like you pour something down it.” Brennan said, pointing out the carved space. “Why else would it be hollow so deep?”

“Alright, but what do we pour into it?” Garren asked, peering down into the statue's mouth.

After a few seconds Brennan and Kyra looked at each other wide eyed.

“The acid!”

Kyra rushed back through the entrance to the puzzle room, Brennan and the rest of the group following behind her. With a skilled hand Kyra quickly harvested the bright green Lizard, carefully stripping its hide, pulling the longest claws from each foot and gently pulling out the double fist sized sack of acid. She gently handed the sack to Brennan, who held it while she finished extracting the lizard's black spherical heart. When she was done packing everything else up she looked up at Brennan.

“Do all puzzle rooms have you running back and forth like this?” She asked, the bloody and unnatural ichor flaking and dusting off of her as the remnants of the lizard faded.

“Puzzle rooms are a bit odd to be honest.” Brennan said with a shrug, still carrying the acid sack. “They do sometimes have you go back, but they can get strange, have you doing things you didn't know you could do in that lair, especially random ones. Some lairs are full of puzzle rooms and they tend to be more tame.”

Brennan, standing in front of the statue, held the acid sack over its mouth and nodded to Kyra.

“C'mon, cut a small hole so it can drain. Not too big, I don't want to miss it.”

Kyra nodded and pulled her knife back out, angling it just right so she wouldn't get sprayed before giving the sack a small cut. Acid poured out of the surprisingly tough organ, ending up in the statue's mouth and flowing down deeper down the stoney throat. After a few seconds the sack was empty and the group waited with bated breath.

“Well... It was a good-” Garren started saying about thirty seconds later, only to stop mid sentence.

The statue slowly started to flake away into dust, starting from the very tip of the tail and making its way down. It spread quickly, the seemingly heavy stone statue disappearing completely in under a few seconds. As it did it quickly revealed a large sword hilt stuck in the stone, its blade completely hidden.

With a grunt Brennan gripped the hilt and slowly pulled it free, revealing a sizable two handed sword.

“Damn... it's got two abilities I think.” He said, rolling the sword to examine every angle. “Kyra, if you would?”

Kyra nodded and stepped forward, pushing her shield to her side and grabbing the hilt with one hand, touching her necklace with the other. Both of them glowed for a moment as she focused, her eyes closed. When the glowing stopped she opened her eyes with a smile.

“You're right, it's got two abilities.” She confirmed, passing it back to Brennan. “It has some sort of enhanced strike and something else, an enhancement of some kind. Not sure what.”

Landen's eyes went wide as Kyra described the swords, while Garren let out a long whistle.

“Damn, that's impressive.” He said with a smirk. “Almost makes me wish I could use a sword like that.”

“It's gonna fetch a few gold at least.” Brennan said with a smile. “Alright. I say we leave it in the last segment. I don't really trust puzzle rooms.”

The group agreed, Garren rushing back to put it away. By the time he returned the team was waiting by the exit to the next segment. It was still blocked, but now had a plinth in front of the path, similar to the one that had marked the entrance into the lair bosses arena. With a nod from Garren Brennan pushed his hand down on the plinth and the stone boulder blocking the way fluttered into dust.

The crew, now rested and ready, made short work of the lair, which had no new surprises. Lilly stuck to a single golem the entire time, doing plenty of damage with her magic. At around the tenth segment the difficulty increased in the form of extra lizards, but they had enough practice killing them at this point that they easily managed it.

In the eleventh segment Kyra noticed a few roots growing from cracks in the stone walls and pointed them out. A quick check of her notes proved they were worth about five steel pieces per pound.

"I'm pretty sure I saw some of that root in another two segments." Garren said, catching the root after Kyra tossed it to him.

"Well we are looking at about four or five silver per bag we fill, so if it's anything like this room we could be making a gold per room."

"What the hell makes this root so valuable?" Landen asked, poking at one root. "It just looks like a root."

"It's the main ingredient in Gentlemen's Aid." Kyra explained with a smirk. "So... you're welcome?"

The group shared a laugh at Landen's expense, who accepted it good naturedly, with a blush and a shrug. In the second to last room before the lair boss's segment they found a secret compartment carved into the rock, very similar to the one Marta found in their previous dive. Inside was a small dagger that was just basic gear that Brennan guessed may be worth a few silver.

"I think I'll be buying this from the pot, as long as no one else wants it?" He asked, already making plans to buy a few more cheap daggers to combine together. When no one said anything he nodded and tucked the dagger and its sheath into his belt.

They cleared the final room relatively easily, Lily's golem getting its second kill by smashing a normal lizard's head flat with its giant fist. The magic stone creation made an incredible movable barrier, but would be much more effective if it wasn't more than a bit on the slow side. The lizards could usually dodge its strikes unless they were being seriously herded or made a mistake.

When they were done they took a few minutes to recover before making their way to the entrance into the boss segment. Brennan checked to make sure everyone was ready before unblocking the door, leading everyone inside.

The first hint that something was different was that the space was much larger than the first time they ran this lair. Not quite twice as large, but close. It looked mostly the same besides that, and the group waited for the boss beast to arrive. There was a loud screech as the large lizard clambered down from the walls, and into the arena, the same green, brown and yellow coloring as the last one. What was different were the two other lizards that joined the boss, all yellow and brown.

"Fuck." Brennan cursed, looking around the room. "This could get rough."

Chapter 19

“Garren with me, harass the boss! Everyone else, focus on the beasts!” Brennan called out as he dashed across the gap. He reached out with his spear and jabbed at the boss, carving a bloody furrow in its side.

Garren, hearing the order, rushed forward as well, taking a much wider approach. His slightly enhanced speed came in handy as he managed to get behind the lair boss, smacking at its long tail. For a moment it looked like all three of the creatures would turn and focus on the two back liners, until a blast of rock shattered against the left one's chest and an arrow slammed into the right one's leg. Both of them screeched and charged at their attackers.

As much as Brennan wanted to intercept the smaller lizard and keep them off of the other three divers, he knew they could handle themselves. The larger creature snapped at both Garren and him before attempting to rush off out of danger. Garren lunged forward and stabbed the base of its tail, activating his sword's ability. The lair boss screeched as sparks of electricity cooked its tail, causing it to stumble and shake slightly. It quickly recovered though and whirled around, lunging at Garren, who stubbled and rolled back.

Landen continued to fire arrow after arrow at one of the charging lizards, while Lily did the same, battering the second lizard with hunks of rock. The first lizard, despite being full of arrows, got to the group first and attempted to get around the hulking golem of stone. The golem managed to slam its fist down and catch its tail, which tore off in a spray of black unnatural ichor. The lizard screeched and leaped at Landen, only for Kyra to step forward and intercept it. The dog-sized lizard slammed against her large kite shield but she managed to hold it off, allowing landed to stop and focus just long enough to activate his bow's ability. The orange glowing arrow struck the beast's side and sank in before detonating, blowing open a foot wide crater, spraying both him and Kyra with lair beast gore.

The second lair beast, still charging at Lily, had just enough time to screech before the mage fired a beam of ice energy, freezing and shattering the beast's head, neck and shoulders. It tumbled to a stop by her feet, oozing and broken.

Garren couldn't help but laugh at the ineffectual attack on the less melee inclined members of the team. He lunged to stab at the lair boss again, only to miss judge his timing. The lizard's jaws clamped on his arm, sharp teeth cutting through his bracers. With a hollow screech the large lizard shook and swung the smaller man, tossing him to the side. Garren flew and tumbled for a dozen feet or so before settling on his stomach, his arm bleeding and at a weird angle.

The lizard screeched again and tried to pounce on the downed diver, ready to savage him with his sharp claws. Before he could land Brennan dashed between them, raised his shield and activated one of its abilities, a blast of force pushing from it, slamming into the creature and knocking it to the side. Both Garren and the creature scrambled to their feet.

“You alright?” Brennan asked, still facing the lair beast.

“Fuck no! Son of a bitch pulled my arm out of its socket.” He replied. Brennan cursed under his breath.

“I need you guys to keep hitting him!” Brennan called out to Lily and Landed, who both turned and aimed at the lair beast.

The seasoned diver stood in between the lair boss and his struggling teammate, who was cursing as he slowly stood, holding only his shield. Splashes of fire and arrows hit the lair beasts back, causing it to spin around. Brennan barely blocked its tail from hitting both him and Garren as it spun. As the beast focused on the golem and his other teammates Brennan thrust his spear into the lizard's backside and activated its second ability. The glow started at the butt of his spear and slammed up into the tip, the force energy thundering into the lizard's back hip. A loud crack echoed through the lair, the beast screeching loud enough to hurt everyone's ears.

The lizard stumbled and faltered, crawling forward before managing to stand back up... just in time for Lily's golem to smash its massive stone fist into its head, knocking it sideways into a boulder. It slammed into the large rock and rolled down, still trying to move despite its head being noticeably thinner than it had been before.

Brennan walked cautiously up to the struggling beast, wary of any tricks, before plunging his spear into its eye, destroying its brain and killing it almost instantly. He let out a long breath as the arena lair was quiet.

“Please tell me one of you knows how to push an arm back into its socket?” Garren asked, leaning against a different boulder, trying to keep his arm steady.

Brennan nodded, heading over to him, dropping his shield and spear before resting a hand on his shoulder, grabbing his elbow with the other. He slowly lifted and rotated before a deep tissue pop resonated from his fellow back liner's shoulder. Garren sagged with relief and laid back on the boulder, breathing deeply.

“Thanks mate.” He said with a smile. “That would have been a nightmare going back.”

“No problem. Here, take a heal or two for the swelling and where it bit you.” Brennan said, pulling out the healing stone from its hidden pocket

“Huh?” Garren said, looking confused before looking down at his arm to find it still bleeding. “Oh, forgot he bit me too. Thanks.”

Garren used the healing stone twice before passing it back to Brennan. The rest of the group was already exploring the boss lair while Kyra got ready to harvest the boss itself. Finding nothing in the lair, the team waited for Kyra to finish before making their way to the previous segment.

From there they began the long process of going from room to room, searching every crack and crevice for equipment or anything valuable while Kyra harvested the lair beasts. They got lucky in the fourth segment from the boss lair, managing to find a few lumps of silver in a pile of gravel. Eventually they made it back to the puzzle room, which they looked over for a few minutes before heading back further.

It took them almost two hours in total to finally leave the lair, spending plenty of time pulling the valuable roots from the stone cracks in four of the segments. When they finally exited the lair everyone was tired and past ready to get back to the guild hall.

“I say we share a drink afterwards.” Garren suggested. “We couldn’t after the last dive since it was so late.”

“Fair enough, that sounds like a good idea!” Landen agreed, slapping his temporary teammate on the back. “I know just the place!”

It took another hour for the team to travel back to the guild and collect their earnings. In total they each made a gold piece as well as various coins below that. The sword, which had three enhanced strikes a day and enhanced the users reaction times, had been worth more than they realized.

The group separated to divest themselves of their gear before meeting back up at the tavern that Landen, Brennan and Kyra were staying at. Landen paid for everyone's first drinks.

“To a successful dive!” He said, getting shouts and laughs while everyone clinked their mugs together. “I have to say, this has been a lucrative two dives with you three. You have some pretty good luck.”

“Don't look at me.” Brennan insisted, holding up his hands. “Kyra is the one who identified that root, I just thought it was the usual set dressing.”

“You never know what might be worth something in there.” Lilly said before looking at Landen. “Remember that filler...”

“The pack rat?”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah I remember him.” Landen said with a nod. “The guild appraiser looked like she was going to strangle him.”

Lily, picking up on everyone's confusion looks smiled,

“He didn't trust harvesters to be able to recognize what was worth anything.” She explained, giggling for a moment before continuing. “So he would bring a few of his own bags and fill them up with stuff. Said he had this whole method for determining what was valuable, insisted that anything the lair lightly sprinkled through the segments meant it must be worth something.”

“We dove with him twice, the second time he came out with a bag of grass and a bag of gravel.” Landen explained, his eyes filled with mirth as he took a drink before continuing. “We didn't invite him for a third.”

Everyone was chuckling at the story before Brennan cleared his throat.

“Speaking of repeat dives.” He said, glancing at Kyra before focusing on Lily and Garren. “I planned to run through the same lair again one last time before heading off to the shield lair. From what I understand it is far enough away that there is a full guild village set up.”

“I've been out there, it's where I met Marta.” Garren volunteered. “There isn't a tavern to sleep in, but there is plenty of land to make camp.”

Landen leaned over and explained who Marta was to Lily while Brennan nodded.

“That's good. I've mentioned it to Garren before I think, but I'll make the same offer to you Lily. Would you like to join us out there?” He asked. “It would be the same contract, though I will specify that I consider a shield to be a type of armor.”

“Sure, I have nothing else better to do.” She agreed with a smile. “I had just arrived when you caught me at the hall. I could use some more money and I have no interest in armor.”

“Great. I'll cover the initial cost for food but considering we could potentially be there for a week I think we should take the cost from the profits we make on each dive.” Brennan offered before looking back to Garren. “Are you still interested in joining us for these dives as well?”

“Yes, you all seem to have some good luck about you.” He said with a nod. “Despite the fact that I've been injured in both dives... Hmm maybe I should rethink this...”

Brennan opened his mouth to respond before Garren laughed and finished off his drink, standing with a smile.

"I'm only messing with you, I would be happy to join you all." He said. "Now I'm going to bay for another round."

Garren went to the bar and returned a few minutes later, shortly followed by a waitress, who brought refills of mead, cider and beer. After she was done everyone ordered food.

"When do you plan on making our last run on the lizard dungeon?" Landen asked

"The day after tomorrow." Brennan answered after wiping froth off of his upper lip. "A day should be enough of a break. Unfortunately while the dives have been lucrative we haven't found much armor for Kyra. We will likely end up buying her some before we leave for the guild village."

"You've said that twice now, what's a guild village?" Kyra asked, nursing her own drink of cider.

"If a lair is too far from the nearest town the guild will set up a small, guild funded village around it." Garren explained. "It's usually not really a village, just some simple buildings that have services that divers need. They don't even have names usually. This one is pretty run of the mill, so you'll get a good idea what to expect."

Not long after that the food arrived and the group enjoyed their meals while discussing the dive. Garren was teased a bit for his second injury, and Kyra was praised for her quick solution to the puzzle, as well as her harvesting.

"You saved my butt too." Landen pointed out. "That block was solid, and without it that lizard would have chomped on me hard. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She responded with a smile.

A little while longer and the group went their separate ways. Landen walked Lily back to the guild, where she had left her possessions, with Garren joining them partially, planning on heading to where he was staying.

Brennan and Kyra headed up to their rooms, stopping in front of Kyra's door.

"Tomorrow I'm going to the guild hall early to make a reservation." He said. "I'll probably head to the shopping district after that, see what kind of armor they have in stock. You should join me for that."

"What for?"

"It's astronomically unlikely that we will find a full set of armor for you with only one last dive." He explained. "We will see if there is anything good, and if there is we will ask for them to hold it for a day. It will probably cost us a bit, but probably nothing outrageous. Then we can come back and pick it up if we don't find anything better. Speaking of armor, how are you liking your greaves?"

"They are great! Cmon, I'll show you." Kyra opened her door and laid down on the floor. Her greaves glowed blue for a moment and suddenly she was standing upright, having shifted with blue after images. "It's impressive right? They even give off the same vibe as your boots."

"Movement gear often has the same dark blue effect to them." Brennan explained. "But that is impressive. How does it work when you're holding your shield?"

"Oh... I don't know..." She admitted, examining her boots. "I haven't tried it with them yet."

"We might be able to test it tomorrow depending on when our reservation ends up being."

"Right, okay. Damn I hadn't even thought of that." Kyra admitted, frowning in annoyance.

"It's most likely not a problem." Brennan assured her with a hand wave. "Lair gear rarely reacts negatively to the gear you are holding or wearing. If you're really unlucky there might be a learning curve but I'm sure you can handle it."

"Alright, well I feel like getting to sleep early Brennan..."

"Sure Kyra, have a good night." He responded as he turned and headed out of her door and into the hall. "You did well today. I'll see you tomorrow."

Chapter 20

Brennan was surprised to find Kyra already up and enjoying a cup of tea when he made his way down to the public part of the tavern. She waved to him when she noticed, gesturing to the seat next to her. He caught the eye of the barmaid as he sat down, gesturing for a tea like Kyra's.

"Didn't expect to see you up already." He commented.

“Well we were already going shopping, now you don't have to come back here after you're done at the guild hall.”

“Fair enough. Have you eaten yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you.”

The two shared their tea and a simple egg, cheese and bread breakfast before heading off to the guild hall. It was a bit slow this early in the morning, so in very little time they had their reservation set up, this time it was a morning dive. Brennan left a note with the worker for Lily and Garren in case they stopped by, before asking the guild hall worker if they knew any good places to shop for lair gear. She knew a few, and after some quick directions Brennan left her an iron piece as a tip.

After they were done they headed off to the shopping district, heading for the first shop that was recommended to them. They spent the rest of the morning looking for armor, visiting a few stores, including the one Brennan had bought their new healing stone with. They found plenty of armor, settling on a few pieces that the shop owners agreed to hold for them.

The first was armor for her upper torso, a lightly plated armor that increased her strength by a small factor, about half as much as what Brennan's shield did. The second was a pair of boots with matching gloves that were just basic gear with no abilities. At the next store they found a set of vambraces that covered her arms and would keep them from getting tired.

“Alright. Thank you for agreeing to hold it for us.” Brennan said, dropping a steel into the last shopkeeper's hands. “We will probably be in tomorrow to pick it up”

Once they were done shopping for lair related items Kyra led Brennan into a book store, right across the street. They spent a while perusing the store, eventually each buying two books. It was an expensive luxury, but with how much down time they had while traveling, entertainment was always important. Brennan stored them quietly in his satchel, paying close attention to who was around and watching as all together the books were too big to fit in his bag had it been normal.

Once they were done shopping the two divers made their way back to the tavern, sitting down by one of the tables. A barmaid immediately noticed them, making her way to the pair.

“Hello, you two are Landens companions, yes?”

“Yes...” Brennan answered, trailing off as he waited for her to answer.

“Great! He left a message saying he was taking his friend Lily for lunch”

“Ah, thank you very much.”

The barmaid left with a smile, heading back to another customer.

“Well, I think I’m going to take a nap.” Brennan said, standing from the table. “In a few hours we should go over our armor and then come down here for some food. That sound alright?”

“Sure. Could I have one of my books?” She asked. “I might do some reading.”

Brennan nodded and reached into his bag, handing over the book before heading upstairs.

The team met up early the next day, everyone eager and ready for another run. Garren had gotten the message Brennan and Kyra had left for him at the guild hall, and had been waiting for the rest of the group. They all headed out not long after arriving, catching the same wagon they had ridden on the day before.

They arrived as the sun was cresting the trees, shining brightly down on them as they entered the simple wooden fort around the lair entrance. The guards were all half asleep, save for the one manning the entrance, who was actually asleep. The team took a corner of the fort as their own and began stretching and psyching themselves up for the dive. Garren was showing off a new piece of gear.

“Well I was injured the last two dives, so I went looking for a way to prevent that.” He explained, showing off his new helmet. It was a leather and metal helm, made from iridescent silver metal and deep purple leather. “It absorbs one attack per day. It can be overwhelmed if the attack is too powerful, which is how I was able to afford it at all. Still ate up quite a bit of my savings. Three whole gold pieces!”

“Dammit, where were they selling that?” Brennan said. “We spent all morning searching for equipment like that for Kyra.”

“Ah, the same shop you got your healing crystal from.” Garren explained. “I went first thing yesterday morning.”

“You must have beaten us by minutes!” Kyra said with a good natured laugh. “We went to the guild hall first, then went shopping.”

“Early bird catches the worm!” Garren said, chuckling as he pulled the helmet over his head.

The group entered the lair not long after that, the previous team exiting slowly with two limping members. They had revealed that they simply got unlucky, and were not prepared for the second to last segment, which apparently spawned a few extra beasts.

After the customary pause to acclimatize to the interior the group quickly settled into the same formation as the previous dive and pushed forward into the lair. The first few segments were simple, just what they had come to expect from this lair. The fourth active segment saw the addition of the acid spitting variation of lizards, which was earlier than expected but not unsurprising. In the sixth segment they found a sand filled pit in the center of the room, which after clearing out the beasts, turned out to be filled with iron ore, similar to the ring of sand from their first dive.

Not long after that room they got lucky, a beast faded into a pair of boots with a single ability. The segment after that one there was a small group of hardy plants growing along a wall. Kyra quickly identified them as valuable, estimating that the lot would be about six or seven silver.

By the eighth segment they were fighting around five lizards in each room, which was high but not dangerously so. In the they found a ring in the ninth room that Kyra tested. She was pretty sure that it could be used to store a spell for later casting, which Brennan immediately wanted, but Lily did as well. He convinced her to let him have it after pointing out that it was likely to cost at least two gold, and that she had such a variety of spells that just having another wasn't worth that to her. She reluctantly agreed, though asserted that if it came down between the two of them again that she would win by default. Brennan merely shrugged and didn't respond, simply tucking the ring into his pocket.

The diving continued, and the team eventually made it to the final room segment, stepping into the boss arena. They were immediately attacked by the same horse seized lizard, as a blob of acid smacked against Lily's golem. It splattered on the three hiding behind it, though Kyra blocked most of it with her shield. Lily and Landen however had spattering burns on their faces and anything else that was exposed. Luckily Lily had bought a pair of protective goggles the previous day while out with Landen.

Landen hit the lizard with an explosive arrow, completely removing its back right leg before Garren and Brennan laid into it, slicing and stabbing at it as it struggled to keep up now that it was hobbled. Eventually Garren managed to stab deep into its side, releasing a stream of electricity from his sword into the beast, causing it to freeze and lock up. This gave Brennan plenty of time to finish the large unnatural beast with a quick jab through its eye socket.

The team celebrated for a few minutes, with Landen teasing Garren for finally making it through a dive with them uninjured. He took it with a smile, making a joke about how of course he wasn't injured, he had just spent a small fortune on preventing it so of course nothing happened to him.

With the boss defeated the team slowly made their way back through each segment, with Kyra harvesting each room as they went. They found a few more valuable things, including a bag full of iron ore and two chunks of silver ore. Laden down with bags of harvested materials and a few pieces of lair equipment they stepped out of the lair and back into the normal world.

After the short wagon ride back to the city they made their way to the guild hall to sell their harvested gains as well as get Kyra's new boots and Brennan's new ring identified. When the guild worker returned they revealed that the team had made around four gold, that the boots could lock someone in place for three seconds, making it almost impossible to knock down once a day, and that Brennan's ring could in fact store a spell for later use. Brennan forwent his share and added another gold piece to the paycheck in order to keep the ring, which meant everyone in the team save Brennan made a full gold piece and a few silver.

"Your harvester seems to be very skilled." The worker informed them as they were celebrating. "Everything you have brought back has been well harvested, we haven't had to reject anything your group has brought back."

The group cheered for Kyra, smiled brightly despite her blush

"I think that means she drinks for free!" Garren suggested, getting various words of agreement from the rest. "I say we gather back at the same tavern tonight to celebrate?"

The group agreed before separating, with Landen escorting Lily back to her place, Garren heading back to where he was staying, and Brennan and Kyra heading to the shops that were holding Kyra's new equipment.

They picked up everything they had put on hold, including the boots, with Brennan also picking up two basic lair daggers from one of the stores. Spending a full gold piece and eight silver. When they were done they made their way back to the tavern, heading straight up to their rooms. Before Kyra could go into hers Brennan nudged her.

"C'mon, it's about time you saw something."

Curious about what he was talking about she followed the more experienced diver to his room, stepping in past him as he shut and locked the door. He leaned his spear and shield against the wall and started pulling off his armor.

"I've shown you the grimoire, but you've never actually seen me use it." He explained as he unclipped his bracers. "I figured now is as good a time as any."

"Wait, really?" She asked, eyes wide. "I thought you wouldn't do it unless we were outside of a city or something."

“Well... I changed my mind. As long as you don't start shouting about it we will be fine.” He said with a smirk, dropping his armor in the corner by his spear and shield.

Brennan made his way to the small table on one side of his room, taking a seat and stretching for a moment. Kyra sat down on the other side of the table, watching as Brennan pulled out the familiar grimoire, his now three basic daggers and the extra pair of boots that they had bought today.

“So the process is pretty simple.” Brennan explained, flipping open his grimoire. There were a few spells in the book, though it was nowhere near as full as Lily's.

He got to the last page and began softly speaking the words of the spell. a pure white spell matrix appeared on his forearm as he held it up, circling and expanding until it was the size of a dinner plate. Stars, symbols and runes spun around his arm as he chanted quietly. When he finished the spell circle slid down his outstretched arm to his hand, constricting around his pointer finger as he reached out and touched one of the daggers.

For a moment nothing happened, until tiny white cracks began to form on the dagger, splintering out from where his finger was making contact with the metal blade. They continued to spread, soundlessly covering the entire dagger before, with a pulse of white light, it shattered into dust. The dust spun and danced around Brennan's finger, following it as he brought it to the second dagger he had bought earlier. The dust surged and pushed into the small weapon, sinking into the blade and disappearing.

“... That's it?” Kyra asked, looking up at Brennan. “I mean it looked cool, but... alright.”

“Yup, that's it.” He confirmed with a chuckle. “What, did you expect more of a show?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

Brennan shrugged and began chanting again, this time shattering the blade they had found inside the lair, adding it to the same dagger. The last dagger, now carrying the essence of two other daggers, looked exactly the same. Brennan gestured to it and Kyra picked it up, her necklace glowing for a moment, the dagger glowing as well. After a moment she opened her eyes.

“It has an ability now.” She said, her eyes locked to the small weapon. “Some sort of speed boost.”

“Probably increases your swing speed.” Brennan guessed, taking the knife from her and attaching it to his belt. “Not really useful for me so I'll probably trade it at some point.”

“Why did it only have one ability if you put two daggers into it?”

"It's not a one to one system." He explained. "Sometimes they get another ability, sometimes the original ability increases. I've kind of got a sense for it by now but it still throws me a wild card occasionally. I added four boots into my dashing boots, and it just kept improving its ability. Not that that was a bad thing, those things are fantastic."

"So what do you think will happen to my boots?" Kyra asked as she pulled the new boots from her bag.

"That depends. You have a bit of a choice." He explained. "One, we improve the locking boots. If it gains an extra ability you can't use it unless it's literally life or death. If it just improves the lockdown ability you have to keep that hidden. Or we could combine the lockdown boots with the ones you just bought, tell the team you sold them to a heavy for a large profit and you'll be able to use these boots whenever you want."

"But we have no idea what the new boots will be able to do." Kyra pointed out, getting a nod of confirmation from Brennan. "What is your suggestion?"

"My suggestion is to go with the new boots. The ability to lock down like that is useful for you but not massively. Yes the new boots could be useless for you but we could always just sell them and start looking for another pair. No offense but with healing stones I'm not massively concerned about damage to your feet."

Kyra thought hard, looking down at her new boots before nodding in agreement.

"I trust you, and I think you're right."

Brennan nodded and went through the process of breaking down the new lockdown boots and adding them to the basic pair. After the boots were finished absorbing the essence Kyra eagerly picked them up, examining them with her necklace.

"I think it's a mobility ability. Once per day." she said. "But I don't know what it is."

"Damn, alright. We will have to bring it to be appraised by someone." Brennan said. "But mobility is good. If we are lucky then enhancing it with more boots will increase how many times you can do it a day."

"Should we go now?" She asked. "I kind of really want to know what they can do."

"We should probably wait till tomorrow." Brennan said, shaking his head.

"Alright, that's fine." Kyra said with a smile, looking up at Brennan again. "So what now?"

“Now you go back to your room and clean up while I do the same. I might take a nap as well. Garren seems determined to make this a night to celebrate and I think he has the right idea.”