

Chapter 11

Brennan woke up the next morning with his whole body stiff and incredibly sore. He had switched with Kyra late the previous night but had struggled to fall asleep with his injured shoulder. He struggled to sit up and crawl out of his tent, his shoulder and arm flaring with pain at his movements. When he finally succeeded and stood he looked around the small camp, noticing Kyra and Landen were both already up.

“Good morning.” Kyra said, having heard him moving about. “How did you sleep?”

“About as well as you would expect.” He responded before turning to Landen. “If you don’t mind...?”

“Hmm? Oh! Yes, of course.” Landen said, reaching into his armor and pulling out the healing stone, passing it to Brennan.

Wordlessly Brennan nodded and focused on the stone, activating it immediately. The blue, palm sized crystal glowed brightly, the glow transferring to his body and suffusing him with a warm healing energy. He couldn’t help but let out a long groan as his body was repaired, his shoulder and arm feeling warm, the stiffness and pain fading almost completely.

“Thank you.” He said to Landen as the light faded, passing him the healing crystal. “I really needed that.”

“I can imagine my friend, you took a rather large blow yesterday.” He said with a grin, accepting the stone back. “I am glad that I could help you recover.”

Brennan nodded before slowly stretching and flexing, checking to see just how much the stone had healed. He was still a little sore in the ribs, but all in all he felt much better. He smiled at Kyra, who had been watching him stretch and chewing her lip nervously.

“Good as new.” He assured her, getting a smile in return.

“So... it would be about time to get back on the road then?” Landen asks. “After we finish packing everything up of course.”

The three divers quickly packed up the campsite, rolling up their bedrolls, folding the canvas that made up their tents and double checking to make sure the fire was out. They shared a quick breakfast of travel food before heading back on the road. Brennan was now forced to carry his spear alongside his usual equipment, since he was pretty sure Landen hadn’t seen him pull his spear out and he wanted to maintain the illusion he had always had it. Kyra carried the large bag of materials harvested from the troll, having refused to let Landen carry it.

"I harvested it and Brennan and I will be getting the coin for it, it's only right that I carry it." She explained, waving Brennan off when he tried to say something. "And no, you won't be carrying it either, you have your spear."

"Oh I wasn't going to offer." Brennan corrected with a smirk, getting an eye roll in response. "I was going to offer you my shield. It should make carrying it easier."

Begrudgingly Kyra accepted his shield, giving a grumbled thank you when she found how much the extra strength helped.

Not long after, the monotony of the forest was broken up by a caravan coming down the road from the opposite direction they were traveling in. Four covered carts went by, each pulled by two horses. The merchant driving the first cart gave them a friendly wave, though only Kyra waved back. The other two settled for giving the man simple nods.

As they traveled the landscape began to shift, the forest slowly becoming more and more sparse. Eventually, an hour or so after noon the road left the forest completely, the landscape shifting to open rolling hills. The three divers visibly relaxed as they left the forest behind, now able to see much further, meaning they were much less likely to be ambushed. The hills made walking a bit harder but the road and the gentle breeze keeping them cool made up for it.

"I didn't realize I was so tense until it faded." Kyra said, shaking herself for a moment. "I don't think I'll ever look at a forest the same way again."

"You don't really stumble on lair beasts that frequently." Brennan assured her, his spear balanced over his shoulder, pointy tip pointed back. "At least not normally. Roads are usually safe, if for no other reason that they are traveled enough that the beasts are killed for attacking people."

"That attack was completely my fault." Landen said unhappily. "I should have known better to go hunting by myself. Just traveling on the roads is dangerous enough. I truly tempted fate and she saw fit to punish me for it. I'm just glad everyone survived, and in eventual good health."

Brennan simply nodded, not denying the man's mistakes. Going out that far into the forest was not a smart choice, at least without an entire team. Any plans he had for hunting would have been within eyesight of the road, and culling of escaped lair beasts would have only been if they saw tracks that they could identify. No reason to risk disturbing a two hundred year old wyvern by accident. Or a troll in this case.

“Mistakes happen.” Kyra said, getting a look from Brennan, shrugging return. “You paid us back by letting us keep the loot and you let Brennan use your healing stone. As far as *I*’M concerned you made up for your mistake.”

Brennan rolled his eyes and looked away, diligently scanning the tall grass and hills around them.

“Thank you Kyra.” Landen said with a smile. “I appreciate the understanding. However, I made a mistake and it's only right that I carry the blame for it.”

Kyra frowned but nodded, reluctantly agreeing that he wasn't completely wrong. The trio of divers made their way down the path, traveling for the rest of the day, finally setting up camp after darkness fell completely. As they set up their tents and made a small campfire in a clearing by a tree Kyra asked Landen a question.

“Why were you out by yourself?”

“I was on my way back from a trip to see family.” He explained, setting a spike into the ground with a fist sized rock, before attaching a rope for his tent to it. “I’m on my way back to Trenia to run one of the dungeons. It’s a good warm up and I could use some new armor if I get lucky.”

“That's why we are going.” She said with a smile. “I need real armor and a shield.”

“We aren't leaving Trenia without getting you a proper shield.” Brennan said, cutting in. “If we find one, great, but if we have to save up and buy one then so be it.”

“Would you... perhaps be amenable to forming a temporary group?” Landen asked after a moment. “Most of the lairs around Trenia can easily be run with four divers, which means we could form the majority of a team, and would get the first pick of items. The fact that Kyra is a harvester makes it even easier.”

Kyra looked at Brennan, shrugging before finishing her tent. With a sigh Brennan nodded.

“Alright, we will try one lair together.” He answered. “As long as we can find two fillers. You need to prove that your not normally stupid enough to piss off a troll before I’m willing to run a dungeon with only one other diver.”

Kyra gave Brennan a look of annoyance, while Landen only chuckled.

“I can’t say I blame you there. That wasn't the best first impression for me.” He admitted, rubbing the back of his head. “You on the other hand seem like quite the catch. Not many could claim to fight a troll one on one in melee and win.”

“I’ve been at this for a while. And the spear is a great counter to the troll’s size, as long as it is sharp enough to pierce its hide.”

Landen nodded, accepting the attempt at modesty. The three finished setting up camp, all of them sit back around the fire, sharing provisions. Before darkness really settled in, Kyra and Brennan practiced her shield work, going through the paces of slow practice before shifting to more intense training. Kyra was showing some improvements, slowly becoming better at predicting and holding off Brennan’s more intense blows. It didn’t take long for them to call it a night once they were done, as all three of them were tired from travel and training. Once again Kyra and Brennan took care of the watch, Landen chuckling at Kyra’s pout.

The next day was very much the same as the previous, at least until the afternoon. The three broke down their tents, packed their things and headed out on the road, making steady progress to the city. They chatted, made small talk and discussed which of the lairs they would run for Landen’s trial run. Kyra assumed they would just go to the easiest, but Landen and Brennan corrected her.

“The easiest lair around Trenia is supposed to be the shield lair. But only one of us needs a shield.” Brennan explained, Landen nodding along. “If we run the shield lair and somehow manage to get two shields, one of them would be useless for us.”

Kyra gave Brennan a look, who gave her a small shrug. He couldn’t admit that getting two shields at once would be perfect for them, not while Landen was still with them.

“But since I’m looking for better armor as well, if we get lucky and find two pieces both of them will be useful.” Landen finished, taking a large step over a puddle in the road. “I’ll let you have the first pick of course, because I am a gentleman.”

“What kind of lair beast is in the armor lair?” Kyra asked, chuckling at Landen.

“I don’t remember.” Brennan admitted with a shrug. “It’s been more than a few years. I have a guild book that should say them but-”

“They are lizard creatures about the size of a cougar.” Landen answered. “They have middling bite strength, and they can whip you with their tails but they need to get lucky to do any real damage. The biggest danger is losing digits but that can be prevented with a pair of protective gloves. Occasionally you’ll see one that is bright green, those can spit a glob of acid. It’s not potent enough to melt anything, and it washes off with water. It’s not fun, especially if you get it in your eyes, but it won’t kill you.”

“And the lair boss at the end?” Brennan asked.

“A larger lizard, the size of a pony.” Landen answered. “It can always spit and the acid is a bit more intense. The key to making it easy is to bring extra water to wash your face and eyes if you get splashed.”

The three continued on, making good progress as the sun started to descend. Suddenly, as they crested a hill Landen held out his hand, motioning for them to stop before pointing ahead and slightly off the path. There, standing in the field were a half dozen or so deer, nibbling on grass. The three divers crouched down, hiding behind a nearby rock.

Quietly as possible Landen got his bow and an arrow ready. He gestured to the herd of deer, getting a nod of agreement from both Kyra and Brennan. He closed his eyes, nocked his arrow and in one smooth movement stood up, took aim and fired the arrow. The well made shaft sped across the gap and slammed into the side of a buck, burying itself deep. Half the arrow disappeared into the deer's flesh, and it dropped immediately, flailing for a few seconds before going still. The rest of the deer scattered, running and hopping through the clearing, scattering out of sight. For a few moments the group paused, waiting to see if any of the bucks would be aggressive.

“Damn... that was a good shot.” Brennan admitted as the three walked to the now dead buck. Its horns were small, having only recently been shed.

“I have plenty of practice.” Landen said with a shrug as Kyra leaned down and inspected the kill.

“Let's get this hung up so I can drain it.” Kyra said.

The trio made their way to a small nearby group of trees. While Kyra started draining, cleaning and harvesting the meat from the deer, Landen and Brennan set up camp. It wasn't long before they were cooking large chunks of meat over the fire, an impromptu jerky making set up as well, constructed from tree branches and twine, set up over that. The meat smelled amazing after days of tough, chewy jerky, especially after Brennan used his spices.

“If we push hard tomorrow, I think we can get to Trenia before it's too dark to travel.” Brennan said as they ate.

“There is a tavern I know that should have rooms open.” Landen said with confidence. “Might even give us a better price, the owner is family... ish.”

As the three had stopped earlier to prepare the deer and cook it, Kyra and Brennan stretched her nightly training out. With frequent breaks to check up on the slow cooking meat, they worked through more practice. Landen even assisted, adding to the challenge by occasionally tossing small rocks at Kyra, keeping her on her toes and forcing her to pay attention to two targets at once.

When the food was done they stopped and ate, eating more than their fill of meat as there was plenty. After they were finished the trio crawled into their tents, well fed and tired, excited that this might be the last night spent on the cold ground. Brennan was too satisfied with the warm meal in his belly and too tired from the walking and training to worry about Landen, and the three of them shared watch equally.

The next morning was a rush, a whirlwind of cleaning and packing. The three were on the road in record time, and earlier than usual as well. They traveled with anticipation, their pace a bit faster, determined to make Trenia before nightfall. After a few hours of walking they began to see homes and farmsteads, as well as people and carts.

Brennan managed to wave down one of those carts and in exchange for half of their freshly made venison jerky, the farmer agreed to ferry them the rest of the way. They could have haggled for a better deal but Kyra cut Brennan off, complaining that they weren't going to be eating the jerky when they were in the city anyway, and it would go bad before they left. With a deal struck the farmer moved some of his produce around, making room for Brennan and Kyra in the back, with Landen sitting up front with the farmer. With the farmland and homesteads rolling past them, they rode in relative comfort.

After an hour of riding they they could make out the details of the city walls, half hidden by a hill. The city itself was slightly smaller than Primonte, but only because the riverside city had a massive dock and shipping area. Not counting that, Trenia was slightly larger, a sprawling city built along the side of a decent sized hill. Once inside the city proper they climbed out of the cart, thanking the farmer before Landen led them to the tavern.

The manager working behind the bar of the tavern greeted Landen with a grin and a handshake. They talked for a few minutes about family, how this aunt and that cousin were doing. Eventually the topic of rooms came up, and the manager was happy to shave a few brass off the price after hearing how Brennan and Kyra had saved his life, especially when he learned they would be staying for a few weeks at least.

With the first week paid for, the three divers shared a quick meal at one of the tavern's tables, Landen buying them both Kyra and Brennan a drink before they retired to their rooms. Brennan spent ten minutes hanging a few noise traps by the door and window of his room before stripping off his armor, grabbing his trusty dagger and sliding it under his pillow before climbing into bed.

Chapter 12

The next morning Kyra and Brennan met down in the tavern's front room, sharing a hot breakfast. Landen joined them not long after, having a cup of tea with his own meal. The three

looked much more put together than they had the night before. Rested, washed and fed a decent meal, the three chatted and joked through small talk before changing over to more serious conversations when their plates were taken away.

“Lets just make a lair reservations today, for tomorrow. Then after that we can spend some time going to the shops.” Brennan suggested. “I’m getting Kyra a normal shield, something relatively cheap but functional to use until we get her something proper.”

“I need to stock up on arrows anyway.” Landen agreed. “I don’t think any of us want to tackle a lair today anyway.”

Kyra and Brennan nodded, with Kyra going back to her room to grab the harvested troll parts, the group heading out into the city and making their way to the guild hall. This one was slightly smaller than the one in Premonte, though it still had all of the same amenities. It was relatively busy as well, the three having to wait in line for a few minutes before they could talk to the woman behind the counter.

“Hello, we would like to set up a reservation for tomorrow.” Brennan said, sliding an iron piece onto the counter.

It took a few minutes to set up the reservation, and another few after that to fill out the paperwork for the filler requests. Their reservation was for a night dive, an hour or so after the sun had set, and together Brennan and Landen decided to post for one heavy and a second back liner or mage.

Once they had finished signing and filling everything out another worker ushered them into a separate small room. The worker examined all of the harvested materials, weighing everything before leaving to check a few things. They returned a few minutes later with a cloth pouch.

“Here you are, two silver pieces, eight steel and four iron.” The worker said with a smile, handing the pouch to Kyra, who immediately passed it to Brennan.

“That’s... a bit more than we expected.” Brennan admitted with a raised eyebrow, sliding the pouch into his satchel.

“There is an extra bounty on all trolls in the area, after they wrecked a few caravans one winter.” The worker explained with a smile. “It’s been quite a few years since someone has brought one in, so I had to check that it was still open. Thank you for making the roads a bit safer.”

After thanking the worker, and giving them a tip, the trio made their way out of the guild hall. After the initial excitement of being paid such a high amount had faded a bit, Kyra politely

asked for directions from a patrolling guard, the three headed in the direction of the city's shopping district.

"It's going to be hard to find an experienced filler here." Landen pointed out with a sigh once they had gotten some distance from the guild hall. Brennan simply nodded in agreement.

"What? Why?" Kyra asked, looking between the more experienced divers.

"This area is full of newbies like you because its lairs are known to be on the easier side." Brennan explained. "Most of the fillers are going to be people looking for experience with more advanced teams and opportunities to join them."

"Worst comes to worst I suppose we could ask if any of the other advanced teams are willing to split the reservation" Landen suggested. "It would be better than nothing."

Kyra was about to ask what that meant when Landen turned and began explaining it before she could.

"A filler expects to make much less than a full member of the team would, and they will hardly ever get equipment from a dive." He explained as they continued walking. "Splitting a reservation with another team means cutting a much more even deal usually, split between even more people than one or two fillers. It's basically a last resort to keep the reservation from being wasted. Plenty of teams consider it not worth the time, but for you experience is worth enough to consider it."

"I see, well I hope we find some fillers then."

The Trena shopping district was a mix of temporary merchant stalls and permanent businesses. After casually perusing the stalls for anything interesting, Landen made his way to a shop focused on archery goods, while Brennan and Kyra entered a armor shop.

"Hello! How can I help you?" The woman behind the counter asked. There were a few other people in the shop perusing the armor on display.

"We are looking for a shield, specifically one for her." Brennan answered, Kyra waving awkwardly when he gestured to her.

"Ah, alright. Are you divers or...?]" She asked, trailing off.

"Divers." Brennan answered back simply.

"Right. Well the shields are in that area over there, feel free to browse. Although... you might be interested in something I have in the back."

Brennan looked at Kyra, looking back to the shop keep.

“As long as I can afford it.”

The woman smiled and nodded, heading into the back of the shop, returning after a minute or so with a medium sized kite shield. There was a point on the bottom of the shield that led up with two curved edges that straightened out before meeting up with the also curved top at two corners. It was mostly made of a polished black wood, banded with dark iron across the front. In the center of the shield was a circle of golden brass like metal, the same color as the thick band that ran along the perimeter of the shield. The shield itself looked to be around three and a half feet tall and two feet wide with a slight curve on its width. The woman carried it easily, coming around the counter and handing it to Kyra.

“Oh... it's much lighter than I thought it would be.” Kyra said, lifting it easily after pushing her arm into the straps.

“That's its ability.” The shopkeeper explained. “It behaves like it's much smaller and lighter for the user while absorbing impacts like its normal size. On top of being unnaturally tough as most lair equipment is.”

“How much are you looking for it?” Brennan asked. “The ability is kind of useful but doesn't seem very potent.”

“Well...we don't usually sell lair equipment, so our customers aren't usually in the market for it...” The shopkeeper admitted. “Alright, how about two silver?”

“One silver and five steel.” Brennan counter offered. “We weren't really in the market for something like this, I'd only really consider buying it if it was a good deal.”

“... A silver and seven steel. That's my final offer.” The woman said seriously.

“... fine, if you include straps so she can wear it more comfortably.” Brennan said, reaching into his satchel and pulling out the pouch they had just been given.

“...Fine, that's acceptable.”

Brennan pulled out the shopkeeper's payment, a single iron disk only slightly larger than the normal iron coins. In its center was a small circle of silver, firmly embedded in the coin. Seven steel coins joined the first one while the woman went into the back and grabbed a well made leather and rope harness. They gathered the harness and made their way out of the shop, Kyra carrying her new shield.

“Thank you very much divers, I hope you have a nice day!”

The two left the shop and headed to a relatively quiet area so Brennan could help Kyra figure out the straps. They ended up setting it so she could walk with it resting on her left shoulder, most of the weight distributed evenly by the harness. Kyra practiced with it, bringing it up to defend herself from its resting position.

"If Landen asks, it is just basic lair equipment, no special abilities." Brennan said as he double checked her straps. "We picked it up cheap because the shop was looking to get rid of it."

"Why would we lie?" Kyra asked with a raised eyebrow.

"So that we can still run the shield lair a few times claiming you want something better. Plus, if we get another shield from a lair I could improve either of them and spin it anyway we want. You liked how this shield felt too much to use the other so we sold it, or we sold this one because it was just basic so it's not worth keeping."

"I... suppose that makes sense." She admitted with a shrug, letting out a sigh. "But being paranoid takes so much energy."

"You have no idea."

With Kyra's shield now firmly strapped in against her side, her left arm helping to carry it, the two met back up with Landen, who was holding a cloth bundle, fletching sticking out of one side.

"Wow, that's a bit bigger than I thought you would get." Landen admitted, looking the shield up and down.

"It's lair gear, and it wasn't too expensive." Kyra volunteered. "Nothing special but better than a normal shield. We are hoping to find something better."

"Then the shield lair is still on the agenda?" Landen asked, continuing after Brennan coughed as a reminder. "Assuming of course I passed your first test?"

"Yes, we will probably run it a few times." Brennan answered, a small smirk on his lips. "If you pass our test."

Landen gave a good natured laugh at his words, nodding along while Kyra rolled her eyes. The trio made their way out of the shopping district before pausing at an intersection.

"So we have the rest of the day to ourselves?" Kyra asked. "Could we go grab some lunch?"

“Lunch sounds good. But after that we need to get some things ready. We need to buy a few things for tomorrow, you need to practice with your new shield, and I would like to read through what the guild has on tomorrow's lair.”

“What do we need?” Landen asked. “I could go get our shopping done while you two head back to the hall. They have a training yard behind the main building, free to use for divers.”

“That... sounds good.” Brennan said after thinking for a moment. “We need extra waterskins, maybe one for each of us. I also wanted to see if we could find some protective glasses, to keep the acid from our eyes.”

“The water skins and glasses should be easy, they are common for this lair.”

Brennan nodded, reaching into his satchel and pulling out four steel pieces, passing them to Landen.

“These should more than cover two of each.” He said as Landen took the coins. “Let's grab some easy lunch first.”

The three walked through the city, bought a simple lunch of mutton stew before splitting up. Landen made his way through the city away from Brennan and Kyra, who both watched him for a moment before looking at each other.

“I like him.” Kyra said with a smile. “He is very light and optimistic.”

“...He seems to be trustworthy.” Brennan admitted with a shrug. “No way of knowing if he is a good fighter yet.”

“I suppose not.” Kyra said solemnly before looking around. “Do you remember how to get back to the guild hall?”

Brennan's eyes widened as he looked around, up and down the street before letting out a long defeated sigh, shaking his head. Kyra chuckled and then laughed before looking around for someone to ask.

It took them a bit to find their way back but eventually they made it. After asking a worker they were guided back to the yard behind the guild hall, where several other divers practiced, spared and tried out new gear. The worker asked them to be careful with any destructive pieces of equipment before returning to his work. After a moment Brennan pointed to a small unoccupied space.

“That looks like a good spot.”

After making their way to the small space the two started going through the now familiar training, this time side by side instead of swapping Brennan's shield back and forth. After spending an hour or so working through the different forms they took a short break, sitting on a sturdy wooden fence.

"I'll be honest, I don't have a ton of experience with a shield of that size." Brennan admitted. "I prefer slightly smaller shields like this one."

"It feels like I'm more covered holding it." Kyra said, standing and getting into a stable position.

"If you hold it like this it's almost full body coverage." Brennan said, guiding her to a more sideways stance. "Don't be afraid to grip it with two hands, there should be a handle there to use."

Kyra looked down and nodded, gripping the second handle and adjusting again. Feeling even more solid now that she was using both hands.

"So should I give up holding my dagger completely?" She asked, slowly working through some standard blocks, now with two hands.

"Unless things get desperate, yes." Brennan answered, standing up and making his way back to the small vacant area. "I very much appreciated you coming to my rescue when that wolf had my arm but in all likelihood I was only a few seconds away from killing it myself. Now if I was pinned? Or more severely injured? Then it might be time for you to help."

Kyra nodded and followed right behind, the two of them starting their more intense training, with Brennan trying his best to get past her shield, this time even going as far to use his boots to occasionally dash across the space to a better position. There was definitely a learning curve for her new shield, but Kyra quickly got used to the new size and shape.

After a while Kyra felt something hit her back, checking quickly to see that Landen was there, sitting on the fence with a few small rocks in his hand. The three trained for a while longer before eventually stopping, both Kyra and Brennan sweating and breathing hard. Kyra gave Landen a rough look, which only made him laugh, proud that he had distracted her enough for Brennan to break through her guard a few times.

The three of them rested as Landen passed his purchases to the other two. Brennan hung the new waterskin from his belt beside the older one, before picking up the glasses. They were made from some sort of crystal, as thick as his thumb and relatively clear.

"What are they made of, it's not glass..." Kyra asked, examining the robust glasses.

"It's some sort of crystal harvested from a lair. Landen answered with a shrug. "Stronger than glass and if they do break it won't be into dangerous shards."

"Alright, they should help a bit. We will keep them on hand when we go in tomorrow. If we start seeing acid we can put them on."

"I think I'll have mine on from the start." Kyra said with a shiver. "I don't want to risk it."

"Fair enough."

The three spent a few more minutes examining and trying on the protective eyewear before heading back inside the guild hall. After a short talk with a worker they were handed a thin book of information, which Brennan carried to one of the free tables. They poured over the booklet, reading all of the data the guild hall had gathered about the acid lizard lair. After an hour of reading and planning the trio decided to call it an early night, the three of them heading back to the tavern for another night of rest.

Chapter 13

The next morning the team ate a simple breakfast, strapped on their various pieces of armor and headed to the guild hall. Brennan carried his spear and shield, a basic dagger on his hip, while Kyra had her new shield and her usual dagger on her hip. Landen had his bow in his hands and his quiver on his back.

It was a short walk to the guild hall, especially early in the morning. When they arrived Brennan checked to make sure both of their postings were up while Landen and Kyra claimed a small table in the corner. Kyra nervously wrung her hands under the table, unable to stop herself from thinking of her last dive. When Brennan returned from the posting board he put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze, getting her attention. She looked at him as he sat next to her, nodding at his look. She took a deep breath and released it, letting some of the anxiety fade.

Not long after they had settled in and Landen was relaxed, napping quietly with his head down on the table while Brennan was working through his own tension by going over the guild's informative book on the lair. Eventually Kyra pulled out her father's journal and started reading through it, using it to calm herself. About an hour into their wait the first filler applicant came to their table.

A young, tanned guy with muscles and simple armor came to their table, looking to fill the heavy position. Brennan studied the diver as Landen asked them a few questions. They answered evasively, forcing Brennan to ask directly how many dives they had done. The muscular man finally admitted they had only done a few, and that they were a farmer by trade.

When he went on to admit his last dive was a little over a year ago Brennan told him he should stick to farming, that diving was a dangerous business and he was likely to get someone killed. Kyra scolded him, while Landen apologized to the filler, smoothing things over enough that he agreed not to complain to the guild.

“Brennan, what the hell was that?” Kyra asked when they were alone. “You didn't have to be such an ass about it.”

“With any luck it will get through his skull.” Brennan said with no remorse. “There is no such thing as a casual diver, Kyra. What if we had been a slightly less experienced team and hadn't realized he was purposely being vague? We would have dived with him, assuming he is new but with a few dives under his belt. Meanwhile he doesn't know what the hell he is doing because his head is filled with farming and tending animals.”

Kyra shook her head and looked to Landen for support, who looked apologetic and shrugged.

“I might have been a bit less... confrontational about it, but Brennan isn't wrong.” He admitted. “Casual divers can be dangerous, especially if they aren't open about it. Obviously if they are a soldier or a guard, it's different but...”

“Fine. But don't be such a jerk Brennan. You're partnered with me and working with Landen.” She pointed out. “You being an ass reflects poorly on us.”

Brennan raised his eyebrows, pausing and eventually nodding reluctantly.

“I... suppose you're right. I'll do my best.”

Over the next few hours a handful more fillers applied, each of them a poor fit. Most of them were too new, still learning the ropes just as Kyra was. Landen apologized that they couldn't handle more than one new person at a time, placating them slightly. Eventually someone applied for the heavy position who at least looked like they could handle themselves.

A woman who looked to be about their age, maybe a bit older, sat down at the table while Landen was gone getting some lunch for the team. She was massive, easily more than six feet tall and armed with a large tower shield and mace, the former which she leaned against the table before sitting. She had a few thin and faded scars visible on her face and arms, though her mostly black leather armor covered most of them.

“So. You still looking for a heavy?” She asked, her voice rough. “Your posting said you were a team of three, looking for two fillers?”

“Our archer is off getting lunch.” Brennan explained, closing his book with a bookmark still inside. “And the position is still empty.”

“Good.” The large, powerful looking woman said simply before getting more comfortable in the chair. “Names Marta.”

“Nice to meet you Marta. My name is Kyra and this is Brennan. Landen is the one absent at the moment.” Kyra explained, getting a nod in return.

“So how long have you been diving Marta?” Brennan asked. “And have you dived the lair we are doing today?”

“I’ve been a diver for three years now. And yes I have, twice.” She answered. “I’m a bit surprised you’re looking to dive with five people. The lizard lair is usually done with four.”

“Well Kyra, our harvester, is new to this, so we wanted to make sure.”

“She’s been trained though, right?”

“Yes. She’s done a few dives and she was taught harvesting by an expert. If you want to check you can ask the workers, we dropped off some harvested troll parts.”

“Where the fuck did you find a troll?” She asked, looking doubtful.

“We ran into it on the way here.” Brennan answered. “Landen and I took it down and Kyra harvested it.”

“Alright, fair enough.” she said with a shrug.

“What kind of equipment do you have?” Brennan asked, looking over her armor and shield.

“My mace and most of my armor is just basic gear.” She explained, tapping the spiked mass of metal. “My shield lets out a blast of sound that deafens anything in front of me and tends to anger stupid beasts into focusing on me. My boots keep me stable, makes me harder to knock down.”

“Does your shield work on the lizards?” Brennan asked. “And how many times can it activate?”

“Yeah, it does.” She answered with a smirk. “And it works twice. What kind of cut are you offering?”

“The whole reason we are running the lizard lair is because Kyra desperately needs armor.” He explained, Kyra agreeing with a nod. “So we are asking that any and all armor go to us, including shields. In exchange we will divide everything else equally. Gear that isn’t armor

will be sold and the profits split equally. If it's something you want you can buy it for four fifths the price quoted by the hall appraiser, three fifths if it was your kill.”

“That... that is a pretty good deal.” Marta agreed with a nod, sticking her hand out. “You have yourself a deal.”

“Good. Landen should be back shortly, but I think you are a solid fit.” Brennan said, leaning across the table to shake the powerful woman's hand. “Our reservation is for later tonight. You can wait here or come back at sunset.”

“I'll be back later.” She responded. “I want to get some extra sleep.”

The large heavy stood, grabbed her shield and mace before giving them both a nod, leaving the guild hall with large powerful steps. Kyra looked at Brennan with wide eyes, the experienced diver only shrugging in return. Eventually Landen came back with food and the three enjoyed a simple lunch while Brennan described Marta. After finishing lunch they continued waiting for their last filler, a second back liner like Brennan. Eventually, after another few hours, a few unsuitable applicants and a second heavy that they had to pass over, a short man made his way to the table.

He was armed with the usual sword and board, though the sword was shorter than most full sized one handed swords. He was wearing mostly pale leather armor, though his chest was protected by a silver and black metal cuirass

“Hello, names Garren. Are you still looking for a back liner?” He asked once he was sitting, greeting everyone with a smile.

“Nice to meet you Garren, and yes we are.” Kyra answered with her own smile, before introducing everyone.

“Alright, well I've been diving for going on three years now.” He volunteered when Kyra was done, anticipating what kind of questions they would ask. “I've been running the local lairs for the last week or so, but I haven't run the lizard one quite yet.”

“That's fine. Kyra and I haven't dove into this lair yet, but Landen and our second filler has. Her name is Marta.”

“Oh! Yes, I dove a lair three days ago with her.” The shorter man said with a nod. “Her shield was a fantastic boon.”

“What kind of equipment do you have?” Landen asked.

“My boots increase my speed slightly and keep me from slipping or stumbling.” He responded. “My sword can shock creatures it pierces three times a day. I also have a bracelet that enhances one strike a day. Do you have any healing equipment?”

“We have a powerful healing stone, though it only has one charge.” Landen answered, pulling the stone out to show him before tucking it back in his clothes.

“Hmm... That’s a bit low...” Garren responded, rubbing his short beard. “I’m hesitant to dive with so little healing, even if the one charge is potent.”

Landen and Brennan shared a look for a moment, the former shrugging and gesturing to the latter. Brennan nodded and looked back to Garren.

“Well we would be willing to split the cost of a few potions.” He offered.

“Maybe... What kind of funds does your team have available?” He asked, looking them over. “I visited a shop yesterday that had a decent healing stone for sale. Three charges, each enough to heal up small wounds and keep people from bleeding out from larger ones.”

“How much was it?” Brennan asked, sitting up straight in interest.

“Two gold, four silver.”

Brennan frowned for a moment, going over his funds as well as what he had in his pack. He had a few things that would be worth that much, but none that he could pull out now or that he wanted to separate with. After a moment more of thinking he nodded.

“Depending on their willingness to trade I think I can swing that.”

“Great! Before I show you the shop, what kind of split are we talking about?”

Brennan described the same terms as he had for Marta, which the shorter man happily agreed to. After a quick handshake, Garren led Brennan for a short walk to a small but well kept shop. It was near but not inside of the shopping district, and dealt specifically in lair equipment.

“Alright, I’ll see about haggling out a decent deal.” Brennan said, standing by the front door of the shop. “You can return to the hall if you’d like, we have a few more hours before we need to head out to the lair.”

“No problem, I should read up on the lair anyway!” Garren said with a smile. “Good luck!”

The shorter man rushed away, back the way they had come from before turning a corner and disappearing. Meanwhile, Brennan stepped into the shop, a bell dingling as he opened the door.

“Just a minute!” A voice called out from the back of the shop.

While he waited Brennan took a look around. The store was pretty well stocked all things considered, though most of the gear was just basic. After a minute or so of browsing an older woman stepped out from the back and stood behind the counter, a large smile on her face. She had graying thin hair that was pulled back in a bun, dressed in a simple blue dress.

“Well hello, what can I do for you?” She asked, putting her hands on the counter. “Anything specific I can help you find?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” He responded, making his way to the counter. “I heard a rumor that you had a healing item available.”

“Ah! Yes, a diver got lucky a few days ago and traded it for a rather nice sword.” She answered. “Would you like to see it?”

“Yes, I would please.”

The shopkeeper nodded with a smile, turning and stepping into the back again, returning after a moment with a small wooden box. She put it on the table before opening the lid. Inside was a glowing stone of a familiar color.”

“And you've had it appraised?”

“Of course dear. Three heals a day, moderate wounds.” She responded. “It's well worth the two and a half gold.”

“Does it still have all three charges?” He asked, the shopkeeping nodding in confirmation. “In that case, would you be open for trade?”

Brennan reached into his satchel and pulled out a simple looking dagger, laying it on the counter before pulling out a small bag of coins, different from the pouch containing the reward from the troll. He only had a single gold coin, and spending that would cut harshly into his savings. But a decent healing stone was too good to pass up, especially with the minor stone he had bought in Primonte.

“The dagger cuts extremely well, piercing most armors, increases its speed when thrown and returns to its sheath five seconds after it impacts its target or thirty seconds after it leaves your hand. Twice a day it explodes with force magic when it returns to your sheath, on command.”

The shopkeeper's eyes go wide as Brennan describes the dagger, nodding along. She touched it with one hand, the silver ring on that hand glowing.

"Impressive, not often you see a dagger like that with increased cutting ability and the added abilities." She said with a smile. "I think that would be worth a gold piece."

"It's at least a gold and five silver." Brennan said, shaking his head. "You know I could ask for more."

"...a gold and three silver." The woman said eventually.

"Done." Brennan said simply, opening his pouch and looking inside.

It took him a moment to find the right one, pulling out the shining steel coin, slightly bigger than normal steel pieces, checking the small circle of gold in its center. He pulled out two more silver pieces, placing them all on the counter.

"Pleasure doing business with you." The older woman said with a big smile, picking up the coin and pulling the dagger closer. "Be sure to come back if you find anything interesting when you are diving."

Brennan nodded as he put his money pouch away, picking up the stone. He examined the blue glowing crystal, smooth and oval, only a half an inch thick. He took the stone and slid it into a hidden pocket along his armor, somewhere easily accessible but not completely obvious. The shopkeeper gave him a final nod as he made his way out. With that purchase he was pretty low on big spending money, but he felt a lot more confident with access to his own healing.

Silently he made his way back to the guild hall, arriving just in time to see Marta sitting down beside Garren at their table. He waved and made his way over, sitting down in his old seat.

"Did you get it?" Garren asked.

"I did, I managed to trade an old dagger to bring down the price." He said, reaching into his pocket and showing him the healing stone.

"Wonderful!" Garren said with a laugh, nodding and leaning back in his chair.

"A healing stone? How potent?" Marta asked, an eyebrow raised.

"This one is moderate, with three charges." Brennan explained. "We have access to a second one, slightly more powerful but with only one charge."

"That's good. Having to rely on potions is expensive." Marta said, shaking her head a bit.

“I’m glad I managed to get my hands on one. Well worth the coin and dagger.” Brennan responded with a smile. “With that out of the way, why don’t we get our contracts sorted out. Our reservation is only an hour or so away.”

The two fillers nodded and stood, Kyra and Landen following suit, the whole group making their way to the guild hall counter, which thankfully did not have a line. Ten minutes later the contract was filed and the group of five left the hall, on their way to the lair.

Chapter 14

It took about thirty minutes to get to the lair itself, twenty of which was spent on a cart, traveling through the woods on a well worn road. They arrived at the lair entrance portal just as the sky went completely dark, the stars dotting the sky. The small fort surrounding the entrance was a stark contrast to the wolf lair in Premonte. The wolf lair had been surrounded by stone walls and a reinforced gate, while this one was only a wooden structure, one that was clearly showing signs of its age. There were fewer guards as well, while the few that were there were clearly distracted by their own time passing activities. Two were playing a card game, while a third was reading a book. They did notice the group’s arrival however, slowly standing from their business and pretending to look busy.

Brennan headed to a small covered area, had a quick conversation with the guard, and confirmed that they were next in line after the current divers finished. The group found an empty space and claimed it as Brennan returned.

“The current team has been in there for three hours now.” He explained before jabbing his spear into the ground, pointed tip towards the sky. “So they should be back any time now.”

The group began going through their individual rituals, mostly stretches and warm ups. Brennan ran Kyra through his, limbering up and making sure everything was ready to go. The portal arch activated while they were stretching, getting everyone’s attention. One by one a team exited, carrying a few bags, most of them laughing and chatting with each other. When the fourth one came through the team let out a cheer and headed for the gates.

“Alright guys, not going to do anything fancy. Marta leads, I’ll cover Kyra and Garren covers Landen. Marta, please hold off on your shield unless things go bad. Marta and Landen, you’ve run this lair before, so let us know if you recognize anything. Also please keep in mind that Kyra has only done a few dives before this, so don’t assume she knows something an experienced diver should.”

Kyra, looking nervous and now embarrassed by Brennan, gave everyone a hesitant smile, getting a much larger smile back from Garren and Landen, as well as a simple nod from Marta.

“Good. Let’s fight conservative and take our time.” Brennan said with his own nod. “Final gear check and then we head through.”

Following his own instructions Brennan ran through a pat down of his armor, strapped his shield on tight and pulled his spear from the ground. Kyra pulled her own straps on tight, while everyone else stood straight and prepared themselves. As the gate reopened everyone got closer before one by one stepping through the blue green portal.

Once inside, they all took a moment to get used to the strange pressure that permeated every lair. Once everyone had adjusted the group got into position, with the two back liners pairing with their wards.

Just as they had read about, the lair was a field of rocks and solid stone, all sunk in a small caldera looking area about a hundred feet across. On the opposite side was a gap in the rocky walls, just enough space for them to pass through two by two, shoulder to shoulder. After a quick look around Marta checked over her shoulder and got a nod from Brennan.

“Let’s move on. No sense waiting here.”

The group made their way across the gray and white solid stone area, the natural looking rock walls getting closer and closer. Squeezing together to pass through the gap, they emerged into a similar open area, with stone walls surrounding them, rocks and boulders strewn across the ground.

Brennan, trailing behind Kyra, kept his eyes on the ridges of the rock walls. After a few seconds he spotted something.

“Behind!” He called out, shifting to face the threat directly.

Two yellow and brown lizards crested the ridge and crawled down the rocky sides, skittering and moving fast, making a beeline to Brennan. He raised his shield to defend himself, watching as one of the lizards was hit in the back half by an arrow, causing to roll and stumble. The other, unharmed lizard kept coming, climbing and leaping off a small rock at him.

With a grunt Brennan took the impact on his shield, using his enhanced strength to stop it and push it back. The lizard fell awkwardly, exposing his belly just long enough for him to plunge his spear deep into its chest. The lizard wiggled for a moment before going still. Brennan turned and brought his shield up just in time to watch Garren finish off the second lizard.

The group waited for a moment in silence, eyes on the ridge for a while, waiting to see if any more lair beasts would join in for this segment. When a full minute had passed they let out a collected breath of relief.

“Alright, take a look around, make note of anything unusual. I want everyone loose for the next segment.”

The team relaxed and began a quick search of the segment. When nothing unusual turned up in a few minutes of looking, Brennan called everyone back, the group reforming into a loose formation before walking through the next gap, this one to the left. They pushed through and into the next segment, this area devoid of any rocks or boulders. Instead there were patches of sand and gravel along the outside, forming a circle around the perimeter, only broken by the entrance and exit gaps.

The group pushed to the center of the space, stopping when they reached it. They scanned the ridge and after a few moments Marta and Kyra both called out.

“Front!”

“Behind!”

Garren reacted swiftly to the two lizards entering the clearing through the next gap, quickly darting off and charging Marta and Landen. Marta took the charge head on with hardly a struggle, slamming her mace down and caving in the lizard's skull, while Garren stepped in between the second lizard and its target, raising his own shield. As the leathery skinned reptile leaped at him he nimbly shifted to the right at the last moment, opening the lair beast's stomach with his sword.

Meanwhile the single lizard coming from behind charged at Kyra, sprinting with startling speed. Before the lizard got too close Brennan dashed, flashing in blue and black smoke to surprise the beast, suddenly appearing in its face with his spear already jabbing forward. The momentum of his thrust and the lizard's charge drove the spear tip through its skull. Brennan was forced to put his boot on its forehead to yank his weapon free.

Once again the group waited with anxious tension, eyes scanning the rim of the stone pit. After a minute or so they relaxed and spread out, searching the area. Brennan used the butt of his spear to prod the sand and gravel along the walls. When the wood hit something with a light thunk he kneeled down to examine it. After pushing the sand and gravel around a bit he pulled out a hunk of red, brown and black stone, half as big as his fist.

“Kyra! This what I think it is?” He asked, tossing it to her when she turned to him.

She reached out and managed to catch the chunk of rock, bobbling it a bit before holding it. After a moment she nodded, tossing it back.

“It's iron ore. Should be worth a few brass.”

This announcement caught the attention of the other three team members, who looked to the ring of sand and gravel.

“Thought so.” He said, catching the wrong and dropping it back onto the sand. “Not bad. We will grab as much as we can on the way back.”

Same as before the group got back into their pairs with Marta leading, progressing to the next segment of the lair. Much like the previous room, three reptiles charged the group, this time with two targeting the back and a third coming from the side. Once again the lair beasts were killed, with Landen picking one of them off and Marta and Brennan killing the remaining two.

This went on for a few more segments, the beasts being taken care of with relative ease. It wasn't until the sixth room when they got their first curveball. Two beasts rushed down the walls of the pit, charging Marta, Landen and Garren in the front. At the same time a fourth lizard, bright green and slightly larger stopped on the lip of the walls and focused on Kyra. After a moment it convulsed, retched and spat a glob of green liquid at her.

Kyra spun at the sound, turning around and raising her shield with impressive speed. The acid splashed against the shield, scattering into green droplets and dripping down the wood and metal kite shield. Holding the shield steady she blocked another splash of acid, the sharp, stinging smell of the liquid making her wince.

Brennan, who had also heard the retching turned and dashed in front of Kyra, his spear glowing blue and firing a quick barrage of ice shards, slamming into the lizard. A few of the spears of ice scattered off the reptile's hide, but even more sank into its skin, burying several inches deep, killing the lair beast almost instantly. It collapsed and fell off the wall, landing in a hefty thump.

After a minute of waiting for more threats, Landen looked over at Brennan and Kyra.

“You two all right?” He asked, arrow still nocked on his bow, though it was pointed down.

“I'm fine, I managed to get the shield up in time.” Kyra answered before looking at Brennan. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine, he was too focused on you to try and target me.” He said, standing up out of his lower combat stance. “Six segments in before our first real difficulty increase, that's reassuring.”

The rest of the group nodded, already looking around the open pit. Before anyone could get anywhere though, Kyra gasped.

“Brennan!” She called out, standing over the bright green lizard. “It's fading!”

Sure enough, the unnatural lair beast was slowly fading to dust, swirling away in the non-existent wind. In its place was a pair of greaves, dark gray metal plates on pale blue leather. They fell to the ground when the beast fully disappeared.

“Damn, I was hoping we wouldn’t get any armor.” Marta said, shrugging when everyone looked at her. “What? It means our cuts are smaller.”

Brennan chuckled and walked over to the greaves, picking them up and walking over to Kyra, putting them inside of her leather pack.

“Shouldn’t I...” Kyra started to ask, getting a head shake and meaningful look from Brennan. “Never mind.”

“We can look at them later. It’s bad manners to try new gear inside a lair, even if you know it’s already yours. Some superstitious divers think it’s bad luck.”

“That’s ‘cause it is!” Garren called out, shaking his head, though he was still smiling. “Lairs don’t like it when their own gifts are used to fight them.”

“Yeah... we will just have to agree to disagree on that one.” Brennan said, not looking back at him, which meant Kyra could see him roll his eyes.

Once the equipment was stored Landen reminded everyone to put on their protective eyewear. Luckily the two fillers had gotten their own. Feeling a bit better about the acid spitting lizards now that their eyes were protected, the group set back on their dive, moving onto the next room. The difficulty stayed at its new level as they cleared the next few segments, four beasts attacking in various pairings and directions, each time having a bright green, acid spitting lizard among them. They managed to keep the acid from doing any serious damage by virtue of keeping a vigilant eye open, though Garren did have some burning on his leg. They had to stop when that happened, Landen helping pull his leg armor off to rinse it all with water. His leg was an angry red, covered in blisters, most of them torn open and weeping. They washed it before helping him put his armor back on, the shorter man wincing and hissing as he strapped his greave on tightly.

“When we are done, if we have any healing charges left we will take care of that.” Brennan assured him, helping him to his feet. “And if we don’t then we will meet up at the guild hall tomorrow.”

“Appreciated.” The man had said simply, his smile tight, morphing into a grimace as he moved around.

The group finally arrived at the sixteenth segment, quickly cutting down the two spitting lizards and the three normal ones. They paused and searched quickly before regrouping by the

exit. The usual simple gap was blocked by a large boulder, completely locked tight in the gap. In front of the boulder was a short plinth, a simple handprint on the top surface.

Brennan stood in front of the simple block of rock, looking back at the group.

“So. Simple has worked so far so let's stick with it.” He said, getting nods in return. “Marta, I want you to use your shield immediately. If you can get its attention and keep it on you then me and Garren can slice it up from behind. Landen, I want you hanging by the entrance with Kyra. Don't attract attention, we are going to stick with melee for this battle. Your only job is to work with Kyra to keep each other safe, and heal Marta if she gets really hurt.”

“I can handle that.” Landen agreed with a nod.

“Good. Marta, you ready?”

“Yeah, not anything new.”

“Great. Garren?” He asked next.

“Yeah. Quicker we kill it the quicker you can fix my leg.”

“Right. Let's do it.”

Brennan turned and put his hand on the plinth, a shiver running through the entire lair. With a sudden puff the boulder turned to dust, fluttering away, leaving the path open. The team headed in, Marta advancing past Brennan to take the lead.

Chapter 15

The group pushed into the much larger area, eyes locking on the center of the arena. Instead of crawling over and down the rocky walls like the smaller lair beasts had, the lair boss simply stood in the center of the segment. It was considerably bigger than the normal lair beasts and was colored bright green with yellow and brown highlights.

Before it could do anything Marta tensed and a loud bellowing roar shook the arena, emanating from her shield. The whole group winced, despite the fact that they were all standing behind the large woman. The lair boss took the full force of the blast of sound however, making it shake its head and screech in pain. It scratched at itself before shaking its head and focusing completely on Marta, charging her recklessly. Brennan and Garren ran away from Marta as the large beast crashed into the tall woman, knocking her back a few feet. Even as she was forced

to backpedal the woman roared back, slowly stopping the lizard, the energy of its charge dispersed.

With the lizard focused on their heavy, both Garren and Brennan closed in, lashing out at the unnatural beast from both sides. Brennans spear cut deep, glowing before freezing a chunk of leathery skin around the side where he jabbed it through its tough hide. On the other side Garren slashed and cut before stabbing into the beast and activating his sword, electricity sizzling into the huge lizard's side, sparking and burning, making its back leg seize up.

The almost horse sized lizard screeched again, whirling around and snapping at its attackers, first at Brennan, who was forced to dash back a half dozen feet. Garren managed to step back as it was attacking Brennan, avoiding the lizard's claws and teeth, but catching its sweeping tail on his shield, getting tossed back a dozen feet, tumbling onto his stomach. He stood slowly, winded and bruised but unbroken.

The second attacker now temporarily pushed back, the bright green reptile focused on Brennan, using its long whipping tail to keep Marta from attacking it from behind. Its claws sparked against Brennan's shield, almost tearing it from his grip. Managing to hold on, in part because of the shields own ability to increase his strength, the spear wielding diver was slowly forced back a few steps as he struggled. Before he could be completely overwhelmed, Garren charged the large reptile, once again slashing twice and stabbing it, this time managing to really slide his blade deep.

The boss screeched loudly in Brennans face, its legs failing for a moment as Garrens blade delivered its second electric shock deep inside its chest. It quickly recovered however, side stepping and pulling itself away, before jumping out of range.

The creature, its wounds slowly bleeding, paced and stared down the divers as they regrouped, Marta and Garren standing beside Brennan. After a moment it opened its mouth and retched a massive blob of acid, arching it at the three melee divers, darting around a boulder the second it released its spit.

Marta stood her ground, ducking under the protection of her shield as Brennan dashed around the same boulder, meeting the lizard as it tried to get a better angle. Using the dashes' momentum he shield bashed its front shoulder with considerable force, rattling his own cage in the process of almost knocking the creature off its feet. Garren, who had sprinted around to follow the lair boss's path, came up behind and cut at the beast again, this time focusing on slices.

The lair beast attempted to push the shorter diver back by bashing him with its tail for a second time, but Garren was ready. With a swift and precise move he raised and slashed at the tail with his sword, managing to lop off two thirds of the tail.

The lizard, rattled by Brennan's shield bash and in massive pain from the loss of its powerful tail, stumbled away before leaping onto the side of the pit, its feet slipping and sliding before it managed to stabilize and stop. Out of reach it began retching over and over, launching globs of acid at Garren, Brennan and Marta.

"Marta!" Brennan called out, his eyes staying on the large lizard as he did his best to dash, roll and jump away from the splashing globs. "Pull back to cover Landen and Kyra! Landen, explode its footing!"

Marta began backing up, not turning around as she made her way to the more vulnerable members of the team. While she was moving Landen pulled out an arrow and tensed for a moment, his bow glowing a pale orange for just a moment before the glow transferred to his arrow, becoming much more intense. After focusing for a few seconds he released the arrow, the glowing missile streaking across the arena to slam against the rock wall, between the lizard's right legs. It exploded, a blast of energy that shattered scattered shards of rock right between the lizard's two right legs. The shards sliced into the lair boss and the blast knocked against it, causing it to slip. Before it could even begin to fight to stay up on its perch a second glowing arrow sank into its front right leg. It detonated, eviscerating the limb completely, leaving it with a dripping tattered stump. Unbalanced and now lacking a limb to stabilize itself the lizard skidded and fell off the stone wall, rolling and hobbling to its feet.

Garren and Brennan, taking advantage of the beast's struggles, came at it from both sides. They battered it with their shields, sliced into it and stabbed at it, taking their time. The lizard, unable to keep up now that it was severely handicapped quickly succumbed. It snapped a final time at Garren, leaving an opening for Brennan to slam his spear into its neck. The lizard proved its unnatural origin as it spun to attack the one causing it pain, plunging the spear all the way through its neck in the process. Even so, it continued to struggle until Garren dropped his shield, held his sword with both hands, one of them glowing faintly, and slammed his blade down on the lizard's neck, managing to cut almost half way through before hitting Brennan's spear and stopping.

The creature finally went still, collapsing onto the ground, dead.

For a moment, no one moved. The silence was unbroken save for harsh breathing and slow drips of blood from the lizard corpse. After a while Brennan put his boot on the beast's neck, yanking his spear out of the corpse.

"Everyone good?" He called out, looking around at the members of his temporary team. "Anyone injured?"

After everyone responded negatively he let out a sigh, letting the tension flow out of his body. Before he could speak though, the large beast's body began to turn to dust and fade away. He took a step back, even as everyone else stepped closer.

“Been a while since I've seen a boss fade into an item.” Marta admitted, getting an agreeing nod from Garren.

As the large beast disappeared it left behind a rather large double headed battle ax, clattering to the ground when the beast was fully gone.

“Yeah, I'm having that.” Marta said before anyone else could say anything.

Landen chuckled while Kyra nodded, the rest of the group watching as Marta leaned down and picked up the weapon.

“As long as you can pay for it...” Brennan said.

“I'll take a loan out from the hall if I have to.” She said with a shrug. “I can feel it can do something, already better than my mace.”

Brennan simply shrugged in response. He looked at Garren, fishing out the healing stone from his hidden pocket. He passed the stone over to the other back liner, who gratefully took it.

“Thank you Brennan.” He said, the blue stone glowing brightly in his fist, the glow traveling through his body, most of it focused on his leg. “That was getting increasingly hard to ignore. Could I take a second charge?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” Brennan said with a smile, before focusing on Kyra. “Alright harvester, you're up.”

Kyra nodded, and the group split apart, examining the boss lair for anything valuable. They found a few chunks of iron ore, as well as some moss that Kyra identified as being valuable. They tossed the ore into a large leather bag, pulled from Kyra's pack, while they put the moss delicately into a cloth pouch.

When they were done with the bosses' lair they made their way back to the last segment. Kyra began harvesting the unnatural corpses of the lizards, pulling the largest claw from each foot, a strip of hide from either side of the lizard torso's and lastly the black spherical heart from each of the normal yellow and brown lizards. She pulled the same from the bright green lizards, but also pulled a double fist sized organ filled with acid, as well as as much blood she could drain from each of them.

It took a while to make their way back through the lair, stopping in each segment to let Kyra harvest each previous kill. While she did her work, the rest of the team went over the rooms with a fine tooth comb, examining every nook and cranny for any hidden surprises. They were in the sixth room back when Marta stumbled on something.

"I found something!" She called out.

Everyone turned to the large impressive woman and made their way to her, everyone save Kyra, who was two arms deep inside of a bright green lizard. The group huddled around Marta as she fiddled with a loose slab of rock, wedged into the surrounding rock wall.

"Here, try this." Brennan said, pulling out his dagger and offering it to the woman.

Marta accepted the blade and used it to pry open the rock, the slab of stone sliding out and falling to the ground, splitting in half. This revealed a surprisingly deep recess, perfectly rectangular and about a foot deep. Marta handed Brennan back his dagger before reaching inside and pulling out a grimoire.

"Looks like force magic." She said, touching the telltale gray cover before flipping to the last page, the only page with any writing on it. "Blasting wave. I don't know enough about magic to say how much it's worth."

Brennan held out his hand and opened it to the last page when Marta passed it to him. He scanned through the writing for a few seconds before nodding and passing the book to Garren.

"It's a simple but effective spell, I think I've seen it before, though I didn't know what its name was." He admitted. "It should be worth a few silver though."

Treasure found and recovered the group returned to searching. Eventually they made their way through the segments, reaching the pit with the perimeter of sand and gravel. Kyra started harvesting the beasts while the rest of the team went through the sand and gravel. They managed to pull out two dozen chunks of iron ore from the sand, as well as three silver ore and a single gold nugget a third of the size of Brennan's thumb.

"Damn... that's surprising" Landen said as he picked up the nuggets from Brennan's palm and examined it. "That's a gold coin right there, atleast."

Kyra eventually finished harvesting everything she could from the beasts, filling three complete leather bags with harvested parts. They filled another leather bag with iron ore, a cloth pouch full of moss and a second pouch with the three iron ore and the small gold nugget. Marta was still holding the ax while Garren was carrying the grimoire. With one final check of the second to last segment they entered the portal room, Brennan pushing his hand down on the plinth to summon the returning portal. After waiting for it to form the team left one by one, carrying their spoils. Brennan was the last to leave, taking one last look around before stepping through.

